

MINDFOOD

#SMARTTHINKING

She watches the city fall into the distance in her rear view mirror. The evening has that winding down feel, another working week done, and the weekend stretching ahead. Jessica settles into the physical act of driving and feels the tension across her shoulders begin to ease.

It's Friday and bubbles of happiness float in her chest as she thinks of being with him tonight. She wonders fleetingly about what to wear and then smiles to herself as she realises that it never really matters with him, he has no interest in her clothes after all.

As she enters the motorway with the other commuters, her mind explores the night she has planned. Should she have a bath while she waits for him? Perhaps she'll wait and they'll have one together? These are the decadent decisions that she ponders, the wonderful possibilities to mull over as she commutes. Maybe it is the illicitness of the relationship that increases her desire and adds the frisson of excitement? It's certainly true that theirs is no conventional relationship.

In the early days he made her feel witty and confident, they had fun together. But then time went on and there were too many evenings ending in fights, tears, or a public scene. Now with a little planning they can still be together, discreetly spending their time at her little place, their oasis of sin. She catches her eye in the mirror and for a moment she sees the truth reflected there: stop fooling yourself Jessica, it's not like you have a choice. A normal relationship between us would never work. She pushes the thought firmly aside.

As she exits the motorway, the traffic thins. The commute that she usually hates is just building the anticipation of tonight – the languorous feeling of being seduced, the chance to feel attractive and desirable. The bubbles of happiness rise again and she flicks through her playlist until she finds a song she can sing along to. She's on a high now, eyes sparkling, thinking of the evening ahead.

Jessica drives past the small cluster of shops near her home. She passes the office of her former therapist, recalling with irritation her brief dalliance with therapy. At first she had felt like she was an actor in an American sitcom, playing a part, unsure if she should lie on the couch, tissue in hand and describe her inappropriate sexual dreams.

Awkward as ever, she had been painfully aware of how much space her thighs filled in the chair as she sat waiting to be scrutinised and found lacking. Embarrassingly, as the sessions went on, she found herself trying to get the counsellor to like her, answering questions in a way that would paint her in a good light.

The counsellor had a terrible fashion sense that was distracting and when she had been seated across from her, Jessica hadn't seemed to be able to maintain the appropriate amount of eye contact.

It had deteriorated from there. The counsellor's clothing looked badly put together. Jessica spent too many minutes of the time she was paying for wondering how anyone could choose navy and tan shoes with rubber soles. For one terrible moment she thought she spied a tie-dyed detail on the therapist's shirt pocket; her blood pressure had spiked and she had scanned the room for possible escape routes. Jessica had spent so many years practising the art of hiding her worst secrets and many faults, that therapy was doomed from the start.

She pictured her real self as a naked infant curled in a foetal position, exposed on a stainless steel gurney.

Instinctively she covered it, wrapped it and cradled it to her chest. It wasn't safe in that cheap and run-down office with that poorly dressed caretaker of sanity; Jessica needed to find her own way of living her 'best life'.

Now her working life is filled with a not-so-subtle pressure, she must constantly give the illusion of being in control. Shamefully she stalks other women on social media, trying to emulate them. Her internet history is filled with capsule wardrobes to aspire to and inspirational quotes.

It had happened again today, Sonya had given her one of those looks that made Jessica doubt everything about herself. She's not sure if these disparaging looks from her colleagues are real or imagined, she has no way of asking for honest feedback without making herself vulnerable to scrutiny. She lives every day as if waiting for the axe to fall. Shame floods through her as she recalls a particularly bad Monday morning meeting when a colleague gently corrected her and she realised she had been mispronouncing a word her whole life. Her cheeks had flooded with heat, ears buzzing for long moments before she could regain a semblance of normality and re-join the conversation. It's moments like these when she's convinced her colleagues know that she's a fraud, constantly comparing herself to the beautiful people in their effortless slipstream.

She shakes off the feelings of anxiety this provokes and concentrates on the driving, willing her brain to disengage from the pressure behind her in the cityscape receding. She runs through her mental checklist as houses replace shops and businesses. She had spent the previous evening getting supplies in, she's called her single friends to let them know she is busy. Her married friends with children have weekends packed with sports games, cutesy haircuts and coupledness. She has carved a pocket of illicitness that no one should ruin. Her anticipation is high and the excitement in her body builds.

Her mind casts back to when they first met. It was at a low point in her life and the relationship was like a lifeline. Suddenly the hair falling around her shoulders feels irritating, suffocating her and she reaches for the tangle of hair ties that live in her console. Of course it's empty. A feeling of irritation wars with the anticipation; just yesterday when she had been searching for coins, all she could find were hair ties. She takes a deep breath trying to ease the tension creeping up her spine.

With a sickening feeling Jessica realises that there is one person who can be guaranteed to gatecrash her illicit weekend: her mother. She can't let this happen and with a deep and weary sigh she hits a button on her hands-free and prepares herself. The ringtone echoing through the car makes her think of tiny soldiers advancing into battle, the sound of their tiny boots marching.

Her mother's voice shatters her soldiers' frontline.

"Hello, Whittaker residence. Carol speaking."

"Hi Mum," Jessica says brightly, forcing an enthusiasm into her voice.

"Oh Jessica, it's you, I was just about to have my tea."

"Sorry Mum, I won't keep you, just checking in. I've a busy weekend planned so I was just calling for a quick hello now."

"It's fine, it was nothing special ... just a homemade casserole I've been slow cooking since this morning," her mother frowns through the phone connection.

"I don't want to keep you if your dinner is getting cold," Jessica says. Catching her own reflection in the rear view mirror she pulls a face, the childish belligerence a relief.

"It's fine, Jessica, no need to make a drama of it, it's just bad timing that's all, I'm not always at the end of the phone, waiting for you to call. Am I?"

"No Mum, you're not."

"How is work then? How's the important job going?"

Jessica searches for a neutral answer but it's redundant as Carol continues. "Judith's daughter has just been given a car park spot as part of her promotion. She was paying twenty-five dollars a day! Imagine! That's ludicrous! You need to do something about your parking situation Jessica, it can't go on."

Tension rolls over Jessica's shoulders like an ocean of plastic waste. Sometimes Jessica envies a sea turtle suffocating in a gentle ocean of plastic, thinking it was enjoying a last supper of jellyfish. Some things, no matter how awful, were still preferable to calling her mother.

For a moment she considers feigning a dropped call but can't risk the interruption to her weekend if her mother tries to call back later. "Great idea, Mum, I'll have to bring that up with my manager," lies Jessica. "I must go and start the drive home, before the traffic."

"Go, go," says her mother "you don't want to get stuck in traffic. It's appalling, I don't know why you can't move closer to your office. Goodbye, Jessica." Her mother ends the call abruptly, the silence like a cold sip of wine in a parched throat. Thank God sighs Jessica, job done.

As the city falls behind her and she drives past the homes in her neighbourhood, Jessica catches glimpses of people, families and the lives they live in the houses surrounding her. Their homes come to life as the lights come on, pets are greeted and children's lunch boxes emptied. For a moment she feels a pull toward that life, the ordinariness a balm instead of a suburban parody.

It's not for me, she tells herself like some kind of mantra, that will never be me.

She pulls into her driveway and takes in her little house, dark now and showing no signs of life. For a moment she feels flat – as if this wasn't something she had been waiting for all day, as if it was somehow tawdry.

She shakes it off and keys in hand enters her little sanctuary. Her home is the same as she left it this morning, the air feels stagnant, a plate with crumbs on it from her morning toast the only disarray in her kitchen.

She decides a shower would be better than a bath, she needs to shake off this depressing feeling. She doesn't want the evening to start at a low point. Lighting an aromatic candle she climbs her stairs. Turning the hot shower on to warm the room, she prepares to wash away the working week and the anxiety and discontent that cling to her hair and skin.

As she stands there with the water flowing down on her she closes her eyes and knows she can't wait much longer, the illusion of control she has constructed is slipping.

Downstairs waiting, laying like so much promise in the shelf of her fridge are the three beautiful bottles of crisp white wine she has been craving like a lover's touch, all week long. There will be no lingering in the shower, no dressing for a lover in fancy lingerie, no lover at all for her.

This is the relationship she has, the relationship she deserves. Maybe she chose it, maybe it chose her, but it has become the only one in her life she has room for.

The first bottle will be like foreplay as the feeling of sweet release builds and the second bringing a kind of salvation in the peace it brings that eludes her sober life: the third she won't remember and that too is a feeling worth chasing.

This is the enduring relationship she has, this craving, the satiation and the half-life in between. She both loves and hates this, but for now it's what she has.

The stream of water ends as she turns off the taps, clumsy now as the urgency of her craving builds.

Wrapped in a towel, she wipes the steam from the mirror with the underside of her arm. She looks at her reflection, the haunted eyes, the bags under them like bruises against her pasty skin, and she meets a knowing look of resignation gazing back, there's an absence of hope in her reflection and she looks away quickly.

"It's time. Let the sweet release begin," she says aloud, her voice a solitary sound in the steam filled bathroom. She has waited long enough.

