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BACK-HANDED COMPLIMENTS

Written by Emily Hourican

“It’s **great** that you don’t mind about the house getting in a mess, or worry about the children being untidy. You’re so **relaxed...**” A friend’s sister, barely five minutes in the door (and really only invited out of kindness because the friend said she was having a tough time), had just managed to insult me through a pearly smirk. Good lord! “Relaxed,” my foot, she had just basically said I was a slattern, and that my children were like something out of a 19th century slum. She might have been purring in an oh-so-charming way, but make no mistake, under all that faux-friendliness, she was delivering a killer blow with the instinct of a total pro.

I didn’t even know her all that well, certainly I’d never felt we were close enough to be on slagging terms, but here she was, laying into me under cover of a compliment. It’s a peculiar situation to be in. After all, the person is pretending they are being friendly – the tone of voice invites a reciprocal bit of nicey-nice: “why thank you!” – but the actual content, objectively considered, demands a put-down. So what to do?

This of course is the secret weapon of the backhanded compliment-giver – confusion. They can count on muddling you so efficiently that you won’t be ready with any kind of decent retort, or even be sure if their comment requires one. Alternatively, the insult might arrive under cover of a joke – “goodness, how many teddy bears died to make that coat?” – so that, in taking offence, you risk being told, “oh lighten up, I’m only kidding.” Either way, Arghhh!

Typically, the backhanded compliment is territory for women and gay men, traditionally weaker groups in society, who may not have relished a full frontal challenge and so resorted instead to these little barbs – no less unpleasant than overt hostility, but much less easy to deal with. And of course, more socially acceptable than a punch-up. Because any of you who have been the victim of this kind of thing, will know well that the underminer often chooses a public space for their little dig. This is because having other people around makes the dig extra-infuriating, and makes the recipient more likely to just grin and bear it.

Asking around among friends and colleagues, it didn’t take long to unearth a whole load of eye-popping stories. “I had a friend from school who did it to me all the time, since I was

about 15. She'd wait until we were with a gang of boys, who we didn't know very well, and she'd start telling this stupid story about me trying to jump over a low chain fence on the street and getting tangled in it – 'because your feet are so big!' – and falling over. She'd scream laughing, and everyone would look at my feet. Which were quite big, and she knew I was sensitive about it." The woman who told me this did so through gritted teeth, even after all these years. The friend in question had a whole load of other little tricks and teases – "she'd compliment me on how 'daring' I was to wear such and such a thing, but only if it didn't really suit me. Anytime I really looked good, she wouldn't say a word" – until eventually, this woman simply had to stop seeing her. "I consciously allowed us to drift apart. I'd had enough of being the butt of her jokes and fake compliments."

For another woman, a colleague, it's her sister who plays the role of malicious sprite. "She's always saying things like 'oh you're so lucky your house is small, you don't have to spend so long cleaning it...' Which is basically her way of sneering at me for not living in as big a house as she does. Or she'll sigh and say how wise we are to holiday in Ireland every year, because isn't long-haul so expensive and tiring. Like we have any choice about it, which she well knows!"

Often, the fake compliment comes via a comment on clothes and appearance – "I love that dress on you, I think so every time you wear it," is of course a subtle way of drawing attention to the fact that you have worn something before, maybe many times. Whereas "isn't your botox done **well**?" is a not remotely subtle way of telling everyone you've had work done, but still in the guise of a friendly endorsement.

a bit of disingenuous

So what exactly is going on here? What is the fake complimenter trying to achieve? "It's a reflection of their own insecurities, low self-esteem and fears," says life coach Anna Aparacio, a self-esteem and confidence expert. "When people feel like that, either they become shy and introspective, or they become passive-aggressive. The fake compliment is an example of passive-aggression. Someone who has a healthy regard for themselves feels no need to do this."

She points out that it is important to distinguish between what is genuinely a joke, even a slightly edgy one, and an undermining comment. "If someone says 'you drive well, for a woman,' that's really pretty innocent, just humour, quite different to a genuinely nasty remark, no matter how well disguised." The subtext is that this person wants to put you down

– “they think of you as above their level,” explains Anna, “and so they want to bring you down.”

Now, there is great scope to actually enjoy the exchange, to engage in a battle of wits – who can deliver the fastest, most fantastic put-down, always staying within the bounds of ostensible politeness – that can become the defining tone of the relationship, and is wonderful fun for on-lookers. Think of Gore Vidal on Andy Warhol, “The only genius with an IQ of 60.” Or Bette Davis; “why am I so good at playing bitches? I think it's because I'm not a bitch. Maybe that's why Miss Crawford always plays ladies.” Dorothy Parker seemed to deliver this kind of put-down fast and furious: “That woman speaks 18 languages and can't say ‘No’ in any of them,” “This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.” However, not all of us are willing or able to match swords like this. So what to do if you are the victim of an underminer, and you're just not seeing the funny side?

“Its best not to give that person the satisfaction of seeing they've got to you,” says Anna. “There are a number of things you can do. You can fight fire with fire by responding with a bitchy comment of your own, but that means you stoop to their level (and let's face it, for those of us who aren't Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, there's a good chance this is just going to disintegrate into a vulgar slagging match). Or you can call them on their rudeness by politely pointing out that wasn't a very nice thing to say. Or, you can just refuse to rise to the bait. Pretend that you are taking their fake compliment as a genuine one, and say “thank you so much,” as if they were perfectly sincere.” The bottom line is, as long as your own self-confidence is intact, a few backhanded compliments can't really do any damage (well no, but its still galling beyond belief to have someone sneer at the state of your house, whatever about the kids...). You can't control what others say and do, but you can control how you react to it.

Where it's a friend you care about, Anna says, rather than simply an acquaintance, then pointing out that you don't like their subtle undermining, is really doing them a favour. “Often this can be an unconscious habit. It's born of insecurity, but the person may well not be aware that they're doing it. It's not necessarily premeditated, it's an impulse that comes over them because they feel momentarily bad about themselves. Letting them know how you feel about it can actually make the friendship stronger.”

And presumably – the old cliché in reverse – what doesn't make it stronger, kills it. For many of the women I spoke to, the solution was simply removing the person from their lives, letting go of what had turned out to be a negative and destructive relationship. But, for those who

did actually take the time to explain that they felt belittled by the bitchy asides, and bewildered as to why they were the butt of them, the results were often surprising.

But back to my friend's sister and her roundabout insulting of my house and children. Did I deliver a superbly calibrated response, engineered to show her that I saw her game and raised her stakes? No. I decided to smile and stay above it. "Oh well, children do need to feel free to have fun," I said, fighting down the urge to spill coffee on her cream cable knit J Crew sweater. And yes, I will invite her back. But only once I've dreamed up the perfect riposte. yes, turning the other cheek

After she left of course, in classic Esprit d'Escalier style, I thought up several perfect responses. And yes, I will be inviting her back, but only in order to deliver one of these.

Men by the way (heterosexual ones anyway), never, never get the subtle putdown contained in the smiling exchange, so there;s no point appealing to them for sympathy or the camaraderie of outrage.

the smiling assassin

You Know You've Been Given A Backhanded Compliment When:

- You're left feeling upset or cross, but can't quite work out why.
- The people around you are tittering behind their hands and not making eye-contact.
- You start to say "thanks," but want to change that to "F*** you"
 - Your hand twitches
 - You spend the rest of the evening obsessing over the perfect retort
 - you tell your husband/ partner what she said, and he can't see that there's anything wrong with it

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