

Life of a Woman (3551 words)

Look, her friend says, you've been down, recently; there's obviously something weird you're not telling us about; you're not acting like yourself, lately: you've been avoiding everyone. What's wrong? Where are you on the holiday Whatsapp; why aren't you helping me plan my big 3-0? You're usually the one organising stuff for us to do; you're always getting us together; man, I fucking loved that city farm. It's just, babe, are you OK?

The friend pauses, takes a sip of espresso and glances out of the window as his attention is caught by a bus manoeuvring around Camberwell Green. Then continues: Look, anyway, I just thought I could do something to cheer you up a bit. He turns back to her and grins, waggles a finger at her: How about a haircut?

He is a hairdresser. His boss is on holiday next week; why doesn't she pop in and he'll sort her right out, give her a bit of a pamper. A lift. The woman shrugs and agrees. Why not, if it makes him happy; and, anyway, that's the sort of thing that is supposed to lift your mood, isn't it, according to women's magazines; though it goes somewhat against her feminist sensibilities; but then again, she and her friend are basically making up for it, aren't they, by sticking it to his boss, a.k.a. The Man? Yeah, definitely; it's all intersectional, anyway. She feels fine.

In a peach and alabaster room, in the upstairs of a mews in Mayfair, her friend hovers around her shoulders. Like an oversized bee, she finds herself thinking; with his crooked arms and freshly-spiked mullet (one of those trendy, second-time-around ones), and he's put on a bit of weight, too. What a bitch comment. That's not very like her. Her reflection smirks back at her. Nothing radical, she says aloud, and he is quick to reassure her: head massage, rough chop, then whack the split ends off; that'll be all.

They natter about their lives as he washes her hair. The conversation all goes like normal at first: bitching about his partner, who is insisting that they holiday in Mallorca, which will be full of trashed graduates in July; when for sure they should go to Sicily, which is way more cultural and has the best of both worlds, really: the wildness of a Greek island; but the shopping and decent hotels of a resort. She agrees: Mmm, Greek islands are heavenly, aren't they; but it really depends which one, doesn't it; have you done...? They nod at each other, affirming; he downward, mohair arms plunging around her head in the sink, and she, head tilted back, as more of a chin waggle up towards him and the ceiling. But be careful with Sicily, the woman informs her hairdresser friend; has she ever told him about her friend who'd had a holiday from hell there? – with the Mafia... The Mafia? he answers, and his mouth twists into a sneer of disbelief as he briskly wraps a towel around her head and leads her to a chair. Wait, she thinks. A sneer of disbelief? He's still talking. What, like the *Godfather*? He's talking; no, he's snorting; yes, he's actually disbelieving her. Uh, yeah, she says, and realises, with the icy clarity of a cold trickle of water down her back that he's lightly scorning her story, he's deprecating it, he's belittling her so he can gain the upper hand in the dynamics of this conversation, and something shifts within her: OK, the woman thinks, her knuckles tightening under the gown: Fine, if that's the way we're doing it; let's show off, then, let's prove it! No way is this anecdotal lol falling flat, this time – Yeah! It was so bad – her little brother chatted up the wrong girl... they brought him back to the hotel that night totally unconscious, horrible...

And catches sight of herself in the mirror as she's gesturing with her hands to emphasise how *so bad* it was; and, with her long, rattailed hippie locks tucked up and away, and the towel pulling her unplucked eyebrows up into pencil-thin arches, and

her mouth vehement in the middle of an exaggerated, dramatic, largely untrue story, she breaks off in horror, looking at a face she has chosen not to see for several years; realising she looks identical to her mother.

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Recently, she's been feeling a return to her childhood. She's sick of her friends, feels sick and bored with everything. Nothing's fun; there's no reason to go out. She hears only falsity, everywhere. The irritating buzz of small talk: all those hyperboles and hyperactive high-pitched voices, dramatic stories, meaningless babble, the exaggerations that go alongside speaking to other people. And this is weird, as, usually, she's very much a people person, nice, a listener, pretty popular, actually. Generally known as the one who organises dinner parties, film-and-face-mask nights for friends who are down, is always there for them; generally known, in fact, as a 'good friend' and has a lot of them, who are there for her no matter what. And yet she's just been unable to bear to see anyone in recent months. So, until this fit of sluggishness passes, until she returns to herself again, she'd just rather be alone. And why doesn't anyone seem to get that? Why does everyone – her father, sister, friends – insist on asking if she is OK when she totally, obviously is?

Over the past few months, it is as though she has been seeing her mother everywhere. Instead of her beloved social circle's chatter, it's like it's the woman's mother and desperate-housewife neighbours of the woman's childhood. She's seeing them everywhere, more and more: self-serving exaggerations, lies, overegged femininity, drama queening and attempts at one-upmanship. Voices rising in fake affection – it's too risky to go out. Worse, along with her newfound impatience with

her own gang, she's starting to see this behaviour in herself, of the sort she'd never usually do: for example, when making a self-pitying excuse to avoid seeing a friend; when catching herself in a competitive little passive-aggressive argument; the general feeling, when looking out of her bedroom window onto the familiar view of grey Camberwell, looking just the same as it was when she was six, or eight, or ten, of an anchor plunging from her stomach to the floor. And yet, as she has always told her friends, her mother is her exact polar negative: unreconstructed woman, spent her whole adult life in the area of South London where she was born, totally superficial in all relationships. Her mother is everything she's always been set against.

Shortly after the hairdresser incident, she is travelling on the train back into the city after visiting her father, who has been an inhabitant of Norwich for approximately eight years (since he and her mother sold the woman's childhood home in Camberwell), for the weekend. The woman is standing in the corridor between carriages, staring out of the window and thinking about how she should visit her father in his inconveniently-located home more often; after all, he won't be there for ever, and Heaven is even harder to pop over to for a weekend than Norwich – when the phone rings. Oh, not another one; she finds herself answering on the seventh ring and then telling her friend that there is no way she will be able to make it tonight: she's just feeling so, so sick; must be one of those one-day stomach bug things; she'd had fish at her dad's; honestly, literally, she's feeling so, so bad, etc., etc. She's heard herself make this excuse several times in recent weeks, is fully prepared for wincing through the friend's exasperated breathing, heavy patience, enquiries of what medicine is she taking and what fish was it, exactly? before –finally! – it's possible to hang up and stand a second, sway and stare out of the window at the outskirts of the

city whizzing past. There, another example: tick. Another claim to be the worst-off, a plea to be pitied, another lie.

While at her father's, (from where she is returning now), she spent the weekend telling him about how great her new life is in Camberwell as opposed to when they, as a family, lived there in her childhood; as usual with him, had to speak *at*, rather than *to*, e.g.: When we were little, you never used to take us down in those streets at the back of the park, like, the street where I live now; but it's actually *such* a nice area (as she flicks the desk lamp off, then on again), I can't believe we never went there when we lived there. Are *you* friends with your neighbours here (she said, scathingly), at which the newspaper in the armchair opposite gave a rustle, and a voice from behind it replied: Well, the Freemans on the right are all right! A chuckle.

Mine are SO COOL, she shot back; Camberwell's changed SO MUCH since you guys lived there; there's nobody like YOU round there now. Her father had put down his newspaper and asked, with an equally mild voice as before, if she has been doing all right, recently, over the past couple of months? I just SAID I was! she shouted. Jolly good, he said. The newspaper reared up again.

OK, excuses made and phone shoved into the depths of her knapsack, she turns and stumbles back along into the buffet car as a disembodied voice reminds passengers to take extra care when handling hot drinks. Bawls her order of a cappuccino to the bald man behind the counter: And would he leave the lid off, please. Takes eye contact and a blank stare to be assent (after all, who can tell what kind of a bad day he's had? Maybe he doesn't feel like smiling; people who expect service staff to be their friends are just so wrong); and that's right up until the moment he's finished pouring the foamed milk and, before she can get a word in, has twisted a lid off the towering snake lying above his faux-retro machine and slapped it on.

Can't. Health & safety, I'm afraid. Your safety is our first priority.

The woman freezes. There's no way he'd expect trouble, here; she must look calm, to him: an ordinary hippie-type with hair and floral skirt a bit too long, almost-Topshop but just shabby enough to be genuinely, slightly alternative; one like all the other London chicks with battered rucksacks and Dr Martens clogging up the aisles. And yet she freezes. She OK? Her lips have disappeared into ice-cream whiteness. Her shoulders tense. Her fingernails, invisible to him, of course, under the counter, dig deep in her palms.

Her own pathetic excuses about dinner are still ringing in her ears. This corporate pretext is the last straw that has slithered from his latex-gloved hand to break her back. OK, but why couldn't he just say his first priority was obeying his boss's instruction to put lids on? Why not that, in actual fact, avoiding litigation from scalded customers was his first priority? Before he's closed his mouth, it has all come flooding back: her mother. The self-serving exaggerations. The way she shrugged, uncaring, in response a child's question. Her leading silences. How she always exaggerated every story she told, was all pretence and fake mystery, and everything was always all about her.

I hate liars, the woman says, dashes the coffee onto the floor.

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For a person to hate liars, one assumes she must have been lied to. What is lying? Lying is deception and/or purposeful withholding of information. What does a display of anger suggest? Anger is the reaction of a cornered person who feels they have been imposed upon; that their rights have been trampled into the (metaphorical)

carpet, and there is no way to get any justice except to piss (metaphorically) on said carpet. She's aware of mental wellbeing, she knows from the leaflets, self-care information and yoga blogs, that anger comes from feeling a) attacked, b) unfairly/badly treated, c) invalidated, d) deceived, and so here we come back to the beginning: lies.

Logically, there is no reason why she should be bugged by visions of her mother, right now, in this way. This mother-child pairing was never close (if one speaks tactfully) and they suffered from a difficult (alternatively: mutually antagonistic) relationship, particularly when the woman was a young child (as in, later in life there was basically no relationship), as she recalls (well, her mother has never recalled or mentioned it), because her mother lied to her family (competed with, manipulated, blanked out) and to herself. (Her mother was a trapped woman, thinks the woman, who led a failed life, and yet still pretended she was better than everyone else. It was self-deceiving, sad. It made her daughter sad.)

Basically, her mother's life depressed her, her mother's lying angered her, this was a constant throughout her teens, she got away as soon as she could and resolved she would never turn into that: glassy-eyed drinking-every-evening creature; a character sidelined by life but desperately clinging on. And, as an adult, the woman decided to cut the toxicity out. Not need for downward-dragging elements, surround yourself only with positivity! Her friends agreed: Friends are the family you make for yourself! Genes are just coincidence! Save your energy for yourself alone. So, she has not seen her mother for a few years except from across the room at large parties; something that has been surprisingly easy to achieve and ignore, particularly since her mother and father moved to Norwich around eight years ago. At first, her father and sister nagged her to attend family Christmasses, birthdays, etc., but she made excuses

(e.g. must stay with boyfriend-of-the-moment/Australian friend with no home to go to/neighbour's cat/working this weekend, yes, that's Boxing Day, yes, at the community centre, I can't let them down) and they soon realised it made for less trouble to see she and her mother separately.

So, it's all been fine and dandy and she has thought very little of her mother until recently. OK, so she's ended up living in Camberwell, the same area she grew up and her mother lived for most of her adult life, but South London is cool now: see the alternative lifestyles her friends live with those of her childhood neighbours. Her life is so different to her mother's. She doesn't think of her. Logically, there's no reason why the woman should care about anything her mother does and no way it could impact on her. Earlier this year, her mother did something from far away, without a word.

She rewrote her will to cut the woman out. OK, not entirely; in the paragraph of the will that read: 'To my second daughter'; the woman's mother signed off a small sum of money, indeed, roughly a third of her (not very stately) estate. However: no objects left to the aforementioned, no letters, no words of affection as were signed to her mother's husband (i.e., the woman's father) ('to darling Arth, in memory...') and elder daughter (the woman's elder sister) ('I thought my Lovey Emily would enjoy...'), who were given the respective jobs of a) disposing of her meagre estate and the legalities thereof b) disposing of all other possessions of no value except the sentimental.

Reading this will after her mild and gentle father showed her a copy, saying as he did that he knew her old mum had thought she, the woman, would not want any of her mum's old stuff or any of that old legal botheration given to him and her sister, in fact, the woman agreed: Of course, Dad, that makes total sense. And yet actually, the

instant she smashes the biodegradable cardboard onto the floor, she realises the rage at this latest bitchy little action of her fucking mother's has been building to a head inside her until it exploded out of a cappuccino cup: rage at this final instance of her mother's devious, uncaring behaviour. Just like her fucking mother to evade direct, honest speech.

While at her father's, just prior to that ill-fated train journey, she discovered the house was being cleared out: binbags full of 1980s dresses, knickknacks and objects of no use piled among the usual kicked-off shoes and newspapers that had always cluttered up the narrow staircase at her parents' two-up two-down in Norwich; earmarked by him (or, perhaps, her tidy-minded sister, who finds such things no stress) for charity shops and neatly labelled with hot pink Post-Its: OXFAM THESE: ALL GROSS. Her father came in and found her staring down at these. Are you all right, love, he asked; and, without waiting for an answer, continued: you don't want any of this stuff, do you? Not very *you*. You're right, she thinks now, as she's slamming the door of her flat, having been let off the train with a scolding from Southeastern. She's not very *me*. What I need is a clear out, too: a clear-out from her toxic influence which clearly still has a hold over me, probably because of her despicable behaviour during my childhood – she makes a note on her phone to look up Freud on Wiki. So, cut me out without a word, will you? The will's resounding silence infuriates her. Well, thinks the woman, I'm resolved: I'll get the last word and then I'll be rid of you. You are a trapped woman, and I can see the trap. I am nothing like you.

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In fact, she's been wanting a good project for ages. Evidentially, taking action against a helpless dick employee is by no means exemplary of her behaviour in general; as well as holding a subconscious grievance against her female parent, she's had this sluggishness and not wanted to go out; it has been a particularly long and hectic summer, one which feels like it started in February, and, while work had indeed, been on hiatus over the summer (she works haphazardly and locally in archival and organisational capacities: as a librarian at the local boys' private school and as the co-organiser and co-founder of a local community hub), over this period of several months there have also been several bureaucratic events in personal and family life which had, admittedly, long been in the pipeline but were nonetheless an administrative pain. It has been a depressing summer, she admits to herself; no wonder her friends and father noticed. And this started from her mother.

And so after that final instance of bursting into tears at the barista, with the seed of Dad's house clearance already planted in her head, it comes to her that she does not want to return straight away to work. To, for example, the organisation of display boards about savagery, civilisation and the role of Piggy in *Lord of the Flies* or the writing of advertisements for retirees' performances of *Bugsy Malone* – that it, actually, makes her feel like she is about to vomit, that she is literally sick of her futureless career: dreads speaking to colleagues, dreads running into anyone at the water machine, dreads using her access card to swipe through the automated gates to the library; finds it all a bit crap and immoral, basically. Now that all the frenetic chaos of summer is over, autumn feels like a wet dog landing on her carpet. She does not want to be like her mother, stuck in a dead-end life. She is going to

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Why was ur mum so special, texts the hairdresser. V into competitions sport etc., she texts back while standing in the kitchen, waiting for the microwave to ping. Lol, her friend texts, which – she admits, with a wry grin – is a comment on how utterly incompetent at all sport-slash-outdoor activity she is; more into arts, wordgames, pub quizzes. Except yoga and mental self-care; but that’s different. Her mother, being a constantly active type, ran all kinds of kids’ clubs around the area in South London where they lived, which perhaps is one explanation as to why she was continually disappointed in her younger daughter. Frankly, she explains (in brief, over text), she and her mother had zilch in common: they are utterly different in all tangible ways. Indeed, this is how the woman has always previously explained her maternal difficulties: that this vast, oceanic impossibility between the two of them was precisely why they didn’t get on: opposites repel; they had absolutely nothing to share, so there was no point making an effort and she may as well give up. That was roughly the conclusion she has come to, up until now. But now, she adds, she realises she was deceiving herself by avoiding her mother; obviously things had to come to a head eventually. But she was ignoring basic psychology – it’s only natural that she should repress. Now, she should honestly confront her mother, her relationship with her mother, and attempt to directly understand her.

I knew something up w u!!!! texts the hairdresser: So its just Mommy issues like the rest of us.