

Jessica Burgess.

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Jessica Burgess. This is a story about Jessica Burgess. Let's not call her Jess, or Jessie, she's neither of those. She's absolutely and resolutely a Jessica.

I don't know her.

I've only met her once, and that was brief, yet sufficient, to make me Google her place of work and amuse myself with her Team Page photo. So, I thought I would write her story.

I only have a few real snippets to go on – height, weight, hair, dress – that sort of thing, and I will go through those in due course. But it's the unseen, and unknown, things that make Jessica interesting to me: A bag of jigsaw pieces on a summer fair jumble table with no picture to guide you. Just a few clues peeping through the bag: A piece of russet sky; a yellow sailboat; a headless torso in a blue-hooped top. There's so much fun to be had filling in the gaps from the imagination. So here goes:

Jessica is a divorcee. She became unbearable after the birth of her daughter. Then she became unreachable. As her child grew so did Jessica's distance from her husband – we'll call him, Neil. At first she loved the way he held her and told her

everything would be okay, after Lucy's birth she despised it. She took to holding Lucy for comfort instead. So, he started texting a girl in dispatch pictures of his genitals. And that was that.

Jessica tells people they grew apart. She works as a chartered legal executive specialising in family law, so it's embarrassing. She spends her days digging amongst the entrails of other people's disintegrating relationships. She used to say; "I know, I know it's tough." Now she says it and means it. Especially now Lucy's old enough to make the choice to avoid being in the same room as her mother.

Jessica did have a thing with a fellow divorcee called Robin. But they were both too bloodied from their own battles to be willing to go to war again. He tried to introduce her to free-form jazz, but she couldn't understand the lack of structure to the notes and eventually they forgot to call each other.

Jessica is not a bad person – despite what I might have felt the time I met her – but she isn't a good person either. To be considered a good person there has to be some form of measurement. One isn't one just because it isn't minus one - it's zero. It's a radical view of good, I realise, but what other scale would cull the Jessicas of the world? This Jessica is a Jessica that would trap a spider, not kill it. She's a Jessica that would take her *Nutri-Grain* bar wrapper home, not drop it. She's a Jessica who would replace borrowed petty cash, not pocket it. That's not being good. It's just not being bad. She's a flat-liner. A living-dying flat-liner, no hindrance to life, but no benefit either. There is no scale for a Jessica like her.

When I meet Jessica she is behind the wheel of big square block of a car. Her hands are clenched tight and she is leaning forwards in her seat. I imagine she drives such a solid lump of a thing, not because she isn't a decent driver herself, but because she cannot trust everyone else round her to be as diligent as her.

From seeing her briefly in the flesh and then her photo, this is what I can tell you as fact:

Jessica is somewhere in her mid-fifties. She has a charmless, sagging, round face. She is distinctly plump and tries to disguise the fact counter-intuitively with bold, floral prints. (I think when we met her she was wearing something in greens and browns with little flecks of red and yellow). It doesn't look like she bothers much with her hair. It is brown. It is shoulder length and it has been butchered for function rather than form. Maybe she concedes to make a token effort with a flower hair clip on

a night out. Her expression when we came face to face was the same as it is on the web page: Irritated condescension infused with resigned disapproval. Her stare blames the photographer for her melting jowls and bloated porcine snout.

Lucy follows her father from the family home. It is a stifling sweat-box of nagging and soft-furnishings. She moves in with a boyfriend Jessica doesn't much like and they argue about him every day on the phone. Lucy tells Jessica to mind her own business. She tells her to stop trying to manage everyone else's life. She tells her she pushes people away. She tells her she'll end up all alone. She tells her she'll never get fucked again.

Jessica is strong in the face of cussing. She doesn't use words like that and has only pity for those who do. Other things she doesn't like are; exposed tattoos, aggressive vanity dogs, football shirts on grown men, or children come to think of it, drunk women, women in short skirts, jogging trousers when not exercising, cyclists, smoking, loud chatter in restaurants, boisterous children and jihabs.

"No wonder Dad fucked off. No wonder he sent that woman pics of his dick."

It's Neil, of course, who she blames for her daughter's rebellion. It is he who puts the poison in Lucy's mind: Drip, drip, drip. Nasty, evil little suggestions. Thanks to his pollution, Lucy is like one of those desperate seabirds flapping flightless covered in thick black oil. It is revenge for the loss of the house and his daughter, of course - Jessica can see that. It is this kind of embittered, small-mindedness she witnesses every day in her work. Usually from sad, lonely impotent men who are no longer able to bully and manipulate the past so they try to destroy the future.

It is tempting to give Jessica cats. Maybe two; Clovis and Clyde. But that's a cliché, and Jessica refuses to fill her home with false emotional props. Her own company is enough. A dying mother joins her at weekends as respite from the ghouls at the Care Home who don't feed or clean her properly. Jessica may not have cats but other stereo-types she is happy to indulge include; a passionate love for Michael Bubl , BBC Four documentaries, camomile tea and car boot sales.

Jessica knows any hurtful words aren't Lucy's. They are Neil's. They are his insidious manipulation, manifested in the confused emotions of a vulnerable teenage girl.

"You are just so sad." Lucy says, "how the fuck can you fix other people's families when you have so fucked up ours." Jessica doesn't retort. She let's Lucy

expunge her anguish. “Now darling,” she says at last, “there’s no need to swear.”

Lucy resorts to texting. She can’t talk to Jessica any more. Her mother manners her voice and talks very, very slowly to make her point. It makes Lucy pitch her words high and litter her sentences with curse words. She punches the keys of her phone:

FUCK MUM. WHEN DO YOU GET OFF TELLIN ME WOT TO DO?

Jessica thinks it is best for Lucy to make her own mistakes. Moving in with Amir is a mistake, but as long as she doesn’t get pregnant by him, Jessica thinks, everything will be all right.

The morning I met Jessica, Lucy had just texted. She is pregnant by Amir.

So, I suppose this is why, when I come across Jessica sat behind the wheel of her car, her face is all puffed red and burning and why she stares at me so angrily. Our cars have come nose to nose at the entrance-way to the car park. It is an impasse – one of us will need to reverse. But we each wait for the other. I suppose Jessica’s head is full of Lucy’s vitriol, Neil’s weak will and my refusal to move. She points beyond me to where she wants to go. I point beyond her in the same manner. She clearly has no intention of moving anywhere. After a moment I reverse to one side and look at her. She is clapping me slowly with sarcastic glee. I have made her day. Finally, it would seem, someone has done as she feels they should. Someone accepts she is right. But I’m not sure her cynical applause is measured just for me. This is Jessica slowly clapping Sarah in HR who forgets to clean her coffee mug every morning; clapping the care home manager who pilfers her mother’s loose change; clapping Amir and his Visa-grabbing aspirations; clapping Lucy, her loose tongue and looser morals; clapping Neil with his wayward genitalia; and, finally, clapping a world that refuses to revolve just exactly as Jessica, poor Jessica Burgess, thinks it should.

