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Dames do it tough at the pointy end of social change

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A COLLEAGUE walks up to my desk. He stubs his cigarette out in my ashtray and winks. "It's 10 past 12. What say we head out for a bite?"

"I've got a few interviews to line up." I say, a little peeved he used the ashtray. Sure it's well used, but it's also a family heirloom, a fact he knows only too well. My butts or no butts.

"Let your girl take care of that. Come on, what's gotten into you? I've got our regular table booked at Draper's. If we men can't be a little mad every now and then, what's life all about?"

A few minutes later we're seated, the ordering done. No need for menus. The usual. Steaks, big and rare. Chips. Easy on the salad. A nice bottle of cab sav to drink. And one to breathe. My pal says the quality of a lunch is measured by the level of stainage on one's teeth. After a couple of hours of "Remember the time when ..." stories we're back, a little hazy, happy, with rose-coloured incisors just in time to file our stories for the next day.

And then home to ignore our wives and their incredibly pointy underwire bras and instead snore in front of the television. Ah, nostalgia. Who said it ain't what it used to be?

Mad Men daydream over, I unpick the cellophane wrapping from a too-cold \$6.50 egg-and-lettuce sandwich while filing a story for the website's lunchtime update. A blotch of mayonnaise falls on caps lock on my keyboard. But however hard I try I can't shake from my thoughts SBS's extraordinary series, set in a New York advertising agency in the early 1960s. Just why Don Draper, the show's lead - narcissistic, philandering, manipulative, brooding and brutal - remains so beguiling interests me almost like a science experiment. As do the women in his life.

Is Draper so anthropologically appealing because he represents what men supposedly secretly pine for (though I'm not so sure), a simpler time when gender roles were more clear cut? Where the women - wife, mistress, client or secretary - seemed content with the second fiddle?

The latest research into women's happiness tends to support the Draper formula. Sure, in the past 40 years women have been freer to pursue education and careers, the gender pay gap has narrowed, the invention of myriad household appliances has made domestic life easier, and better contraception has given women greater control over their fertility.

But according to a study, *The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness*, by University of Pennsylvania researchers Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, women today are unhappier than Draper's women both in absolute terms and relative to men.

The research reveals that for most of the post-war period happiness surveys put women out in front, but no longer.

And it's across the board. The authors say this recent decline in women's happiness comes "irrespective of the age, marital, labour market or fertility status of the group analysed". In other words, single, married, divorced, working, stay at home, kids or no kids, women report being unhappier now.

Answering why is a lot harder, the authors admit, though they take a stab at complexity. Women's more complicated juggle of work and family gives them less satisfaction in every avenue of their lives compared with men.

I have the bud of an idea for women to regain their marooned mojo. Think more like men when it comes to introspection. That is, don't think at all. Not unless you're forced to. And even if you are, think about one thing at a time. Remember, not asking yourself a question in the first place means you won't get an answer you don't want to hear.

Don Draper tends to deal with things only directly in front of him. Visceral, selfish. He has it all. Surely those rumours his life unravels in upcoming episodes can't be true.

And look, here he comes now. "Hey Draper, don't butt your cigarette in my ashtray."

"And what about lunch?"

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