

Liberating encounter

By Ruth Ostrow

"GOD, don't let me run into anyone I know ... please," I mutter under my breath as I run around our local supermarket in my daggiest tracky bottoms and sweater, my skin a pallid hue, my hair resembling a terrified cat. Not a great look, but I have a serious deadline to meet which has seen me stuck at the computer for weeks without air or sunshine.

With a daughter about to divorce me unless I get supplies, I rush down the street between line-edits to do a quickie.

In the middle of my prayer, I run smack-bang into the mayor of Byron Bay, Jan Barham, with whom I am negotiating an important matter. I'm totally shame-faced until I notice she is dressed like me. "Some days I just pray I never run into anyone I know in here," she confesses as I self-consciously flatten down my own bouffant. "The truth is I get so busy, I often don't have time to shop, and then I suddenly remember I need things. The other night I came here in my pyjamas with a coat thrown over the top!"

We concur that it would be a great photo – the mayor of Byron Bay and a well-known journalist caught shopping in our jammies and trackies, sporting the latest bird's nest hairstyle.

But after giggling at our own expense we agree that we are lucky to be comfortable enough in our own skins to allow ourselves to have seriously ugly, daggy days – in public.

And so what? Didn't Cybill Shepherd go on American breakfast TV in recent times with no make-up and her hair sticking up so high she looked like she'd been electrocuted – simply to make this point? We are not Barbie dolls and it's very unnatural and soul-destroying to keep trying to be, especially when most men don't give a toss about their own appearance.

When Madam Mayor and I have our scheduled meeting we will be in our Sunday best, make-up, stilettos and blow-dried hair. It will be formal and businesslike. But there is something very special about having seen her at her worst – something liberating in her having seen me at mine. An invisible barrier put up by polite society to keep women envious and separate from each other has come down, and in crumbling has made us a little closer. It's nice when real, truthful things happen in this world of artifice and illusion.

www.ruthostrow.com

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