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## THE TEDIUM OF PERFECTION

Written by Emily Hourican

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I recently did a photo shoot for this magazine. It was a Friday afternoon, the end of what had been a very, very long week. The kids had colds, I have the tail-end of strep throat, and everyone had been busy, so no one had spent the morning at home transforming the house into a fit location for a photoshoot. Result? Utter squalor. The kind of mess that only three kids, two jobs and a couple of malignant bacteria can effect on an average-sized family home.

Just as I was wondering if I could suddenly move house, the make-up artist and hair stylist arrived. Both young, blonde and pretty. Neither had kids, and therefore couldn't possibly have understood the background to the scenario of squalor around them. No matter what vague explanations I gave about 'oh we've all been sick, and it's been a frantic week...' I could see they thought we just naturally appallingy scruffy. Still, we were getting along alright, when one of them made the mistake of kindly playing with the middle child, to stop him teasing his little sister, B, while I was occupied have twelve layers of foundation applied to the bags under my eyes. "We don't let B play with the tiny bits," I heard him telling the hair stylist cheerfully. "Because once she swallowed one of them and we had to go through her poo to find it."

"That didn't happen," I shrieked. "That was just a joke Davy, you know it didn't actually happen."

"It did," he roared gleefully, "Oh yes. It did."

I would like to say – just for the record – that it definitely did not. Perhaps you don't believe me? The make-up and hair girls certainly didn't. They smiled kindly, sympathetically, and got on with the business of trying to make me look presentable for the photographer.

I was truly mortified. Of all the many embarrassing things my children have done – vomiting on me in the National Gallery café, having tantrums in Tesco, pulling down their trousers in a whole variety of situations – this one was well up there with the worst.

Because you see, the dizziness of the make-up and the stylist had gone to my head. I had lost the run of myself. In those moments, I badly wanted to be the vision the photographs were

trying to simulate. Unconsciously, I had begun acting the part (ignoring the chaos at my feet of course), fantasising myself into a perfect life, complete with fabulous wardrobe and designer sofa. Until my son pulled me ruthlessly back to earth with all that talk of poo.

What is it about perfection – the idea of it – that causes so many of us to seek it out? Why do we pretend so hard to have the perfect life, the perfect family, the perfect set of matching garden furniture? Particularly when we know full well how pointless this is, and how alienating. How much do we enjoy each other's projection of this perfection? Not at all actually. The version we really like is the one where everything is a mess and goes impossibly wrong. That, we can identify with, be amused and encouraged by.

Perfection, by definition, is a dead-end. A cul-de-sac. It cannot be improved on. It has no room for growth or change. It is sterile; Yeats' "glory of changeless metal." So why do we strive to assume it, when deep down we know well that it is actually imperfection that moves us? The struggle of another human being to better themselves, to succeed against their own odds, is where we find a deep connection with them and an echo of ourselves.

What draws us is difficulty; the infinite seduction of possibility rather than the sterile finality of perfection. Jackie Kennedy was interesting for as long as she was the beautiful young wife of John F Kennedy, but irresistible as the tragic widow. Grace Kelly may have been admired for her perfect ice queen looks, but we only identified with her when the stories of rampant passions held in check beneath that ruthlessly poised exterior began to surface. Curt Cobain, George Best, Amy Winehouse, Marilyn Monroe; in each case it is the flaws rather than fully-formed perfection, that calls to us. Their insecurity and angst, the way they were driven by fear, desire and their own personal demons. Even the Venus de Milo is more lovely and appealing for her missing arms, or the Winged Victory of Samothrace, poised as if for magnificent flight, but without a head.

In each case, what we respond to is the 'what if', the space left for imagination and aspiration, for hope. This is what inspires us. So, we need to wean ourselves off wanting to project perfection, and instead understand the possibilities for honesty and creativity in the admission of our failings. Which I most heartily believe. But I still insist that Davy's version of events surrounding the eating of small Lego pieces, never actually happened.

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