

Monday started off like, well, Monday. I had a lukewarm shower in what was left of the water, half dried and raked my hair, found some random underwear in the drawer, then pulled on my jeans and a tracksuit top. Gregory lumbered about without speaking and the children argued. James was watching cartoons on one channel and Sarah wanted her week in the stars on the other. Sarah was three years older so it was James who came in crying. I was making their sandwiches and, since it was Monday, had the luxury of wrestling with the choice of supermarket pate wrapped in what looked like a bile coloured condom, some left over ham from the weekend or cheddar cheese slices with the consistency of wet fabric. The ham won on the grounds that it was more perishable.

‘Sarah,’ sobbed James, ‘turned the telly over while I was watching my cartoon.’

‘Watch it upside down then,’ I suggested helpfully. It wasn’t very good but it was the best I could manage. It made James worse. He went back into the lounge. ‘Mum says you got to turn back to BBC,’ I overheard him say.

‘Piss off,’ said Sarah. James came back into the kitchen.

‘Sarah says you can piss off,’ he reported. Each of the last two words was clearly announced and rolled out with emphasis.

‘Don’t swear, please,’ I said. ‘Sarah, come here!’ I called. I called her name more loudly again and she slouched in. ‘Let James watch his cartoon,’ I said wearily, ‘and don’t swear at him or anybody else. It sounds horrible.’

‘I always watch the horoscope on Mondays,’ said Sarah, ‘he knows I do.’

‘Well just give it a miss for once. Okay?’

‘They’ll have finished by now anyway,’ she conceded grumpily and then went on in the same breath. ‘Don’t give me any of that ham. It was really horrible, all salty and stringy. Can I have pate?’

‘Too late,’ I replied. ‘I’ve made them.’

‘Well I’m not eating mine. I think I’ll be a vegetarian. I’ll just have some crisps and a biscuit.’ She went upstairs and James came back into the kitchen.

‘Will you make me some toast?’

‘No,’ I answered. Then, I added as an afterthought. ‘I’m just going upstairs. Make it yourself.’

‘I can’t be bothered,’ he said. ‘I’ll probably just have to faint at school and be taken to hospital. That’s what happened to Martin Bowen and that was because he didn’t have any breakfast. Mrs Haynes said so.’

‘Well, ask Mrs Haynes to come and make your breakfast. Go back and watch the television. Save your strength.’

‘There’s no point. The cartoons are finished.’

Gregory called downstairs. 'Can you put some toast on for me?' I gave in, cut two slices off the loaf and rammed them into the toaster with as appropriate a display of anger as I could muster. In fact, it is very hard to put slices of bread into a toaster violently and I suspect that James noticed nothing. Looking back, I wish I had gone and watched the horoscopes with Sarah instead of calling her. They might have been some help with what was to come or, better still, might have warned me to stay in the house all week. But, unfortunately, I didn't. I made the toast instead.

Gregory was downstairs within minutes, shaved, dressed and ready for the car. He was carrying his empty teacup and wearing his better suit. The word better describes it well since his other suit was infinitely worse than this one which at least had the merit of hiding the worst of his paunch. His shoes were clean because it was Monday as well. He looked almost smart. He gobbled his toast greedily as he walked around the kitchen reading the sports pages of the paper.

Gregory did everything greedily from home to work and from shopping to sex. If Gregory decided to go jogging then he had to jog further than anyone else. If he needed a personal stereo to listen to on the way it had to be the most expensive in the shop and in restaurants he always chose the most expensive first course with meat in it. He spoke with his mouth full and tiny crumbs snow-flaked down the clean shirt front.

'I'll be late tonight. Tomorrow I'm in Birmingham, staying overnight. Then back home on Wednesday evening.' I wasn't surprised at this. Gregory, as far as I knew at the time, was a consultant. That's a title which sounded rather grand until you realised that he was actually chief salesman for the smallest large producer of ready mixed cement in the United Kingdom.

The people who consulted him were almost entirely second-generation Irish immigrants. 'Ruddy Catholic paddies', he called them at moments of tension. From the accounts he gave, there was not much doubt their joint deliberations were an insult to the grand profession of consulting. He was frequently away on business to the point that the children hardly noticed his absence for the odd night in the week. James sometimes asked where his daddy was and when I told him that daddy had gone to Birmingham, Gregory could as well have been paddling up the Amazon. Come to think of it, for all I knew, he could have been - paddling up the Amazon that is. All I ever heard he did in Birmingham was to talk to his Irish friends in a very loud voice - mostly so they understood better.

This probably sounds a bit churlish but, in most respects, I was the perfect company wife. I went to the annual dinner and was invariably sat next to the most sullen and rudest directors because the managing director thought I was a sociable soul, unlikely either to be offended by their vulgar propositions or lured into embarrassing discussions about the length of their Mercedes saloons. I asked polite questions about cement as well. At home I even tried to talk to Gregory about his work and listened politely to his more, and less, racist diatribes, as well as the endless stream of disgusting jokes, folk myths and stories which people who travel seem to feed on. Gregory took a final mouthful of leftover, lukewarm instant coffee then wiped his mouth on the drying up cloth before giving me a greasy peck on the cheek.

'Bye kids,' he called upstairs and said the same to me as he walked out through the front door. No one answered. The car engine whined in a disgruntled sort of way, stuttered, fired and he was gone.