

WHY MUMMY'S SLOSHED

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Why Mummy Drinks

Why Mummy Swears

Why Mummy Drinks: The Journal

Why Mummy Doesn't Give a ****

Gill Sims

WHY MUMMY'S SLOSHED

Because the bigger the kids,
the bigger the DRINK!



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JANUARY

Friday, 25 January

I finished my tea and put the cup in the dishwasher. Despite a rather sleepless night, plagued with terrifying dreams of out-of-control clown cars careering towards me at speed, I was quite pleased with how very organised I'd been this morning – up and dressed, dogs walked and fed, and my precious moppets roused from their pits and nutritious breakfasts refused by them. I'd even found time to spend five minutes furtively perusing the *Daily Mail's* Sidebar of Shame over a second cup of tea, while wondering if I should try 'flaunting my pins' to see if that could get me a new boyfriend, or perhaps I'd be better off 'showcasing my curves', or, better yet, I could give up rotting my brain with such nonsense before I found myself watching *Good Morning Britain* and agreeing with Piers Morgan.

This was the sort of morning I used to dream of when I was trying to shovel Weetabix down recalcitrant toddlers, who were more focused on trying to get Weetabix on the ceiling than in their mouths (do you have any idea how hard it is to try to chip dried-on Weetabix off a ceiling? It's worse than trying to get fucking Artex off). Or the sort of morning that seemed impossible when I was trying to jam shoes onto the feet of a child who had 'forgotten' how to put on their shoes, while arguing with the

other child about why, yes, they *did* have to wear trousers to nursery and could not in fact just waltz in there bare-arsed, no matter how much *Rastamouse* they'd been watching.

Of course, my mornings are not usually like this. They usually still involve a fair amount of shouting things like 'I DON'T KNOW WHERE YOUR PE KIT IS, YOU NEED TO FIND IT YOURSELF!' and 'NO, standing in the middle of the room, giving a cursory glance around you and claiming you still can't find it IS NOT ACTUALLY LOOKING FOR IT!' and muttering dark curses as I attempt to log into ParentPay to fork over yet more money.

However, I'd been super organised last night, having made them pack their bags, including finding PE kit and art supplies, because I was determined there would be no stress, no shouting, no aggravation, for all would be calm and serene for Jane's sake, because today was her driving test, so she needed a peaceful environment to enable her to stay focused and able to concentrate. I felt a tiny bit smug at how successful I'd been in creating this.

I gathered up my keys, coat and handbag, said goodbye to the dogs, and called upstairs to Jane that it was time to go.

Twenty minutes later, I was still yelling up the stairs, with no response from Jane. I'd been upstairs and banged on her door and got some kind of muffled snort, I'd issued grave threats about how she needed to be downstairs in ONE MINUTE or I was going without her (somewhat pointless, as why would I go to her driving test without her?), and here I *still* was, now getting slightly hoarse.

'Jane! JANE! Jane, *hurry up!* We're going to be late! Jane, can you hear me? JANE! Are you listening? For Christ's sake, Jane, just get down here now, we need to GO!'

Peter stuck his head out of his bedroom door. ‘Mum, can you, like, stop shouting, yeah? I’m on the Xbox and all my friends can hear you? It’s like, *really* embarrassing?’

‘Well, can you go and tell your sister that we need to leave *now*, please?’

‘Not really, Mum, I’m like, totally in the middle of a game here!’ said Peter in horror, clamping his headphones on again and retreating back to his room and whatever awful, mind-numbing computer game he was frying his vulnerable teenage synapses with now.

‘Peter!’ I yelled after him. ‘PETER! Get off that computer and get ready for school, you’re going to be late. I haven’t got time to take you to the bus stop, you’ll have to walk! Peter! Did you hear me?’

A grunting sound was emitted from Peter’s room, which could mean anything from he was agreeing he’d heard me and would get ready, to being some teenage-boy communication code he was grunting down the internet to his friends, to the grunt being the noise the computer made when he murdered a prostitute. However, given that Peter is now several inches taller than me, I can’t physically drag him off the computer, and can only issue dire threats and occasionally change the Wi-Fi password to make him do as he is told.

‘JANE!’ I bellowed again, wondering how many days, months or indeed years of my life I’d spent at the bottom of the stairs, howling fruitlessly for my beloved offspring to emerge from their lairs and leave the house. It would probably be a really depressing statistic, like the number of weeks you spend on the toilet in a lifetime, though I feel that figure about time on the toilet should not be given as an average, but instead broken down into how much time men spend on the toilet compared

with women, because I still cannot comprehend how the male digestive system is so different to a female one that they need to spend approximately fifteen times as long in the loo. I suppose at least I can take comfort from this by assuming that next time I see something that claims we spend 213 days of our life just pooing, that this statistic is vastly skewed and in fact women probably spend about three days of their entire lives having brisk, efficient poos, and men spend eleventy fucking billion years on the bog, having their many multiple and protracted Important Daily Shits.

I was roused from this contemplation by Jane FINALLY slamming her bedroom door and sauntering down the stairs.

'At last!' I said. 'What *have* you been doing all this time?'

'Er, curling my hair, *obvs*,' said Jane scathingly.

'Of course,' I sighed. How foolish of me to think that there was any occasion in life that might take precedence over Jane's all-encompassing devotion to the Grand Altar of GHDs.

'Right, come on, we'll be *late*!' I said again.

'Like, just *chill*, Mum!' said Jane. 'Why are you always so stressy? It's not good for you, you know. You'll end up having a heart attack. And anyway, we've got plenty of time!'

'No, we don't!'

'Well, I'll just drive faster on the way there, it'll be fine.'

'Jane, no, that is not how it works. You can't get done for speeding on the way to your driving test! Apart from anything else, *I'll* get points too for being the responsible driver, and you'll be uninsurable if you've got a speeding ticket on a provisional licence.'

'If you're talking about me getting my own insurance, does that mean you're going to buy me a car if I pass?' demanded Jane.

‘What? No! That’s not what I said.’

‘Well, what does it matter then, if you’re not even going to buy me a car? How am I going to get to school if you don’t buy me a car?’

‘On the bus! Like you have for the last six years,’ I pointed out. ‘Anyway, this is entirely academic as you haven’t *passed* your test yet, and you won’t unless we go *now*, because you’ll be late!’

Jane finally got into the car with another strop-py toss of beautifully waved hair, and we set off for the test centre, me in the passenger seat, desperately clutching the door handle with white knuckles and trying not to gasp in terror at every junction, nor to stress Jane out too much by screaming ‘BRAKE! BRAKE!’ every time I saw a car in front or ‘INDICATE! For fuck’s sake, INDICATE!’

I’m no longer allowed to chant ‘Mirror, signal, manoeuvre’ at her before she moves off, even though it’s the only thing I can remember from my own driving lessons, as we had a rather nasty row about that on the day she pointed out to me that I rarely bother with mirror, signal, manoeuvre myself, which was why I once had a *bijou tête-à-tête* with a neighbour’s car (‘*bijou tête-à-tête*’ is my phrase for it; Jane insists on referring to it as ‘When You Crashed the Car Again, MOTHER!’).

We finally arrived at the test centre, Jane having only stalled twice at traffic lights on the way. This was actually Jane’s second attempt at passing her test. After sailing through her theory test with flying colours, and even nailing the hazard perception section (surprising, given her lack of perception of any hazards when actually driving), she’d insisted on sitting her practical test shortly afterwards, only for it to end in a storm of tears and recriminations and wails of it ‘Not being fair’ when a trembling examiner returned her to the test centre early, Jane having

attempted to go around a roundabout in the wrong direction, something Jane insisted 'could have happened to anyone!'

I still had reservations about Jane really being ready to sit her test, based on the driving skills she'd so far demonstrated while out 'practising' with me (I'd been carefully picking roundabout-free routes), but her instructor apparently thought she was good to go. So who was I to argue, especially since it would save me forking out the GDP of Luxembourg on a weekly basis for lessons, as well as enduring the white-knuckle rides of the practice sessions in my car while I desperately prayed to the God of Gearboxes (if there was such a thing? Maybe it's Edd China, with his lovely big hands) to save my poor gears from their daily grinding. I couldn't help but wonder if it was fear for his own gearbox and a desire to be free of Jane's eyerolls and sarcasm that had led to her instructor's keenness to put her in for the test.

I couldn't even consult Simon, Jane's father and my ex-husband, about his opinion on whether she was ready or not, because during her one and only practice session with him, Jane had done an emergency stop after a mile and got out of the car and walked home, declaring she was never driving *anywhere* with him again because he was such an annoying backseat driver. In fairness to Jane, I'd once done the same, only luckily I'd been able to drive too at the time, so I kicked Simon out and made *him* walk home, because he really *is* a desperately annoying passenger, his right foot constantly pumping the air, as it searches for the non-existent brake, and hissed intakes of breath every thirty seconds at some perceived 'near miss', or his favourite, 'There's a vehicle ahead, Ellen, are you aware of the vehicle ahead, you need to slow down now, Ellen, VEHICLE ahead!' To be honest, sometimes it astounds me that I didn't divorce Simon *years* before I actually did, although at least he eased off on the

passenger prickdom after he had to walk four miles home in the rain.

Unfortunately, Jane had the same examiner as on her previous test, and I did notice that the poor man visibly blanched at the sight of her. Nothing daunted Jane, however, and she merrily skipped off with the driving examiner, complete with his clipboard, but sadly lacking the beige anorak and driving gloves I always imagine for them, after overexposure to *Lee and Herring's Fist of Fun* at a formative age (I've had to fight the urge to shout 'Are you a FOOL? Are you a STUPID FOOL! You CAN'T EVEN DRIVE!' at Jane in our practice sessions, as I fear she wouldn't be mollified by my explanation that such things were what passed for comedy in the nineties).

Meanwhile I retired to the steamy café over the road. I mean it was steamy as in the windows, not steamy as in a porn café – do you even get porn cafés? Maybe in Amsterdam, where they're much more relaxed about such things. Here, there would probably have to be lengthy risk assessments completed about the dangers of boiling liquids and naked genitalia, not to mention the hygiene aspects. On reflection, it's probably best if porn cafés aren't a thing anywhere. You do get cat cafés, of course, although I wonder why you don't get dog cafés, given that most cats actually hate people, whereas most dogs (with the exception of my elderly and grumpy Border terrier, Judge Dog, but I'm pretty sure he's part cat anyway) *love* people and would adore nothing more than a stream of strangers to scratch their ears and give them illicit cake under the table.

Obviously, I was musing to myself about cat/porn cafés (I suppose you could combine the two and just call them pussy cafés) to distract myself from dwelling on how on earth I'm old enough to have a daughter who's on the brink of being able to

drive, and even more terrifyingly will shortly be old enough to drink alcohol. Well, legally, I mean. In an actual pub. As a result of what I like to think of as my 'liberal' approach to parenting, or what *Daily Mail* readers would probably refer to as 'lax' parenting, I've been permitting Jane to experiment with sensible amounts of not-too-strong drink for a few years. By which I mean I let her take some cider to parties and pretend not to notice when she's hungover to fuck the next day after getting rat-arsed on vodka and Mad Dog 20/20, which is apparently a *thing* among the youth again. Who knew? They have all sorts of exotic flavours now, though, like 'electric melon' instead of just the strawberry or peach that was available in my day. Was it strawberry or peach? Oh God, I can't even remember, it's so lost in the mists of time, now that I'm an ancient crone with a grown-up daughter. Just please, please don't let her get knocked up for at least ten years. I'm so not ready to be Granny Ellen yet. Though my mother might finally keel over at the horrendous thought of being a great-grandmother! ... But even that wouldn't be enough to make up for granny-dom before fifty!

The growing up is all happening terribly fast, and it feels rather strange to think that soon, after so many years of the main focus of my life being keeping my children alive and fed, first one and then both of them will no longer be my responsibility. Before Christmas, we had all the stress of filling out UCAS forms and trying to pick courses and universities, when it only seems like about five minutes since I was doing that for myself. Well, I say 'we' had the stress of filling in forms, *I* had the stress of nagging Jane about it, and pleading with her to show it to me, and finally being told she'd sent it off without even letting me see her personal statement. She did eventually, grudgingly, tell me what she'd applied for and where, though. Her first choice is

Edinburgh, which surprised me, as that's where Simon and I went to university, so I thought she'd shun it on principle, but apparently it's good for History and Politics (her current chosen course), and 'It's, like, really far away, Mum, so you couldn't come and visit all the time.'

I got myself a nice cup of tea and a bun (oh God, I *am* practically a granny) and settled down to gnaw my nails and await Jane's return. I wasn't sure what outcome would be preferable, actually. Jane passing her test would mean she could give me a lift to the pub, and I wouldn't have to drive her places, but Jane failing her test would mean that I didn't have to share my car and wouldn't have to lie awake at night imagining her trapped in a tangled heap of metal in a ditch. In truth, my faith in Jane's driving abilities was formed when she was four and a half, and we'd visited my best friend Hannah, who had a little electric jeep for her children Emily and Lucas (who, helpfully, are also my children's best friends) to play in. Peter and Jane had been desperately excited by this, and considered being given a shot in it to be the most thrilling thing that had ever happened to them.

Somehow, Peter managed to get the first go, to my apprehension, as he was only two and a half, but Hannah assured me he wouldn't be able to get it off the drive. He managed splendidly, turning, reversing, and finally parking with a flourish. Then it was Jane's turn.

'I want Emily to come in with me too!' Jane insisted, and so her friend duly hopped in the passenger seat.

'This is so fun, Emily!' squeaked Jane, slamming her foot on the accelerator and flying straight through the hedge as we hurtled into the street after her, Jane still completely oblivious to her *Dukes of Hazzard*-style exit from the driveway.

'Oooh, look, Emily, it's got a phone. Let's pretend to phone Milly!' babbled Jane, veering wildly back and forth across the road as I bellowed, 'JANE! JANE! STOP! STOP!' and attempted to throw myself in front of her, as Jane paid no heed to the road or me whatsoever, as she was 'phoning' Milly, while chattering to Emily, one hand casually on the wheel and her foot still firmly on the accelerator, the brake pedal a mere redundant piece of plastic as far as Jane was concerned.

My final anguished bellow of 'JAAAAAAANE' as she belted towards a very shiny BMW parked a few yards away from her perilous progress finally got through to her, and she turned around to say, 'Yes, Mummy?'

Luckily, in the process of turning around, she took her foot off the accelerator and by dint of basically rugby tackling the fucking electric jeep, I was able to stop it in time before it ploughed into the shiny and doubtless hugely expensive Beamer. I've rarely been so relieved about anything in my life, as Jane crashing a car and causing extensive and expensive amounts of damage at the tender age of four would have given Simon endless ammunition in his 'amusing' remarks about 'women drivers' (this, obviously, was prior to me kicking him out of the car for being a condescending twat!).

I nibbled my bun and sipped my tea as the hour slowly passed. Seventeen years ago, it didn't seem possible that I'd be sitting and waiting to hear if Jane had passed her driving test. What was I doing seventeen years ago? Apart from feeling old and thinking I was already a dried-up husk because I was the ancient and decrepit age of thirty-one, which now, with hindsight, seems utterly ridiculous. I'm forty-eight and look upon women of thirty-one as mere babies! They are but ingénues, so hopeful and young, with not the slightest idea of how much cronedom lies

ahead of them, or just how much they yet to have dry up. They're all hash-tagging madly on Instagram about things I don't understand, like 'bulletproof coffee' and kimchi and starting podcasts. Anyway. Seventeen years ago. Baby Music. I used to go to Baby Music on Friday mornings. Every Friday morning, sitting in a circle on a hard, cold, church-hall floor, attempting to pin a furious and writhing Jane on my lap while clapping along with the other smiley-happy mummies to an irritating song about an old brass wagon.

What else was I doing? It's all a bit of a blur, really. I walked a lot. I mean a *lot*. Hours in the park, pushing Jane on the baby swings, feeding the ducks, although of course now you aren't meant to feed ducks bread, which means already I'm finding myself saying things like 'In my day!' like my granny used to, and I'm mildly terrified that the next step is that I'll come out with some awful casual racism, and when I'm (rightly) upbraided for it I'll brush it off by saying something terrible like, 'But everyone said it in *my* day, dear.' And if I do it in public, then someone might overhear and I'll end up in some grim *Daily Mail* article about Political Correctness Gone Mad, and they'll misquote both my age and the value of my house.

There was a lot of pureeing vegetables and carefully freezing them for Jane to reject. I gradually learnt that the more Annabel Bloody Karmel assured me that *all* children *adored* some revolting concoction she'd come up with, the more likely Jane was to point-blank refuse to try it. Finally, one day, after spending an hour coaxing Jane to try the revolting sludge I'd spent the previous two hours peeling, chopping, steaming and pureeing, seasoning it only with my fucking tears, I caught sight of Annabel's beaming face on the cover of the book and something snapped. I hurled the damn book into the garden, then stormed

after it and jumped up and down on top of it while screaming obscenities. I felt so much better for doing that, that I did the same to Gina Fucking Ford.

And then there was attempting to go back to work, when Jane was six months old, and feeling terribly guilty that I didn't feel guilty about leaving her at nursery to be Brought Up By Strangers, as my mother put it, as she thought it would be *far* more suitable if I employed a full-time nanny like my sister Jessica did, instead of risking Jane learning Bad Habits from Common Children when she was at a formative age and thus could never be broken of them. My mother was vague on the subject of what Bad Habits she thought Jane was going to adopt, and even vaguer on the subject of how she thought I was going to pay for a full-time nanny. The bliss, though, of stepping through that door and handing Jane over to someone else for a few hours while I went and had adult conversations and used my mind and got to eat a sandwich without someone screaming for a bit and then spitting it over me when I gave them some.

Nothing makes you appreciate even the most socially inept of colleagues like the alternative being the company of small children. Of course, it was a logistical nightmare trying to go back to work, but for me it was worth it, if just to feel slightly like myself again. The judgement on all sides was hideous, of course – the stay-at-home mummies tutted about how could the dreadful working mothers leave their babies, the full-time working mothers tutted that I didn't know how easy it was only working part-time, and the other part-timers all insisted their jobs were the most stressful and no one knew how hard it was juggling everything.

What was Simon doing seventeen years ago? I don't really remember. I've vague recollections of a shadowy figure who

required dinners made and complained about being tired a lot, because Jane was a terrible sleeper who was still up through the night until she was nearly eighteen months old. This was despite never being the one who actually got out of his bed and went to see to her, because he had to go to work and be Busy and Important, even once my maternity leave had finished and I was back at work. And when I was pregnant with Peter and so tired I thought I might actually die from it, he apparently found me getting up and down to Jane very disruptive to his night's sleep.

With hindsight, I'm buggered if I know how I even managed to get pregnant with Peter. I don't recall actually ever having the time or inclination for sex, but at some point I must have put out (possibly for Simon's birthday), because there's the evidence in the form of Peter, and although I'd never tell him this, he was in fact something of an accident, because Jane almost broke me. Not only do I not recall any sex, I also don't recall any conversations we had in those days apart from furious games of competitive tiredness, and one night when he walked into the kitchen while I was chopping carrots, when he started complaining about something, I just stared down at the knife and considered plunging it into his heart. I gave serious consideration to how much force I'd have to use. I was even trying to remember which side the heart was on so I could aim correctly, and working out that I needed to remember to aim for *his* left, not mine, when Jane started crying and the moment was lost.

Obviously, it's just as well the moment was lost, as it's unlikely Jane would currently be out there sitting her driving test had I murdered her father and spent the rest of her childhood in prison, and of course, if I'd done that, Peter would not have existed at all. A lack of Peter in the world would definitely be very sad, but it would probably have done wonders for our

carbon footprint as a family, given the amount of food he eats, electricity he uses on gaming and methane he produces, as he's farted pretty much constantly from birth and shows no sign of letting up. And then there's the loo roll. We never have any loo roll, so I'm starting to think he eats it. I'm constantly at the shop buying more – I have to rotate which check-out person I go to, in case they think I have some kind of terrible digestive problem.

And we won't even touch on his excessive tissue consumption. Part of me thinks for green reasons I should furnish him with handkerchiefs, but the other part of me thinks the polar bears will just have to take their chances as I cannot actually face the idea of washing the dubious matter out of a teenage boy's handkerchief, assuming of course that he wouldn't just use his sock in the absence of tissues. I wonder what the menfolk did about such things in the olden days before tissues. *Did* they just use their hankies? Or their stockings? Leaves? I'm pretty sure interfering with oneself is not a modern-day phenomenon, but it's not really the sort of thing one can go into a museum and ask about, is it? 'I'm interested in research into historical wanking ...' Nor could one really contact climate-change organisations and ask for greener alternatives for teenage boys' self-love habits.

These thoughts quite put me off my bun, and I realised my tea had gone cold, when Jane erupted into the café.

'I PASSED!' she shrieked. 'I DID IT! I'M ROADWORTHY, MOTHER! LET'S GO!'

'That's wonderful, darling!' I said. 'I knew you could do it!' I added untruthfully. 'Did you have to reverse around a corner?'

'No,' said Jane scornfully. 'And now I'll never have to. It's, like, a *pointless* manoeuvre.'

'Have you called Daddy and told him?' I asked.

‘Not yet, I wanted to tell you first!’ beamed Jane. ‘Also, you know, thanks, Mum. For taking me out to practise so much and everything.’

It’s rare that your children thank you, or appreciate you, or see you as anything other than the provider of food and profferer of unwanted and unsolicited and, in their opinion, pointless and incorrect advice. But on those exceptional occasions when the blinkers of teenagerdom fall briefly from their eyes and they see you as a person, not just a parent, and they show an appreciation for the role you play in their life, it makes the sleepless nights, the Annabel Fucking Karmel purees, the eye rolls and door slams and the incessant furious ‘Oh, *Mother’s* spat at you, almost, very nearly, worth it.

‘You’re welcome, darling,’ I beamed, feeling like I was, for once, bloody *naïve* parenting. Of course, it never lasts, either the sensation that you’re getting things right or your offspring being civil and pleasant.

We left the café and walked over to where the car was parked.

‘So, anyway, I’ll be using the car tonight, obviously,’ Jane said blithely. ‘Just letting you know.’

‘Errr, don’t you think perhaps you should *ask* if you can use *my* car, rather than just telling me?’ I suggested gently.

‘Well, I wouldn’t have to use your car, would I, if you’d only buy me one of my own!’ said Jane indignantly.

‘Anyway, you can’t use the car till I’ve sorted the insurance,’ I pointed out.

‘Oh my *God*, Mother, *why* are you so difficult about *everything*!’ snapped Jane, our lovely moment well and truly over.

‘I’m not being difficult, it’s the bloody *law*!’ I reminded her.

‘Oh, whatever!’ she huffed. ‘Well, can’t you just get it sorted so I can drive to Amy’s party tonight?’

'I'm really not sure about you driving to a party and coming home by yourself late at night,' I fretted. 'You haven't really driven much in the dark.'

'But I won't *be* by myself, will I? I'll have Sophie and Emily and Tilly and Millie. I've promised them a lift!'

'How? How have you promised them a lift? You've literally only just passed your test.'

'I texted them on the way across the road.'

Marvellous. So I wasn't the first person she'd told after all. I comforted myself that at least I was the first *adult*.

'Jane,' I said firmly. 'No. You're not taking my car out to drive home at 2 a.m. with it full of your drunken mates. It's not happening. No. We'll discuss insurance later, but for now you need to go back to school and I need to go back to work. Anyway,' I wheedled, 'if you're driving tonight, you won't be able to drink, will you?'

'I know that, OBVIOUSLY,' said Jane hastily, though I could see from the panic on her face that it hadn't occurred to her that being the designated driver would mean watching her friends get off their tits while she made do with Coke Zero, and that maybe it wouldn't be that much fun after all.

'Look, I'll talk to your dad about us *looking into* how much it would cost to buy and insure and run a little car for you, but Jane, these things are expensive. I don't have unlimited money to pay for all this, especially with you going to university soon.'

'I *know*!' said Jane. 'I'll get a job and pay for my own petrol and ... and oil ... and stuff.'

I made a note to have an adult conversation with Jane about basic car maintenance and running.

'For now, why don't you just call Daddy and tell him you've passed?' I suggested.

‘I was *literally* just about to!’ said Jane.

She tapped out Simon’s number, and next thing a female voice purred down the line. ‘Hi Jane, this is Marissa. I’m afraid Simon can’t come to the phone right now, he’s driving.’

Marissa. Marvellous. Simon’s pert, lithe, glossy-haired and youthful witch of a girlfriend. I mean, OK, she’s not *that* youthful, but she’s thirty-eight, which makes her youthful compared with me, and I suddenly felt very hot and I had my usual panic that I was starting to get hot flushes, but it turned out it was just a surge of the burning rage that Marissa provokes in me.

I don’t know why I hate her so much. I mean, technically, on paper, she’s not a bad person. In fact, if one is to be objective about it, she’s actually a Very Good Person. She works for a company that produces sustainable alternatives to single-use plastics (admittedly in the accounts department, rather than designing the products, which mainly seem to be very expensive water bottles and coffee cups that they flog to yummy mummies to drink soy lattes out of after yoga class), and she volunteers in her spare time with a charity teaching English to refugees, and she does lots and lots of yoga, too, so much fucking yoga, and she even has a three-legged rescue cat, for fuck’s sake, because she’s Such a Good Person.

But Jesus FUCKING Christ, she’s also incredibly annoying, and patronising. In fact, she’s the smuggest smuggety smug fucker I’ve ever had the misfortune to encounter in my life. I’m not just saying that because I’m jealous of her shiny, swishy hair or her colour co-ordinated Instagram grid where she posts every single goddamned yoga workout and the books she’s taught the poor refugees to read in English in double-quick time (in my mind, Marissa’s refugees’ language skills improve so fast because they too are desperate to get away from her smug little face, but

they're probably incredibly grateful and have shrines in their house to St Marissa). She even manages to make the photos of her three-legged cat annoy me, which is remarkable because I love animals, though obviously my dogs Judgy and Barry are much better than her stupid cat. But surely to make a three-legged cat annoying suggests that your smugness is *literally* off the scale?

Part of me fears, though, that my hatred of Marissa (who's even called Marissa? I thought the only people called that were quirky Americans in the nineties, with interesting haircuts and pixie boots, but clearly not) is not so much about her, but is just good old-fashioned jealousy that while Simon has moved on and found someone, and thus is winning at Who Is Better at Being Divorced, I'm still single.

But for a while I was smashing that game, winning effortlessly.

I had my handsome and fabulous boyfriend Jack, and Simon had been rather satisfyingly moony over me still, not least because I'd been an amazing and supportive ex-wife extraordinaire, holding the fort at home and looking after his children almost full-time when he took a six-month sabbatical after his father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Simon had to go and stay with his parents, who had retired to France, so he could take his dad to medical appointments because his mother 'doesn't do foreign driving' (I mean, in fairness, neither do I, but I also didn't move to a country where it would be a necessity), and generally support them. I'd also arranged flights for his children to visit him and their grandparents, and dropped off and picked up from airports, and overall just been a very good person. So really it was only fair that Simon realised what a terrible mistake he'd made in letting me go and had suffered for it, especially when he saw how very happy I was with Jack.

Then, in a move typical of my luck, my perfect boyfriend Jack packed his bloody thermals and bugged off to his Dream Job in Antarctica, just after Simon came home from France. France had suited Simon. He was all tanned and he'd lost weight, and he'd bought some rather chic clothes and was generally looking annoyingly hot, which might have had something to do with the fact that the next thing I knew was that he popped up with fucking Marissa one day. Marissa, all pert and perky and ten fucking years younger than me, which is actually a terrible worry because she's still of childbearing age, and will be for some time, as my best and oldest friend Hannah evidenced by finding herself upduffed at the age of forty-six and producing a rather unexpected bundle called Edward, who's now two and a wrecking ball in human form.

I don't think I could actually stand the smugness from Marissa if she were to get herself impregnated by Simon. I just *know* she's the sort of person who would beam things like 'We're pregnant!' rather than 'I'm pregnant.' Simon once told people 'we' were pregnant, and I snarled that 'we' were not fucking pregnant, *I* was pregnant, but if he wanted to recreate the sensation of pregnancy then that could be arranged by strapping a concrete weight to his stomach, repeatedly punching him in the bladder, denying him anything nice to eat or drink EVER, making him swallow acid to recreate the delightful sensation of pregnancy heartburn, then finishing off the experience by cramming a pineapple up his arse sideways and making him shit it out. And for extra fun, I could rip his dick open and sew it up for him. Then I burst into tears and Simon had to take me home, as everyone else at the party was staring at me oddly. I didn't cope well with pregnancy. Marissa, though, would doubtless glow when with child, and float around in white cheese-

cloth dresses, smugly stroking her perfect little bump and not getting piles.

Anyway. I mustn't let Marissa wind me up so much. Jane asked her to put Simon on the speakerphone, and duly imparted her momentous news.

'Oh, that's *wonderful!*' squealed Marissa, before Simon could even say a word. 'You must be so excited, *well done*, Jane, darling.'

'Er, yeah, well done, darling!' echoed Simon.

'So Mum says that you and her are like going to buy me a car?' announced Jane.

'What!' said Simon.

'I did not!' I said indignantly, grabbing the phone off Jane, as Marissa cooed, 'A car, Jane, darling? I mean, it's *marvellous* that you've passed your test, it's a very useful life skill to have, but getting a car of your own will only increase your carbon footprint and encourage unnecessary journeys. Why don't you get a bike? It's a really efficient mode of transport, and super eco-friendly.'

Jane was making mutinous noises about a bike when Simon interrupted Marissa.

'Why would you say that, Ellen?' he huffed. 'You can't just make promises like that on my behalf.'

'I just *said* I didn't say that!' I repeated. 'What I told Jane was that I'd discuss it with you and we'd see if it was financially viable for us to do something between us, that's all.'

'And me!' chirped Marissa. 'I have a lot of valuable input to offer too.'

'Why?' I asked. 'Are you going to contribute to a car for Jane?'

'Well, no, but I can send you some information about how many miles of rainforest are destroyed per new car built, and

also I've done a lot of research into bikes, so I can help with that, which I really think is a better solution and –'

'But I don't want a bike, I want a *car*,' whined Jane. 'I've got a bike. It's rubbish.'

'Yes, but Jane, if you had a really super-duper high-end bike, I think that would make a lot of difference,' insisted Marissa. 'Just think about it, OK, Jane? Promise me you'll think about it.'

'I think Marissa's right,' said Simon heartily. 'A really good bike sounds a great idea, darling.'

Jane made huffing and non-committal noises about thinking about a bike, and decided to move on to the next battle to be fought.

'Why aren't you at work anyway, Dad?' said Jane. 'Mum says I have to go back to school after this. Do I really?'

I strained my ears to listen.

'We've both taken today off because we're going on a couples' retreat in Dorset,' said Marissa.

'A *couples*' retreat?' said Jane incredulously. 'Ewww. Is that, like, threesomes and sex parties and stuff? That's *totally* disgusting, Dad!'

'No, of course it's not like that,' said Marissa in her calmest, nicest, I-Am-a-Very-Good-Person-and-Shall-Not-Get-Annoyed-by-the-Inferior-Beings voice. 'It involves a weekend of connecting as a couple, strengthening and deepening our bond through intense work with counsellors and trust exercises and –'

'Do you meditate?' interrupted Jane.

'What? Yes, yes, couples' meditation is one of the workshops,' said Marissa smugly.

'It sounds a pile of wank,' said Jane cheerfully.

'Oh, Jane,' sighed Marissa. 'Don't be so quick to judge what you don't understand. It's vital to couples' well-being to nurture

and care for their relationship. You have to be proactive about relationships, you know, if you don't want to end up alone. You often find that the reason a person has a string of failed relationships behind them is because they just couldn't be bothered to put the work in.'

Was that directed at me? That was definitely directed at me. Ouch! Oh, Marissa's good, I'll give her that – sweetness and light and discreet little barbs, just sharp enough to sting, but subtle enough that if you objected you'd either look paranoid and over-sensitive, or Marissa would look at you caringly and say, 'Of course it wasn't about you, but it seems to be resonating with you for some reason. Why do you think you feel that so personally? Would you like to talk about it?' OF COURSE I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT, I'M BRITISH. And if I DID want to talk about it, it wouldn't be with you, with your stupid shiny hair, and your head on one side doing your special Caring Look. Single I may be, failed relationships I may have, but given the choice between being a sad, lonely, ageing singleton, and going on couples' retreats filled with people like Marissa, spending the rest of my life with just me and my discreet box from Ann Summers under the bed doesn't actually seem so bad ...

'It sounds expensive,' said Jane. 'Sounds like it probably cost as much as ... ooh ... say a car? Maybe if Dad wasn't off spending all his money on wanky weekends, he could buy me a car!'

'Firstly,' Marissa said, 'you can't actually put a price on emotional health, and secondly *I* paid for it. It was an anniversary present for your father.'

'Lucky Dad,' said Jane sarcastically. 'Anyway, I was actually asking *him* a question, not you, Marissa, so if you could, like, stop interrupting? So, Dad, *do* I have to go back to school?'

‘Don’t be cheeky to Marissa, please. And if your mother says you have to go back to school, then you have to go back to school,’ said Simon firmly, still nonetheless making *me* out to be the bad cop.

‘She has A levels!’ I shouted down the phone. ‘She needs to work. They don’t pass themselves.’

‘Oh my *God*, Mother!’ snapped Jane. ‘I *know* I have A levels. How could I forget? I’ve only just finished my Mocks, and also you’ve *literally* talked about nothing else for months. *Fine!* Since no one cares about *my* emotional health, I’ll just go back to school. Don’t anyone worry about my individuality or being allowed to *express* myself at any point. No, that’s *fine!*’

‘Jane, I need to go. There’s a very tricky junction coming up and I need to concentrate. But well done, darling, and I’ll call you tonight, OK?’

‘No mobiles are allowed at the retreat,’ put in Marissa.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ Simon sighed. ‘Anyway, bye, darling, talk soon,’ and he hung up.

‘God, Marissa is a fucking annoying cow!’ said Jane.

‘Mmm,’ I said noncommittally, not wanting to make the mistake of bitching about Marissa to Jane, only for Jane to repeat it all back to Marissa at some point in the future when I was in Jane’s bad books and Marissa had bought her goodwill with ASOS vouchers. ‘And don’t swear so much, darling.’

‘Well, she *is!* Anyway, Mum, *seriously*, why do I have to go back to school?’

‘Because, darling,’ I repeated for what felt like the eleventy fucking billionth time, ‘this is your A-level year, and your A levels are very important.’

‘The Queen hasn’t got any A levels,’ interjected Jane.

‘That’s because she’s the fucking QUEEN!’ I pointed out. ‘She didn’t need A levels. You don’t become Queen because you were top of your class at Queen School.’

‘It would be more democratic that way?’ suggested Jane.

‘But you aren’t going to be Queen,’ I said despairingly. ‘And all those other hugely successful people who’ve got to the top despite not having A levels are the *exception*, not the rule. They’d have been successful anyway, and it might have been an easier path if they *had* had A levels, and for every millionaire A level-less entrepreneur, there are a million other people who never realised their potential because they didn’t get any A levels. In most cases it’s not because they didn’t bother to work for them, but that they never got the chance to, and given that there are billions of people in the world who are forced to work in dangerous, low-paid jobs because for one reason or another they’ll never get an *opportunity* to get a decent education, who would in fact give their right fucking *arm* for the educational breaks that *you* take for granted, then it’s in fact rather morally reprehensible of you to not take your education seriously and make the very most of it that you can!’

I was rather proud of my little speech – it almost moved me to tears – and surely, surely somehow it would get through to Jane that she really needed to knuckle down and start working.

‘Oh my God, Mother,’ sneered Jane. ‘Have you actually just given me the educational equivalent of the “There are starving children in Africa, so eat your peas” talk? *Sad!*’

‘Just get in the fucking car,’ I said.

Once a still-grumbling Jane was deposited at school, and I’d fortunately received no phone calls from the school complaining about a lack of a Peter, suggesting that through some miracle

he'd managed to disconnect himself from the online world and made it to the bus in time, I drove on to work.

I do rather like my job. I worked bloody hard to get there and, as jobs go, I've had far worse. I'm good at what I do, plus I have a great team to work with, and – an important point that's never mentioned in school careers talks – no one in my office has killer BO (it's astonishing the effect on morale That Person can have).

Our company seems to be full of complicated politics, though, and that side of things is a bit pants, with Shakespearean levels of intrigue and backstabbing over everything from who gets the better desk to who has the more comfortable office chair, and ridiculous levels of virtue signalling over what fucking brand of coffee to buy for the office. ('This is Fairtrade'; 'Yes, but this is Fairertrade'; 'This one is grown by a co-operative of blind orangutans orphaned by the evil palm oil trade'; 'But THIS one is grown by blind, ONE-LEGGED orangutans orphaned by NAZIS and palm oil'; 'THIS one is grown by blind one-legged orphaned orangutans still traumatised by Dominic Cummings driving to the zoo where they lived, to taunt them about his SUPERIOR EYESIGHT'. No one ever seems to make such a huge, show-offy fuss about tea, do they? It's always the coffee drinkers carrying on.)

If we could all be left alone to get on with our jobs, instead of being summoned to pointless meetings about bastarding coffee, we'd probably be a lot more productive. In fact, if certain people didn't spend so much time wanking on about stuff that doesn't have anything to do with what the company *does* do, just to make themselves look important, we probably wouldn't have a threatened merger hanging over our heads, potentially risking all our jobs.

I'd thought when I started at my current company that perhaps this would be the job that I found a passion for – it's an

achingly trendy technology company, with 'thinking spaces' where creative types draw on the walls (while drinking the hotly argued-over coffee) and have 'blue sky moments', whatever the fuck they are. I'm not achingly trendy, nor am I creative, and after years of child-rearing I have to bite my tongue to stop myself shouting at the hipster creatives in their braces and beards and too-short trousers that drawing on the walls is NAUGHTY and I'll smack their bottom if they do that again. Mainly what stops me is that Daryl, who has the biggest beard and the shortest trousers, looks rather like he'd enjoy a spanking from a woman old enough to be his mother.

Despite my normal-length trousers and the fact that I prefer to play Buzzword Bingo with my colleague Lydia while the creative sorts are whanging on about how, going forward, they'll be reaching out to take ownership of the synergy outside the box and drilling down to circle back to make this happen in a transparent and diverse value-added paradigm, blah blah blah, wank wank wank, I've done rather well at this company. The short-trousered ones come up with things they want to make, and my team and I provide the software to make this happen. I'm in fact now the head of my department, which means that I get an office with a window (and the comfiest chair), and also means I'll be the first one sacked if anything goes wrong.

I'd be pretty devastated if I lost my job, actually, quite apart from the financial impact it would have. I try to tell myself that I have many transferable skills, and would easily find something else, but I'm forty-eight and I don't want to start over at a new company where I don't know that you mustn't mention After Eights in front of Eric from Marketing because of an unfortunate incident at the Christmas party, and where I don't know where the toilets are.

Of course, if I got made redundant, perhaps it would be an opportunity to do something completely different. I like my job, but it would be wonderful to have a vocation, something you spring out of bed in the morning raring to go out there and do – something I *love*. I invented a very clever game app once that made me quite a lot of money – not retire-on money, but enough to make my finances less precarious, until I decided to get divorced, which made things a little rocky again. I'd thought that app invention might have been my vocation, but it turned out all the other ones I tried to invent were rubbish. But it would be nice to have the sort of job I could talk about at length at dinner parties and people would find hearing about it interesting. The trouble is, the older I get, it turns out that the things I love and that might be my vocation mainly seem to be watching rubbish TV, eating cake, sleeping, talking nonsense to my dogs, reading Jilly Cooper, and drinking wine, gin and vodka. I've tried and tried to see how I could turn any of these things into a vocation or a paying job, but so far I've not come up with anything.

I've also tried to expand my hobbies, to see if perhaps I could find my calling that way. Mostly, I found that I really like Vesper Martinis, which not only make you feel very sophisticated when you're drinking them, but are also an excellent drink choice for ladies who perhaps were not quite as vigilant with their pelvic floor exercises as they might have been. They're very small, you see, but also extremely potent, so they get you extraordinarily pissed for a very little amount of liquid. Unfortunately, Hannah and I tested this theory to the max when she got a Saturday afternoon off from Little Edward and abandoned him to his father so that we could go out and be ladies what lunch, and we drank four of them after wine at lunch and then we couldn't speak. Jane called me 'disgraceful' when I got home, and also 'a shameful

example'. In my defence, I never ever claimed to be a *good* example and always held to the theory that since I wouldn't be a good example, I'd better stand as a terrible warning instead. Of course, on the Day of Shame with all the Vesper Martinis, I was quite unable to communicate this to Jane, being forced instead to mumble that it must've been something I ate, and that I needed a 'lil lie-downy'.

I've tried rather more adult ways to find my vocation as well. I always quite fancied being an archaeologist, and thought for a long time that perhaps that would have been my vocation if only I hadn't done computer science at university to spite my mother, who thought it sounded like my course would be full of bespectacled boys in nylon anoraks and how would I ever find a decent husband on such a course, and who would want to marry someone doing such a *male* course? My mother thought I should do English Lit like nice girls do, and try to bag a law student early, or maybe a nice doctor. Secretly, of course, since I went to Edinburgh, where all the posh boys that don't get into Oxford or Cambridge go (or they *did* before Prince William went to St Andrews), she was hoping I might manage to snag myself a title, but failing that, a lawyer or doctor would be acceptable. Or some nice chap who was going into the City. I don't think it ever occurred to her that perhaps I was going to university to further my education and pursue a career. As far as she was concerned, the only possible reason for a woman to go to university was to find herself a rich husband, like she did.

Since I'd been so unreasonable and clearly scuppered my chances with the lawyers and doctors by tainting myself by association with the beige-anorak brigade (who were actually perfectly nice and normal and didn't wear beige anoraks at all), she was relieved I did at least manage to get myself an architect

in the form of Simon, though I was annoyed at myself that to some degree I *had* followed my mother's formula and met a nice boy at university and gone on to marry him. In my defence, I probably had a lot more casual sex with random blokes than my mother ever did in her day, and when I met Simon I was so utterly head over heels in love with him that getting married just seemed the natural next step, because *of course* we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together, so why *wouldn't* we get married?

I always had a hankering for archaeology, though, especially after it turned out that Simon and I wouldn't be spending the rest of our lives together after all, and so I took part in a community dig in our village a couple of years ago. It turned out that archaeology wasn't my vocation. I'd thought it would involve careful sifting through priceless artefacts and then perhaps some *Indiana Jones*-style adventures with a rugged and dashing archaeology sort in a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. I had a vague vision of myself with my hair in a prim bun, and some academic-looking spectacles, and at some point I'd take down my hair and remove my glasses, and the rugged and dashing sort would exclaim, 'Why, Miss Green, you're *beautiful*,' and then we'd snog loads while fighting off the bad guys trying to steal our amulet or something.

It wasn't like that. There was a lot of mud. Archaeologists' clothing turned out to tend much more towards sensible man-made fibres than tweed jackets, and even if there had been a rugged and dashing sort there, there would have been no snogging, since there were also twenty-five OAPs getting in the way and telling me off for using my trowel wrong. They made me draw pictures of stones. I don't know why I had to draw the stones and we couldn't just take a photograph. I suspect they

made me draw the stones to give me something to do and stop my overenthusiastic trowelling, even though I don't even see how you CAN trowel mud wrong. I lost a pencil and got told off. I did see a shrew, though, and I liked the shrew, and also I like my dogs, of course, and I have three chickens who only semi hate me, so then I wondered if maybe zoology was my calling, but I googled it and it turns out the top job for zoologists is not being David Attenborough but being a zoo keeper, which even I can guess probably involves dealing with a lot of poo, especially if you get the elephant or rhinoceros enclosures. So it was back to the drawing board again.