

How to Get Things Really Flat:

A Man's Guide to Ironing, Dusting and
Other Household Arts

Andrew Martin

Published by Short Books

Extract

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**HOW
TO GET
THINGS
REALLY
FLAT**

Andrew Martin



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Introduction: Who Is This Book For?

When I told my two sons, aged eleven and thirteen, that I was writing a book on housework for men, one of them said, ‘Dad, aren’t you going to look a bit gay doing that?’ ‘I’m not bothered about that,’ I said, and I might have quoted at him the domestic watchword of the late Quentin Crisp, than whom it would be difficult to be more gay: ‘There is no need to do any housework. After the first four years the dirt doesn’t get any worse.’

My other son was equally discouraging, but in a different way. ‘Isn’t your book a bit sexist?’ he fretted, ‘because it assumes men don’t do any housework?’

Well, I like to think that between them the boys encompassed the widest possible range of knee-jerk prejudice, and I feel that I ought to make an opening statement in response.

This book is billed as ‘a man’s guide’, but that man could of course be one of two sharing a household, or ‘he’ could be a woman. The book is aimed at the designated slob, the Walter Matthau of the odd couple rather than the Jack Lemmon; the moderately disgusting George rather than fastidious, aspirational Mildred. It is for the person who does not know, or care, what day the dustbin men come, or where the bathroom cleaner is kept, or what starch is. If you said the word ‘limescale’ to this person, it would trigger nothing in their brain. These people have to ask the gasman where the gas meter is rather than the other way around, and they think that a crevice attachment is something used in rock climbing. (You did too, right? In fact, it’s the thinnest – and, as I hope to demonstrate – by far the most interesting and ‘fun’ attachment of the vacuum cleaner.)

Usually, however, the person in that Walter Matthau role will be a man, and usually he will be living with a woman. I have asked my male friends what they do about the house, and only one gave an expansive answer: ‘Every morning, I make the children’s breakfasts, wash up the things from the night before, and generally reduce the place to the state of a show house...’ he began, but his two children, climbing a tree some feet away, kept butting in, ‘Come off it, Dad!’ ‘When do you do that?’ ‘*We’ve* never seen you.’

Most of the men had something to say, like a defendant

offering some feeble mitigation before sentence is passed: 'I always wash up after the evening meal... I do most of the cooking at the weekends.' But in the main their answers were characterised by an extreme brevity:

'Help when I can.'

'Emptying the dishwasher – that's my job.'

'Depends if I'm around,' one man airily responded.

Then again, the wives or partners of these men would be able to answer in fewer words still, because they do 'everything else'.

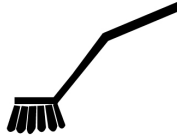
If women don't do most of the housework, then why are cleaning products advertised on weekday mornings, and not during the half-times of football games? Why is it a woman who is shown looking perplexed during an advertisement as the voice-over intones, 'You want to remove tough stains from coloured clothes but you're worried about the colour coming out?' or pleased at the news that 'Harpic three-in-one works twenty-four seven'. And if women don't do most of the housework, why are ninety-nine per cent of all books written about housework written by women?

At the time of writing, the number of women who describe their main occupation as that of 'looking after the family or the house' is 2.1m, whereas the number of men who so describe themselves is 207,000. In 1993, the corresponding figures were 2.7m and 108,000. Gender roles are dissolving under the influence of decreasing job

security, higher divorce rates and – I suppose – feminist persuasion, but they are dissolving very slowly.

In 2005, Dr Caroline Gatrell's book, *Hard Labour: The Sociology of Parenthood*, was first published. It contains the results of Dr Gatrell's interviews conducted with twenty highly qualified couples with children. In each case the woman was in employment. 'As far as the domestic division of labour was concerned,' Dr Gatrell writes, 'the situation for mothers was depressingly familiar, and echoed the findings of key writers on domestic labour during the previous two decades in that women bore the brunt of domestic work, no matter how many hours of paid work they undertook.'

Many men of today would call themselves feminists, but how many of them have ever put in a load of washing? I am in favour of a basic equity in housework: do as you would be done by; leave this toilet in the state you would expect to find it, as the notices have it in the worst sorts of public lavatories. But I am not a feminist writer, or a new man, or a house husband. To my mind, the fact that your wife might want you to do more of the housework is only one good reason for doing it, and I hope it will become evident that *How To Get Things Really Flat* is not about how to help your wife so much as how to help yourself.



Chapter 1: Why Do Housework?

At the risk of sounding like a Dickensian waif, I will start by mentioning that my mother died when I was quite a young boy, and that York City council supplied my father with a ‘home help’ to assist with the housework. She was called, somehow aptly, Mrs Buffard, and she came on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. She was a very jolly woman and I liked having her around, but what I particularly liked was the state of the house just after she’d left it. It was clean and tidy, and seemed sunnier. There was mysterious, rather beautiful midnight-blue stuff in the toilets. (Harpic, as I am now able to deduce). I knew that after one flush the blue stuff in the toilet would be gone, and I’d defer doing a wee to keep it there.

Mrs Buffard made my bed so neatly that I would try to slide into it without disrupting it, and my aim was to get out of a made bed in the morning. In my bedroom, the

window would be left slightly open for the purposes of airing, and my *Whizzer and Chips* and *Beano* comics all looked much more plausible, more *intellectual* somehow, when marshalled into neat piles. I noticed that Mrs Buffard left the tea towel hanging on the kitchen washing line, and I would marvel at this: I'd never thought of hanging it up like that. *I'd* thought I was doing everybody a favour by folding it up into a square about six inches wide after using it. She would also leave the dishcloth hanging over the two kitchen taps to dry, which I thought was a decorative touch; I didn't realise at the time that this was good hygienic practice, since bacteria thrive on moisture.

When Mrs Buffard had finished with the house, it was all ready for living in. A clean house was a suitable basis for getting things done. I would try to invite my friends around shortly after she'd left – not quite while she was there because it was slightly shameful to have a home help. It implied helplessness. But my friends, whether through diplomacy or ignorance, would refer to Mrs Buffard as 'your cleaner', just as though we paid for her services, and I wouldn't go out of my way to correct this misapprehension.

I knew that Mrs Buffard came, in some way, from the government, and it was a bit worrying that they – or it – should have thought it necessary to send her. For a year or so after my mother's death, I'd noticed people furtively congratulating my father on keeping the family together,

on 'keeping the children on', which was alarming, and made me think that this decision of his might be reversible. Even with Mrs Buffard's help, it might all suddenly become too much for him, and he might decide to do whatever was the opposite of keeping us on. Seeing my father in close conversation with another adult, I would sidle up alongside, just in case he was saying, 'I've found a very good orphanage for Andrew... a very smart uniform, all mod cons and reasonable visiting hours.'

So I began to do some of the housework myself. I instituted a nightly routine. Coming home from school, I'd wash any dishes left over from breakfast, wipe down what I did not then call 'the kitchen surfaces', hang the tea towel over the kitchen line and leave the dish cloth strung across the taps à la Mrs Buffard. I'd run over the living room with the Ewbank (carpet sweeper), take the dustpan and brush to the area beneath the canary's cage, shake the hearthrug in the garden (indeed, so vigorously that the backing would repeatedly fall off), and straighten the antimacassars on the chairs. Only then could I sit down and watch *Blue Peter*.

I started doing that when I was ten. At age eleven, I duly failed my Eleven Plus and went to a secondary modern school, which taught practical skills to ready its pupils for careers in the industry that, as it turned out, Mrs Thatcher would shortly come along and abolish. The boys did a lot of metalwork and woodwork, the girls did cookery and

needlework. For one experimental term, these roles were reversed and – in what was probably the most momentous single school lesson I ever attended – a Mrs Davies taught me how to cook an omelette *and* an apple crumble and custard. (Didn't hang about, didn't Mrs Davies.) I should think that I've cooked an average of two omelettes a week ever since. Apple crumbles I knock off less often, but it's what you'll have for pudding if you come to dinner here.

It seemed more fitting that a boy should do housework than a full-grown man. I come from the north of England, which had been the land of factories, where the difference between the man's role and the woman's was greatest. The man went out to work; the woman did her work at home. When this division of labour was at its height, in Edwardian times, any working-class man who did housework would be an object of abuse: a 'dolly-mop', or simply a 'nancy'. The logic was that if this betrayer of the male sex was doing housework, then his wife must be destined for the factory. By never lifting a finger in the house, the typical northern working man would have contended (if he'd ever deigned to argue with you over the matter) that he was exhibiting consideration towards his wife: he brought in enough money to allow her to work only in the domestic sphere. During my boyhood, this arrangement was embodied in the Sunday lunchtime ritual. Just as the women's labours were at their most frenetic, in the cooking of the Sunday lunch, so the men strolled off to the pub.

But *my* dad stayed at home, filling the kitchen with steam as he boiled the vegetables to death. I'd watch his mates going past the kitchen window, passing out the Hamlet cigars and laughing in anticipation of a couple of pints and a game of dominoes, and I'd say, 'Don't you want to go to the pub, Dad?'

'No, I don't, now will you pass me the gravy mix?'

Why didn't he want to go to the pub? It struck me that he was rather suspiciously keen on doing the housework. He was taking to it rather too well.

Then again, had he not also played professional football as a young man when he'd turned out (admittedly only once) for York City, who were then not quite as negligible a footballing force as they subsequently became? Was he not a faster runner than me, as proved every year on Blackpool beach? Had he not – during a trip to London – shoved a big man halfway down an escalator when he'd ignored a polite 'excuse me', repeated three times? Also, his housework speciality was ironing – he would carefully lay a thin piece of damp muslin over my school trousers and press down hard with the iron to give razor creases – and this skill, I knew, he had learnt in the army.

'I always had an iron under my control in the billet,' my dad once told me, 'and I would do the ironing for the blokes who couldn't do it themselves. I'd always iron the cook's uniform, and he paid me back with toast and tea.'

My dad was no dolly-mop, and as I got older, I stopped worrying about it.

I liked being competent around the house, and why shouldn't he? We were both antisocial, and one thing about housework... it gets you out of talking to people. (See **Washing Up/ Why do the washing up?**). It made me feel free, an independent unit as the Edwardians used to say. I could 'manage'; I could look after myself.

As I reached young manhood, some of my male friends 'came out' – on school camps, in student digs and so on – as people who couldn't cook, and I remember the shrill, panicking tone of a friend who said he wouldn't be taking his turn at the cooker in the shared holiday home because he didn't know how to. Later, at university, I would note the shamefaced look on my friends' faces as, at the end of term, they loaded a mountain of dirty laundry into Mummy's car. This was completely incompatible with the swaggering persona they presented every day in the junior common room.

Often today I meet men who proudly declare that they never do any housework, while their wives muster strange, forced, curdled smiles in the background. The existence of these men seems to me unreal. They are living on borrowed time, desperately vulnerable and poised for disaster, like those cartoon characters who've run off the edge of a cliff and not realised. But I know they're about to find out at any minute... when their wives leave them, I

mean. The above-mentioned Dr Caroline Gatrell, author of *Hard Labour*, observed in her interviewees that ‘the domestic division of labour became a serious issue following the birth of the first child’, and when I spoke to her she told me that the second time it becomes a big issue is ‘during divorce proceedings’.

But I do not seek to present myself as a domestic paragon. The domestic scenes of my early manhood were pure *Withnail and I* for years on end; a testament to the power of the human immune system. And when I got married in my mid-thirties, the familiar discrepancy appeared between me and my wife.

Here was a woman – a journalist – who had once been late for an important meeting with her editor (he was threatening to sack her), having been unable to leave the house without first making her bed and tidying the kitchen, even though she was well aware of having overslept. (She did get sacked, but a bit later on.) My wife has very high standards when it comes to washing-up, tidying-up, bathroom and kitchen cleanliness. She’s also very keen – much to my secret satisfaction – that the house should look right, and there’s an element of skilful stage dressing to her tidying up. Her attitude towards housework is (quite) healthy, based as it is on aesthetics rather than an obsessive compulsive desire to disinfect everything in sight. But while I did more housework than the average man, we would still have rows about it, especially after the

boys were born. Or the arguments wouldn't be about housework to begin with, but they'd soon get there. 'This week,' my wife would say, 'I've done the shopping, put in three loads of laundry, spent five hours ironing all the clothes, including yours, made breakfast every day and the evening meal most days; I've vacuumed twice, mopped the kitchen floor...'

For a man, there is no 'Yes, but...' after that. You've lost the argument, however reasonable the point you might have been trying to make in the first place.

I turned over the problem in my mind for a long time. What were the known parameters? My wife did about four times more housework than I did. It was obviously getting her down, since she also did – and does – a full-time job. More importantly, it was getting me down too. The feelings of guilt; the lack of bargaining power; the sense of being a spare part; of aspiring to an anachronistic male role... What to do? The answer came to me one Sunday evening.

That was my evening for going off to the pub for a couple of pints. It was also the evening that my wife did the ironing, usually in front of the classic serial on tv, and we would coincide somewhere near the front door shortly after the children had gone to bed: she would be approaching the living room, her upper body entirely hidden behind a stack of ironing; I would be rounding up the sports sections of the papers in order to read them in the pub.

On this particular Sunday, as I opened the door, and called out my habitual, 'See you a bit later, then,' I noticed a certain lack of enthusiasm in her habitual, 'Have a nice time.' As I wandered over to the pub, I thought this over: perhaps it was just that her voice had been muffled by all the laundry she'd been carrying as she spoke; it *had* toppled over onto her face somewhat; or perhaps it was just the strain of lifting it.

I had a particularly meditative couple of pints in the pub, and I hardly touched those sports sections. On returning to the house, I entered the living room, took off my coat, sat down and said, 'I've something to tell you.'

'Yes?' she said, a little alarmed as she aligned the creases on a pair of my trousers.

'I've decided to take over the ironing,' I said.

For a while she just eyed me suspiciously.

'All of it?' she said.

'All of it.'

'Good,' she said.

But she seemed a bit shell-shocked.

'I'm not letting you do the napkins,' she said, after a while.

I explained to her that she was obviously like those institutionalised prisoners, who wouldn't take their opportunity for freedom when it came.

'No, it's not that,' she said. 'I just don't trust you with the napkins.'

‘Don’t you want me to do the ironing?’

‘Of course I do... of *course* I do.’

It was all very low key, as important pivotal moments often are. We just both knew it was the right thing, and there was nothing further to say.

It was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made, and I commend it to my readers. If anything, I go to the pub more now than I used to, feeling guilt-free and often leaving a pile of freshly if not particularly well-pressed clothes in my wake. My wife’s ‘Have a nice time’ has regained its merry ring, not least because I have branched out from ironing to doing the laundry, or ‘washing the clothes’ as I like to call it. This happened because the iron, I discovered, was kept near the washing machine, and when I squared up to this contraption I saw it was not quite so complicated as I had always suspected. I have developed a basic method of washing the clothes, which leaves them definitely cleaner than they were before (I will put it no higher than that), and which I will outline in the next chapter.

Mindful of the lightened mood in the house that resulted from my work in these areas, I rediscovered my boyhood enjoyment of vacuuming, becoming – if I do say so myself – something of a specialist with the above-mentioned crevice attachment (See **Vacuuming/Why Vacuum?**). I now quite often clean the bath and have even dabbled in toilet cleaning. For several weeks – until my wife reclaimed the job on the grounds that ‘there’s never any

food in the house' – I did the family shopping, and for a couple of those weeks, I think I did the job exceptionally well. (There *was* food in the house – it just wasn't necessarily food that anybody wanted to eat.)

It would be hubristic, and possibly wrong, to say that we argue less. To some extent we just argue about different, more worthwhile things, and, because the moral imbalance has been partly redressed, I win more often than I used to.