

She's lovely, she really is, but everything about her drives me nuts.

For starters, she's the ultimate worry wart. She worries about whether it's safe to live out west in case the government decides to build a nuclear power plant on her doormat, whether she should change her church before the congregation dies off, whether she should move house before the large tree next door grows roots big enough to invade her drains.

She never relaxes, because she's always worried, and if she's not actively worrying, she's being so fussy and particular about every little thing that there's no time to relax anyway.

Dressing just to go to the local Countdown can take an hour, and when she gets there, shopping becomes a slow, directionless amble. Time takes time, as Ringo Starr once sagely noted, but Mum takes an age.

Dealing with counter staff is an ordeal, as she insists on counting out all her small change while a huge line accumulates behind her. When she uses her Eftpos card, it's invariably to make massive cash-outs at restaurants or cafés, thereby depriving the staff of their float for the evening. Or she'll insist on cooking a meal, and by the time the overcooked carcass is served up, hours later, she'll be too exhausted to enjoy the conversation. She doesn't like table chatter, in any case.

Everything becomes a joyless chore, as she works her way through an endless array of medicines – for dubious, non-life-threatening conditions – to be taken at precise intervals, and her real or imagined health maladies determine a spectacular range of forbidden foods. Like a curiously charmless, grumpy child, Mum

exists in her own gently autocratic orbit, in which she's always right and her perspective is the one way, the universal truth.

Yep, I just manage to keep at bay an almost unstoppable torrent of rage and fury. But I plug it up, knowing I'll never change her ways, knowing that this stooped, bird-like old lady is now as vulnerable and fragile as I was as that babe in the safe haven of her arms all those years ago.

Name withheld

THE BOSS

Why does my boss dress like a comedian? Is it because he realises he's a joke? Why, when he speaks, do I want to gouge out my ear orifice with a pencil?

How did my boss get there, where he is today? Is it because, like a gaudy, weightless ping-pong ball, he just bounced to the top? Is it because he goes to barbecues with those other comedians? Is it because the vain biscuit rises to the top of the tin, the better to see his reflection?

How can I take seriously any grown-up who asks me what kind of animal I am? Did the fact I answered "tiger" nail me the job? Did he seriously believe me when I told him that my greatest weakness is perfectionism? Or that my friends would describe me as honest, hard working and reliable? Did I get this job solely on my ability to make up bullshit?

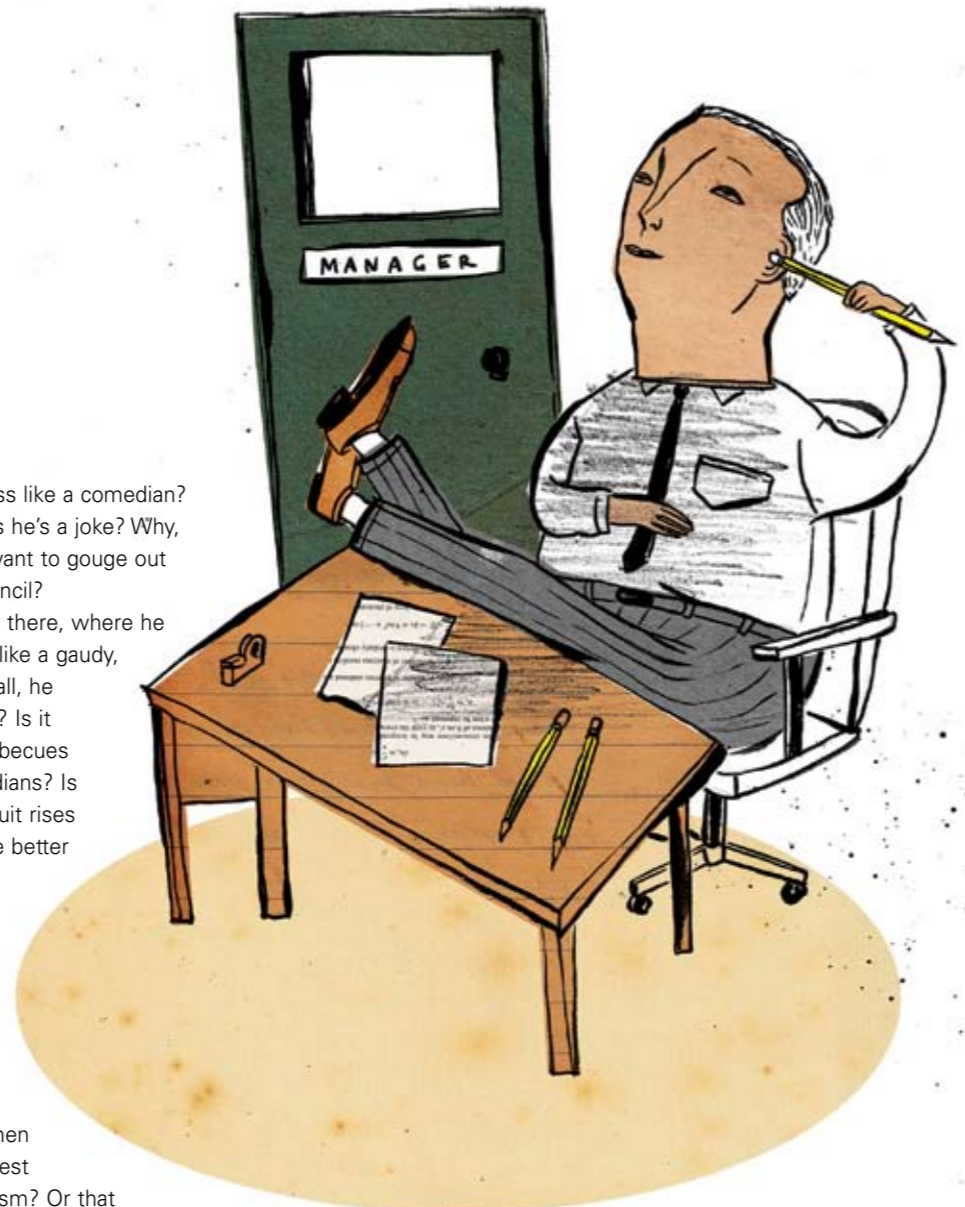
Why is my boss not as smart as his deviant 19-year-old son? How come his deviant son got a job here when he doesn't have any qualifications?

Why doesn't my boss have any real love for this product we're making together? Why must he mask his myriad insecurities by bullying the lovely people around him? How is it possible to have so few of one's own ideas?

Could it be that corporate success is like a backwards escalator slowly taking us down to evolution's bottom floor? And if we try to do handstands on it, our tie will get stuck in it and choke us to death?

If my boss is an idiot and I'm his minion, what does that say about me? Why, in a job interview, does no one ever ask me if I'm kind, generous, sensitive or humane? Why does my boss never want to change anything? Why is my boss stupider than me?

Julie Hill



PARTYING

At the risk of losing friends and alienating people, I have a confession to make: I hate the nightlife. When the expectation is I'll be a good-looking, sexy-smelling, interesting and interested addition to a dimly lit room, try as I might, I'll be anything but.

What's with the pressure to be painting the town red left, right and centre anyway? Everyone constantly asking, "What are you doing tonight/this weekend/after the show?" I'll tell you what I'd like to be doing. Nothing. My ideal end-of-the-week activity is decidedly more lo-fi than rockin' an' rollin' an' whatnot, ideally conducted in front of the TV having slipped into something a little more comfortable.

When an invitation to party is extended my way, my delight at being on the guest list turns swiftly to profound malaise. I try in vain to conjure a suitable excuse, but all too soon the big night arrives. It's cold, it's dark, I know I'll be better in than out. Even the preparation's a bitch – all that bargaining with the zip on my jeans and muttering obscenities at my hair, resolutely flicky on one side and flat on the other.

Enter a room full of revellers and I'm suddenly acutely aware of previously unregistered body parts.

Man, my feet hurt in these heels. Why are my lips twitching? My bum *does* look big in this!

What do I loathe about the soirée? Other people, happiness. If you ask me, the level of perkiness de rigueur at evening events is wholly unnatural. There you all are, blithely mingling, working the room with your honey-tongued repartee; meanwhile, I'm all out of conversation. Particularly vexing in this respect are Friday night work drinks, a hell I'm even less equipped to navigate – after a 40-hour week with you people, I got nothin'.

And the party don't stop when I walk out. After an evening of ill-advised chit-chat I'd love to forget, I'm guaranteed to fall into bed replaying each dispiriting encounter and mentally listing the people I must now avoid at all costs.

What can I say? I'm simply not wired to have the kind of fun that involves passive smoking and the need to yell above the vocal stylings of the next big thing. Leave me at home, where I can dance like no one's watching.

Philippa Prentice

“Particularly vexing are Friday night work drinks – after a 40-hour week with you people, I got nothin’”

PUNCTUATION PUNDITS

Sometimes you see a sign of some kind, or possibly a chalk-board menu in a café, and there's a misused apostrophe on it. "Curry's \$10"; it might say, or "Be careful: Pensioner's crossing". And what I would like to complain about, since it irks me almost beyond endurance, is people who insist on pointing out such errors.

"Look, look!" a finicky know-it-all will exclaim, positively dancing with the excitement this has brought to his inadequate and blighted life. "Just the one pensioner live round here?" And, "Will Mr Curry be angry when he finds out [a pause here, while our pedant snickers and wheezes into his egg-stained beard] that we have his \$10?"

Oooo, that sort of pernickety pettifoggery gets me riled. Really, what could conceivably be gained from bringing grammatical mistakes to public attention? Let us consider the possible scenarios. One: I have already noticed the error. In which case, I too understand the use of the apostrophe. However, I have the good breeding not to delight in other people's mistakes; people who possibly have

not been lucky enough to share my considerable advantages. Two: I was unaware of the mistake and happily looking forward to my butter chicken. But still nothing is gained from pointing the error out to me. It seems to me such nit-picking is not designed to edify the ignorant, the aim is to make them feel stupid and small (and, I posit, considerably less inclined to share their garlic naan).

Obviously, you might find whoever was responsible for writing "Curry's \$10" and ask for

the menu to be amended. But does that slight decrease in the sum total of human ignorance really outweigh being such a patronising goddamn a-hole? Let's be honest, what are you really saying to your local Indian restaurateur? "You don't know

me at all but I know more than you about arbitrary rules applying to my mother tongue which were invented to perpetuate the British class system. Let that be a lesson to you, my good man, and it is one I hope you will consider during your next 16-hour shift as you work to give your kids a better chance in life."

Really, shouldn't it be enough to know the rules of punctuation yourself? Why do some people take such delight in flaunting their tiny scraps of erudition so flagrantly?

"Oh, but I cannot endure the misuse of the apostrophe," people say, twisting up their faces as if seeing "Curry's \$10" had caused them a wrenching physical agony.

Well, speaking for myself, I cannot endure child poverty or the environmental degradation wrought in the oil fields of Nigeria. "Curry's \$10"? Make mine a saag paneer.

Jo McCarroll

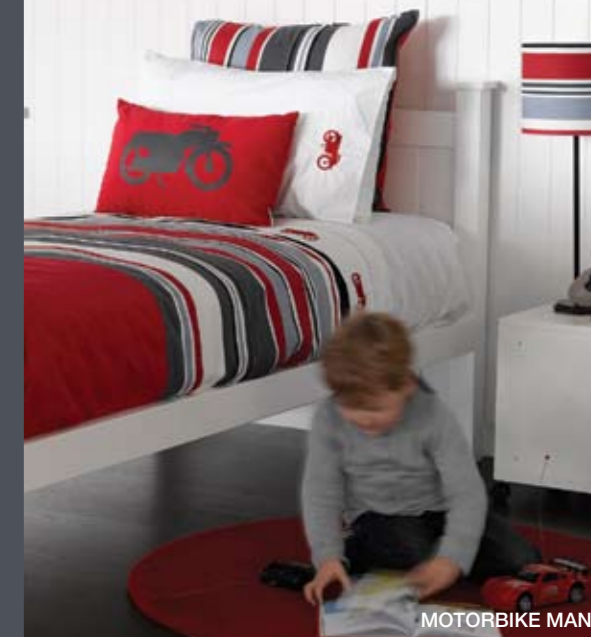
GRAPEFRUIT

Fruit is sweet, it's what fruit does. A mandarin segment is like a joyful sugary lozenge. Peaches taste like gummi bear sweat filtered through the tear ducts of a unicorn. This is nature's way of saying, "Eat me, friend! No, no, you can't eat too much – I'm fruit!"

Nature also has ways of telling you to stay away: protective armour, bright colours, a bitter or acrid taste, the spitting of venoms, acids or inks. (Anyone who's ever tried to cuddle an octopus knows this.) >>



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