

Slummy mummy Lucy Sweeney

'It's alive,' my mother-in-law says, pulling out the car mat. 'That's not coming in my house. There's stuff growing on the bottom'

Despite our protestations, my mother-in-law insists we spend the last weekend of the school holidays at her home in Hertfordshire.

"Very brave," mutters Husband on a Short Fuse as we grind to a halt just outside her house. "Shows great fortitude."

"Do you mean us for coming or her for having us?" asks Eldest Son. "Or," he adds, using his favourite two new phrases, "strictly speaking, is the jury out?"

Before we can answer, my mother-in-law has emerged from the front door to tell Husband on a Short Fuse that he has parked in the wrong place, even though there is enough space for another three cars and no other guests are expected. "Wrong how exactly?" asks Husband on a Short Fuse, who does not like his driving to be critiqued.

"You've left it in the middle of the driveway and the angle is wrong," she says. "It's a mess."

"What kind of angle does Granny want?" asks Eldest Son looking puzzled. "Acute? Obtuse? Isosceles? Or reflex?"

"What I want to know is if she uses a protractor to park her car," says Middle Son.

"Perpendicular to the house, please," she says firmly. "A metre away from the flowerbed and not so close to the front door."

"I'll do it later," says Husband on a Short Fuse, who has immediately reverted to sulky teenager. "Once we've unpacked."

We all get out of the car and my mother-in-law's spectacularly white bichon frise jumps

in the back, then emerges out through the open door on the other side an off-brown colour with bits of Doritos and other unidentifiable detritus stuck in his fur. He has half a Hobnob in his mouth.

"Wow, that's better than Derren Brown," observes Middle Son.

"Maybe he's a chameleon," suggests Youngest Son.

"He's just had a wash and blow-dry. That is absolutely typical," exclaims my mother-in-law.

"Strictly speaking it's not, Granny, because it's never happened before," points out Eldest Son. "So it's not typical at all. It might never happen again."

"How can your car be so dirty?" she asks despairingly. She holds her nose, sticks her head in the back and pulls out, in no particular order, a muddy football boot, a half-finished pack of Doritos and the mat from the floor. "It's alive," she says, observing it and carefully putting it on the gravel. "That is not coming in my house. There's stuff growing on the bottom. Terrifying."

"You have to be brave like us, Granny," says Youngest Son.

"What do you mean?" she asks. "How are you brave?"

"Daddy says that it requires great courage to spend the weekend with you," he explains. ■



Things you only know if you're single

Hannah
Betts



...that there's more than one thing to do to yourself.

One of TYOKIYS's correspondents in the field suggests that it discusses the vexed issue of single people talking to themselves. To which this column can only retort: "Pah. Assssss iiiiiiif. This column is a bastion of hip, swingin', free-wheelin', ultra-modish life choices. It would no more talk to itself than marry, reproduce or discuss house prices. Get over it, beetch."

It would, however, talk to Radio 4, its laptop and the many marauding ants that occupy its kitchen, bathroom and, increasingly, lunch. It would flick the Vs at landline communications, mouth freely at its telephoning mother and abuse the retreating backs of pushchair pavement-hoggers. But talk to itself? Never.

Singing to itself, naturally, occupies an entirely different category of self-expression, singing to oneself being single life's natural articulation of ennui, joie de vivre and basic drink levels. The Zombies, Taylor Swift, Leonard Cohen, Britney (obviously), *Teenage Dirtbag*, copious Lou Reed, *Dido's Lament* and, yes, even Natalie Imbruglia's *Torn* – all might be considered part of its karaoke oeuvre. While strutting and finger-waving, Mick Jagger-style.

As for other solitary pursuits, this column couldn't possibly comment. Although it has come to its attention that breeders engage in one activity more than the liberated. Hence fortysomething male divorcees being far more prone to the debilitating effects of porn than teenagers. The teens know it's porn; the oldsters think it's reality, with less than positive results when released back into the wild. ■

I don't give a monkey's...

Carol
Midgley



...for hospital gowns.

Hospital gowns might be getting a makeover. This is bad news for flashers, but good news for the majority of us who would prefer not to spend time in hospital with our bare buttocks hanging out of the back of a cheap tabard. Call us picky, but that's the situation.

I've been trying to fathom the reasoning behind the traditional tie-up-at-the-back gown

and have come up with only one sensible explanation: the designer was a sadist.

Oh, I know the *supposed* rationale is that it gives doctors and nurses easier access to the bottom with the syringe, the sponge and, alas, the gloved finger. But why not a zip, press studs or a small, closeable window like a serving hatch to the area? All less humiliating than dresses that come untied from neck to thigh, billowing open like tent flaps to reveal your mooning bum and back fat.

Patients are often left in the humiliating position of walking with one hand behind their back, clasping their flaps together, hence the joke: "Why is a hospital gown like an insurance policy? You're never as covered as you think." Then there are the poor sods who

misunderstand and wear them with the opening at the front. Awkward. And why are the patterns so often like the upholstery on budget airline seats: untactfully in shades of grey and yellow, the very colours the body turns when it's about to snuff it?

Ah, but the lovely new wraparound suits on trial at Birmingham Children's Hospital have sturdy Velcro fastenings, promising to preserve both body heat and dignity. They have been welcomed by medics and patients and their use may soon be rolled out, spelling the demise of the backless horror. Good.

The only mystery is that it's taken so long. And that anyone ever thought it was a good idea to dress sick people like perverts in cut-price straitjackets. ■