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The Household Guide to Dying

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Extract

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One

The first thing I did this morning was visit the chickens. Archie had already given them the kitchen scraps, so I leaned over the fence and scattered handfuls of layer pellets. As always, they fussed and squabbled as if they'd never been fed before and never would be again. Then I opened the gate and went to the laying boxes, where they still crowded into one corner, even though there was plenty of room. There were three clean eggs: two brown, one white. Not so long ago I could tell which chicken had laid which egg. Now sometimes I couldn't remember their names. I picked the eggs up carefully. One was still warm. But touch is extraordinary, how it triggers memory, and so then I did remember that the tea-coloured ones were from the brown chickens, and the smaller white one was Jane's. I held it to my cheek for a moment, savouring its warmth, its wholesomeness. I wondered if this was something that poets would ever write about, because it was an experience I treasured. The comforting shape, the startling freshness. The idea that this egg, white and perfect in the palm of my hand, was a potential new life, requiring of the world nothing but warmth.

Ripeness is all. That was something a poet once said. Eliot, I think. Or Shakespeare. Perhaps both – it's hard to remember now.

With the eggs in my pocket I made my way back up the garden. Inside the house, the phone was ringing again, but I didn't bother rushing to answer it. It stopped after five rings. It had been doing that a bit lately. The air was rinsed clean from the rain earlier. I could hear the clipping of hand shears. That would be Mr Lambert next door at work maintaining his lawn, Mr Lambert for whom a heavy dew, rain, or even a snowfall – if such a thing were possible here in the temperate suburbs – never inhibited his devotion to the task. As if in his latter years, all his focus could only be directed down. I realised Mr Lambert had avoided my eye for years. I wondered if he thought about returning to the earth, now that retirement had gripped him and even his grandchildren no longer visited. Or was that just me, thinking about my own future?



Did I say future? I really wish there was the right word for all this, because *irony* doesn't come close, is completely inadequate. For a start, I discovered that Eliot was right about the cruellest month – except for me it wasn't April, but October. Spring was mocking me with its glorious signals that summer was on the way. The wisteria outside my window making the most splendid mess of the verandah. The driveway littered with papery blossoms. My car confettied with them. If I'd been driving this morning it would have been annoying, but instead I was free to admire the way the flowers had been tossed across the windscreen. The shabby old car was as radiant as a bride. And now the sun was out and the wind

was warm, I could smell the wisteria. Or perhaps it was the jasmine, which was along the front fence, just out of sight. My sense of smell was becoming muffled.

What is it about mauve and purple flowers? I remembered now that Mr Eliot (my high school English teacher always referred to him with respect) also had a thing about them – lilacs and hyacinths – but for me it was wisteria, and now irises. Archie planted irises in an old concrete laundry tub he'd turned into a pond, and each year they were more crowded and abundant. I'd been watching them over the past week or two. Their great long spears. The subtle swell of the buds on the stems. On the way back from the chicken shed, I noticed that the first one was out. It was bent over – perhaps the rain earlier was stronger than I thought – but the bloom was unharmed. I cut it and placed it in a vase on the kitchen bench. It was beautiful in a frankly genital way. Dark purple with a lick of yellow up each petal. And no scent at all. I think the scent of lilacs would make me retch now.

I'd always thought that this soft margin between winter and summer could never be cruel. But here, although the hemisphere is inverted, I was as bitten by cruelty as the poet was. Spring is the time of hope. Of inspiring songs and rousing actions. Of possibility, of anticipation, of plans. People emerge from winter, after tolerating autumn's capricious start to the season, and know that if spring has arrived then summer isn't far away. Every spring our local community has a picnic in the park nearby. Children have outdoor birthday parties. Spring is the time of action, of cleaning, of revolution.

Revolution. I thought a lot about the precise meaning of words now. And their sounds. Revolution is like the word

revulsion. Disgust. Rejection. This morning I hadn't yet faced breakfast, which would only be half a slice of toast, no butter, (there was no question of eating one of those eggs in my pocket). The poets were right about one thing, ripeness is all, but I'd like to tell Mr T.S. Eliot at least that his spring represented an insipid kind of cruelty, compared to mine. A laughable cruelty. It didn't get more cruel than this: the season of expectation, of hope, of growth; the season of the future, when there was none at all.

It was spring when I'd had the first operation, giving me just long enough to recover by the end of the year and face my Christmas responsibilities, instead of languishing in bed as I'd have liked. Spring again when I discovered the operation hadn't arrested the cancer. Further removal of body parts and intensive chemical treatment represented a Scylla and Charybdis between which I was pounded for another six months or so. Really, I would have preferred to row backwards, but Archie begged me to keep trying, my mother persuaded me, the fact of my two young daughters reproached me, and so I pushed on. And up until the last operation, when my body was sliced, sawn and prised open (the head this time), I still retained a scrap of hope.

But now the cruellest season had arrived again with an unmistakable finality. At least Mr Eliot had his dry stones and handful of dust to look forward to.



Two

Dear Delia
Can you settle an argument I am having with my friend (we play golf together)? She says you should only do your grocery shopping with a list. That I waste time and spend more money without one. I always take my time and think about it, and it's true I sometimes come home and forget that I needed light bulbs or rice flour. But then so does she.
Unsure.
PS We are both sixty-five years old.

Dear Unsure
I'm sure that the incomparable Mrs Isabella Beeton would have maintained that the efficient housewife should never undertake her grocery shopping without a list. It is said that impulse buying is curbed by taking a list. That a list prevents the unscrupulous vendor forcing unwanted goods on the customer. However life is short. There's a lot to be said for spontaneity. You might occasionally forget the light bulbs but I bet you buy those dark chocolate cream biscuits when they're

on special, or extra tins of salmon when you already have stacks in the pantry. I bet your list-carrying friend does too. PS Mrs Beeton was only twenty-eight when she died. Your friend might want to think about that next time she's writing her list.



Home Economics was promoted to a science some time in the 1970s. I never took the subject myself, already being domestically taught by my mother and grandmother. Both believed in the Deep-End School of home training. And so my grandmother, who cared for me when I was a preschooler, simply pointed me in the right direction and I started to scrub, soak, mop and sweep along with her. When I was a bit older, my mother, Jean, whose speciality was the kitchen, took over. I had to whip, fold and poach (later stir-fry) with barely a lesson. Their theory was that I'd simply pick it all up, that as a female I would learn all this by osmosis. A ludicrous idea, one might think, but there must have been something in the osmosis theory, for I learned without blinking. I understood sewing, cooking, cleaning and knitting. By the time I reached high school and was forced to take a term of cookery, I realised there was nothing more to discover. Learning a subject like domestic science seemed as elementary as learning how to catch a bus or post a letter. Didn't everyone just do these things? And by then I liked movies, books and music and couldn't see much scope for that down in Mrs Lord's austere kitchens or Miss Grover's sewing class.

Thirty years later, it was different. We women of the early twenty-first century knew we were poised somewhere between domestic freedom or servitude. The home was ripe for reinvention. Even the theorists were claiming it. Angels were

out, they'd been expelled years back. Now you could be a goddess, a beautiful producer of lavish meals in magnificent kitchen temples. Or a domestic whore, audaciously serving store-bought risottos and oversized oysters and leaving the cleaning to others. Goddess or whore, both were acceptable.

For Isabella Beeton, on the other hand, home management was a matter of martial discipline and political strategy, with the mistress of the house both the commander of an army and leader of an enterprise. By the early twentieth century housework was a matter of economics. The housewife was the linchpin of an autonomous economic unit. Then it became a science, and all that occurred within the home was accountable to clear logic and linear process. Making a batch of cupcakes was the same as distilling a chemical formula. Children given the right quantities of affection and punishment could be raised as successfully as a batch of scones at exactly 170 degrees centigrade for fifteen minutes. Not that domestic science meant a woman was a domestic scientist. That could never be entered on forms under Occupation.

Finally the home became a *site*. Housework, like everything else from surfing to jelly wrestling, has now been hijacked by theory. Whatever the present name for the subject is in the secondary school system, I bet it doesn't include the word *home*. No doubt there are numerous research projects and dissertations underway right now on the house as locus, the discourses of vacuuming and the multimodality of the food processor.

Though perhaps not. It is women's work, after all.



One morning, I was contemplating a list which I'd retrieved from the kitchen bench. I was still in bed, the same bed in

which I had cavorted with my husband for the last dozen or so years and had the most tender and exciting sex of my life though, I now realised, not nearly enough of it; conceived two children and borne one of them (the other came close, but stubbornly exerted her right to enter the world via hospital intervention); read innumerable books, many of them excellent, a lot of them trashy but wonderfully so; drunk countless cups of tea every Sunday morning while skimming the tabloid papers with an equal mix of cynicism and delight; and made notes on all sorts of things, including writing lists.

Lists were not essential to my life. Nothing would change now if I never wrote another and I suspected that without them I might still have got things done. But this particular morning's list was not for me, and I'd written it late the night before.

Put on washing
Feed scraps to chickens
Feed fish/mice (pond & tank)
Get girls up
Make lunches (not peanut butter for E)
Feed girls (don't let D have chocolate milk on cereal again)
Remind E re homework sheet
Check D has reader, library bag
Hang out washing
Empty/fill dishwasher
Girls to school half hr early (choir practice)

And also:

Have shower (if poss!)
Make coffee, drink while hot (ha!)

I had only been writing this sort of list for the last year or so, since it became clear that certain tasks would need to be delegated. Until things were *sorted out*. That was the term we adopted to describe the future that yawned like crocodile jaws, deep and daunting. Compiling it was hard because it represented things I had been doing intuitively for years. What to put in and leave out? I'd placed it strategically under the pepper grinder late in the night. When the girls came in to kiss me goodbye the next morning, I was too groggy to tell if their hair was properly tied up, teeth cleaned. I murmured goodbye and raised my head to brush their cheeks with my lips. When I woke later there was a feather on the sheet, a dark brown one. I presumed they didn't take their chickens to school.

As I reread the list I considered how Archie must have felt earlier that morning: was he insulted or bemused, offended or grateful? I wondered if I should have stipulated the girls be dressed in their school uniforms, or reminded him about their hats. Then I wondered why I felt all that was so important. I got out of bed and threw it into the wastepaper bin. Archie probably hadn't even noticed it.



I generally wake early, before the light has fully hatched. Just the day before, I had made a small pot of tea and taken a cup out into the garden. Some of the chickens were already quietly burbling to themselves. I went and sat in the cane chair under the umbrella tree nursing my tea and listening. I'd always found the sounds of chickens to be immensely pleasurable. The five of them fussed and bickered on their way out of the shed as the light grew. Lizzie – Elizabeth – the smallest and most beautiful, was the first out, leading the

foray into the sun. She was a Light Sussex, wearing black feathers over her white plumage like a lacy shawl, and she was bossy, instructing the others on the order they should leave the shed. The last to emerge was Kitty, dark brown to almost black on the tips of her wings. As far as I knew, every morning Kitty greeted the day the same way: a pause at the shed door, scratching the earth, a quick dart out a foot or two, a retreat to the door, another few feet, another retreat, before finally making a line for the feed tray on the other side of the run. Halfway there, Lizzie would always turn and peck her back, whereupon the ritual began again until something distracted either of them. Kitty was the last I acquired, though not the youngest, and poultry protocol insisted that, no matter what, this chain of authority remained.

I decided that if I had another life I could just study chickens. Only that morning sitting there, and throwing the dregs of my tea over the fence (they all rushed to investigate: they were incorrigibly curious) I realised despite having chickens for several years, I knew very little about them. The problem was that they were so easy, so compliant, required minimal care. I had, I saw, taken them completely for granted. There were aspects of them I would never understand. Why, for instance, did Jane, an Australorp with magnificent black plumage, glossy and iridescent green in the sunlight, lay white eggs? Why, when I had reared most of them from chicks, did they still hesitate or even protest at being caught? Kitty would once cuddle contentedly in bed with Daisy, but then after five minutes struggle to be free. Realising that the hen preferred to roost at night, I finally had to coax Daisy into returning her to the rest of the flock, after which Kitty became pathologically timid. (And, as was the way with children, Daisy's fierce desire to sleep with the hen every

night evaporated. Some other animal obsession materialised. First the goldfish, and then, when she finally accepted that they weren't amenable to cuddling, the mice: India, Africa and China. A few months back, Daisy was insisting that if she didn't take China, her favourite, to school in her pocket every day, she or it would die.)

I tasted the smallest atoms of life in those few quiet minutes. Drinking tea and waiting by chickens before the rest of the world raised its head. I tossed them a handful of layer pellets. Kitty approached the fence and ate from my hand. The gentle prod of her beak in my palm. The contented cackling. Lizzie darted across and shoved her aside. I was gripped by a sudden urge to protect the smallest of my flock. I entered the shed. Despite the dust, the earthy pungency of the chicken manure, the remains of bones and shells and everything else they unearthed in their endless, restless scratching for vermicular treats, the shed and the run was a pleasant place. It offered tender moments that couldn't be found anywhere else. The angled poles of light capturing swirls of golden dust. The feathers rising and settling on the ground. The clucking that sounded equally contented and distressed. Above all, the air of expectancy that emanated from every hen, no matter how silly. The pure optimism that kept her laying an egg day after day, when day after day that egg was taken away. Some might regard that as stupid, but I thought it almost unbearably generous. A laying hen was so full of integrity, with all that devotion and focus in her life. And then, the egg itself, sitting sometimes in dirt, sometimes crusted with chicken shit, sometimes as clean and unblemished as a new cake of soap. But inside, more than complete; stuffed, entirely, with possibilities.

It struck me that morning how I should have taken the opportunity more often to regard and wonder fully at this corner of the garden, this ordinary aspect of backyard life. Too late now.

In fact, it was too early, but I went in to Estelle and Daisy anyway. In sleep their forms assumed a softness and delicacy that would dissipate once they woke. For a minute or two I drank in their innocence and purity. Then I placed the chickens carefully beside each of them. Estelle's hands curled automatically around Lizzie, Daisy sat up with a start when she felt the tickling warmth of Kitty on her cheek.

What's up? she said.

It wasn't much past six o'clock, but I figured my daughters would have to cope with a lot worse than being dragged early from their beds.

I need to show you something very important, I said.

Cuddling their chickens, they followed me into the kitchen where I made them a chocolate milk each and sat them on their stools at the opposite side of the bench. The chickens settled into each lap with a few muted chirps. Switching the kettle on again and taking down the tea canister, I began.

Making the perfect cup of tea is not something you're necessarily going to learn by accident, I said. Although, as Mrs Beeton says, there is very little art in making good tea. *If the water is boiling and there is no sparing of the fragrant leaf, the beverage will almost invariably be good.*

Who's Mrs Beeton? Daisy said.

Never mind, said Estelle, sensing the importance of the occasion.

I made the tea while talking them through the entire process, streamlined for the twenty-first century, and taking

into account local conditions. I used the small brown pot which was perfect for two cups, Irish Breakfast tea, and one of the white cups. I explained they would hear of things like warming the pot and the milk-first-versus-milk-later debate, and the metal-versus-ceramic-pot argument, which divided purists into polarised camps of Swiftian proportions.

Swiftian? What's that mean? Estelle asked.

Jonathan Swift. Wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, remember?

She nodded. We'd read a children's version of it together a couple of years back, when she was nine.

He wrote about people called Big-Endians and Little-Endians, I said. All about which end you sliced your boiled egg open. Or something like that. Don't worry about that now. We'll do eggs later.

They would only need to heat the pot on the coldest of days, I went on. Not much of a problem here, especially with global warming. Nor, I explained, did they need to worry about the one-for-each-person-and-one-for-the pot rule. It would all depend on how strong you liked your tea, and, as they knew, I happened to like mine quite weak (they nodded, yes, they knew this), whereas others, especially those who took their tea with milk (Jean, their grandmother) might like it strong.

When the tea was made and poured, I placed it under their noses and told them to inhale deeply. I knew they wouldn't want to take a sip. They sniffed and nodded when I asked them if they could detect the malty aroma.

In my opinion, I added, Irish Breakfast is still the best tea to start the day. Failing that, a brand containing an Assam leaf. And you can forget about Billy Tea, these days it's nothing like it used to be.

Then I poured it all away and started again, to be sure they'd got it. They drank the last of their chocolate milks and watched until their attention span expired and they wandered back to bed still holding their chickens.

Nowadays, I focused on small but significant things. These days, my daughters indulged me quite a lot. A year ago they would have resisted, whingeing. Refused to see the point of cups of tea, which only ancient people drank. Now they were more tolerant of my eccentric demands. Sometimes they looked at me quizzically, assessing if it was really me. I have, I thought, at least taught my daughters to make a perfect cup of tea. They might otherwise go through life thinking it was always done with teabags. Though I couldn't explain to myself, really, why I felt this would be a bad thing.

Alone in the kitchen, I raised the cup to my mouth but the perfect cup of tea now tasted bitter and my throat tightened in resistance. I went back to bed, where Archie was just stirring awake.

