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Housewife Down

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Extract

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Chapter One

AGONY

I DON'T REMEMBER when I shelved the dreams I had wished for myself as a girl. I don't remember when it all stopped mattering. All those years before, they had seemed so important, so un-negotiable. All these years later, they are distant childhood memories.

I used to tune into Anna Raeburn's lunchtime agony phone-in on Talk Radio many moons ago. It made for fascinating listening. All those people with car-crash lives. It's easy to feel magnanimous from the safety of your kitchen table while a sorry tale unfolds from some poor woman trying to traverse her way through a clearly ghastly marriage to a wastrel of a husband.

This particular charmer evidently preferred the horses to his family responsibilities and had converted the spare bedroom into a sort of do-it-yourself virtual bookies', having commandeered the children's homework computer and rigged it up to every online betting shop on the internet. She could tell he was gambling heavily at the moment because he was always shouting at everyone and sweating excessively. Incredibly, she wasn't calling about the gambling habit. She was ringing in to bemoan his removal of the family PC because no one could get to it any more and the kids were driving her round the bend.

I recall that at the time I was making fresh pasta and secretly adoring every moment of the lengthy ritual. The fine feel of the dry wheatflour running through my fingers. The cool block of marble on which I would tenderly cajole the pale yellow dough. The long ribbons of fresh pasta falling from the miniature mangle. The peaceful feeling I hold inside.

Then there was the daily company of *Woman's Hour* on Radio Four. I would listen closely to the presenter extolling the virtues of a superwoman who had climbed mountains and helped refugees in parts of the world I had never even heard of, and another who sailed the oceans taking her husband and children with her, shaping their home-spun education despite the most spartan of living arrangements in far-flung places.

I tried to imagine the beauty of these lands and the adventure of it all.

I've never had children. This was not a conscious decision, it is just the way things have worked out. I suppose there is still time if I'm quick about it, but I doubt I ever will. Instead I labour for hours and give birth to complicated menus, nurturing each dish with a mother's love, raising my pastry to perfection.

ONE SUCH DAY, I sat at the kitchen table shelling the fresh peas I had made a special trip to the greengrocer to buy that morning. It was time for the agony phone-in, and I was sitting comfortably. Before long, a woman burst onto the airwaves complaining bitterly about the state of her marriage. Her husband treated her like a domestic slave, brutally ignored her vain attempts at conversation, never lifted a finger to help, nor brought her flowers, nor shared a word of kindness. The list went on and on. And so did she. The catalyst for the call was that today he had forgotten her birthday.

'How long have you been married?' Anna asked.

'Thirty-two years.'

'And you expect him to change?!'

I realized that I had stopped shelling and was just sitting there, stock-still, staring out of the window. My comfort zone had completely disappeared.

My God, I thought. That's me.

I suppose now that I had misinterpreted my life of suburban comfort for happiness. The respectable full-length curtains. The newly appointed steel cooker with the superfluous extra gas ring. The neatly manicured garden. Sufficient housekeeping to shop freely at Sainsbury's but not quite enough to stretch to Waitrose. All this and more had lulled me into a moribund state which I had somehow mistaken for fulfilment. It wasn't quite what I'd had in mind when I married Robert fifteen years ago. All those promises wrapped up in a heavenly white dress and a cripplingly expensive reception filled with people I barely knew.

The agonized caller was me.

The circumstances slightly different perhaps, but the situation just the same and her pointless loveless marriage my own. Not in the dinner-thrown-at-the-wall-because-it's-too-salty sense, but in the diminution of my entire self over a long, long time to make way for a boor. It had been a stealthy, gradual erosion, a not-so-gentle brainwashing. Now I saw that mine had been washed whiter than the beautiful sheets billowing dutifully on the line in the gentle breeze outside.

THE CRACKS HAD begun with the small, withering remarks as his sparkling career failed to materialize.

Stuck on the middle rung of mediocrity, he had supplemented his dented ego and crumbling self-esteem by whittling away at mine. I must have been clever as a child. I had passed my eleven-plus with flying colours and had gone to the very best of grammar schools. Great potential, they'd said. Well look at me now.

I used to feel invincible, and thought that I had arrived as my husband's equal, yet the constant chip-chipping away, scathing remarks and daily criticisms eventually took their toll. I was reduced to a husk of my former effervescent self and began to take solace in the daily routine of my drudgery. My friends had gradually dropped away, finally tiring of the brittle veneer that had to be maintained in my husband's company, which had to be endured if they wanted to see me. The occasional stolen lunch dates had become so difficult to keep in the face of a querulous husband, who was determined that I should not have any interests outside of his needs, that I had simply stopped going. So the friends stopped asking, and I hid myself away among the well-organized jars and tins on the pantry shelves.

What had started as love gave way to simpering tolerance, then silent resentment, and finally a weary acceptance of my lot. Fear of the unknown and a misplaced sense of loyalty had somehow precluded me from ever seriously considering the consequences

of divorce. This was what marriage was like. It was ultimately about endurance, not love. Robert was happy enough now. He had everything pretty much sewn up.

And here was I, gratefully clinging to the wreckage.

I SAT THERE and looked at the peas. Hundreds of them, all the same, and somehow it felt significant. For the first time in many years I wondered what on earth I was doing.

I resisted the urge to throw the bowl into the bin. I have nothing against peas. Besides, there was a pretentious dinner to prepare for my husband's closest colleagues tonight, and while I was feeling rebellious in that instant, I had insufficient courage to write a triumphant Dear John letter and leave it on the dining-room table in lieu of the meal.

I brooded over those peas for a long while, contemplating my sad and meaningless existence, and wondering what had happened to the bright young thing who had once lived on red wine and pâté and pleased herself. Perhaps if I stared at the peas for long enough they would yield an answer, but they just stared back and said nothing.

I put them in the fridge alongside the ridiculously complicated marinade I had spent the entirety of

yesterday afternoon constructing while listening to the man whose wife had refused him sex for the past eight years.

'Get a new wife,' Anna had prescribed. I found myself thinking what I might do if Anna said to me, 'Get a new husband,' and defiantly reached down for the bottle of white wine strictly reserved for poaching fish. I heard Anna saying to me, 'Pour yourself a glass of wine and go take a long hot bath.'

Who was I to argue? The woman obviously knew her onions.

THE SOUND OF the car on the drive woke me with a start. A panic-stricken glance at the clock confirmed the hideous inevitability that I had indeed fallen asleep. By my reckoning I had about twenty seconds to compose myself and look normal. It was a tall order. No clothes, no hair, no face, in a manner of speaking. I threw on a robe and quickly scrolled four rollers into my sleep-mangled fringe.

As I pinned the last of them into place, I suddenly remembered the beef. By now, it was supposed to have been four hours into a slow braise with the incredible marinade, not festering on the worktop where I had left it at lunchtime. Too late now. As I reached the landing, I found myself recounting all the thoughts that had danced through my head

earlier that afternoon and felt deep, red anger that beef carbonnade should matter in my life. It didn't, and nor would I let it. No more.

The front door opened.

'Helen?' called the husband.

I was not yet ready to speak. I wished I could disappear into the ether right then, that very second, and never return to see the fallout.

'Helen!' This time much louder as car keys hit the console table in the hall.

From the top of the stairs I could see him. I watched him walk into the kitchen, open the fridge and then close it, open the oven and then close it.

'He-len!'

Now he was yelling.

'Hello, darling.' I had swept silently down the stairs and attempted to waft nonchalantly into the kitchen.

'Where's the dinner?' he said crossly, looking visibly anxious, but I was ready for him and bravely tried to wave away his concern with a gesture of my hand.

'Oh it's one of those cook-it-all-at-the-last-minute recipes. You know, hours of preparation and all that. How was your day?' I remembered to smile.

'You're cutting it a bit fine, aren't you? And just look at the state of you!'

'Everything's under control,' I said reassuringly.

I realized this needed to be convincing so, as a

finishing authentic touch, I went in for a welcome home kiss on the cheek. Big mistake. His eyes widened in alarm.

'Have you been *drinking*?' The accusation was hurled hard, and he reeled away from me to allow me to take in the full extent of his horror. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

My nerve was starting to unravel.

'Oh nonsense, darling! It was just a glass of wine while I was preparing the dinner.' I made a mental note to extricate myself as quickly as possible to dispose of the empty bottle I must have left in the bathroom.

'You know how important this is. Christ,' he said, lifting his hand to his forehead as though faced with a presidential crisis. 'I bet Graham doesn't have to deal with shit like this from Sheila.'

'Well, lucky old Graham,' I muttered.

'What?'

'Oh nothing.' Now just wasn't the time. 'Why don't you go and take a nice shower and I'll get the dinner on. In fact, I'll pop upstairs and get it running for you.' I was already on my way back up the stairs to remove the evidence of my treacherous afternoon.

BACK IN THE kitchen, things were pretty serious. So was my head. I remembered from my freedom years

that the trick is to keep drinking once you've started at lunchtime, otherwise a five o'clock hangover kicks in and you're pretty much done for. Dinner was already hanging in tatters and it was only half past six. Right. Improvise. Quick. Think Ainsley Harriott, twenty minutes, and get on with it. And that was how braising beef ended up thinly disguised as filet mignon, the marinade an eye-wateringly strong sauce, and the peas – well, peas is peas.

The husband reappeared, calmer, cleaner and dressed in his usual light-blue shirt and slacks ensemble. God, did I really marry that? I should ask for my money back.

'That looks interesting,' he said, peering at the raw steaks.

It'll taste bloody interesting too, I thought mutinously.

'I'm just nipping upstairs to sort my hair out.'

'Well hurry up about it. They'll be here in half an hour. Did you open the wine? Where is it?'

I stopped in my tracks. Would that be the wine that I was supposed to pick up from the wine merchants this afternoon? I supposed it would have to be. I turned to face the music.

'I'm so sorry, darling,' I said meekly. 'I completely forgot about the wine.'

'You did what?'

Oh here we go.

'What the hell do you mean, you forgot the wine?'

He wasn't waiting for an answer.

'That's just typical. How can you forget something so very simple when you have absolutely nothing to do all day except ponce around and watch daytime TV? Aren't you capable of anything?' I assumed it was another rhetorical question. 'Well you'll just have to go and get it now, won't you?' He turned away, paint-stripping over.

'I can't.' This was not going to go down well. 'I've had a glass of wine.'

'Of course you bloody well can.'

'All right then. Two glasses. Big ones,' I added defiantly.

The look said it all. As did the brusque shove past me and the animated snatching of the keys from the table. As did the huffing strides towards the car, and the skidding wheels and the unnecessarily *Miami Vice* tyre marks left on the drive.

THE EVENING'S FREELOADERS arrived. Drinks were drunk. Seats were taken. The starter was uneventful, seasoned as it was with stultifying conversation about sales legends and golf shots that got away. Then came the steak. I watched surreptitiously as the first mouthfuls were consumed, my husband being the last to raise his fork. I watched him intently. He

chewed. And chewed. And his eyes slowly widened and then fixed upon me a dart of sheer horror before lapsing into dazed confusion as he looked back at the steak. I was, after all, the most envied of cooks. I smiled sweetly and returned my gaze to my own plate. As if sensing the moment of tension (or perhaps tasting it) Graham the sycophant decided to reopen the conversation with his usual blinding eloquence.

'So how's that car of yours going, Rob?'

'Great. Apart from the moron who nearly ran me off the road today. Honestly, some people should be shot,' responded my husband as the others nodded understandingly.

'Again?' I asked.

He stopped eating and glared at me. I didn't usually join in much of the conversation at these things, except to small-talk with the other long-suffering wives. And after the earlier run-in, I think he was expecting the rest of the evening to pass without having to engage with me at all.

'Pardon?'

I looked up and decided to run with it. 'Well, only yesterday you were saying about how someone nearly ran into the back of you at a roundabout. And then there was that incident on Sunday when you were coming home on the motorway,' I said quietly.

'What's that supposed to mean?' He was attempt-

ing to keep things light, but managing only to sound rather churlish.

'Nothing. It's just that you do seem to have an awful lot of things happen to you in the car.'

'No I don't!' He enforced the point, angrily digging the spikes of his fork into a cowering Jersey Royal.

'Well you certainly have a lot more than me.' I knew I probably should have stopped talking at that point, but I was starting to enjoy myself. 'I don't have people nearly running me off the road on a daily basis or cutting me up or driving into the back of me like you do.'

'That's because you drive like a hesitant snail.'

Appreciative laughter from the executives.

'I'm not slow. I'm safe.' My tone was surprisingly even. 'And I don't see the point of always trying to get ahead of the car in front, nor do I believe that the entire road belongs exclusively to me.'

'Nor do I.'

'Yes you do!' The situation was now getting nicely out of hand for a business dinner. 'What about the poor chap whose bicycle mudguard got caught up in your bumper when you refused to give him room?'

'His fault.' Husband was now adopting a schoolyard folded-arm pose.

'Rubbish! I was there!' I was feeling braver now

and soldiered on with 'In fact I think you are the worst driver I have ever seen.'

Judging by the icy silence, this may have been a bridge too far. To call your husband a terrible driver in front of a table-load of guests is tantamount to taking out a full-page advertisement in every national newspaper saying that he has a microscopic penis and likes to dress up in women's clothes at the weekends. You see them occasionally in shopping centres and big supermarkets. They're the ones who dress like the Queen with sensible shoes and a matching handbag, but nothing appears to be even slightly worn. A scarf tied jauntily around the Adam's apple is a dead giveaway, as are jelly-mould wigs and shovel-like hands. Didn't you ever wonder who buys the strappy size elevens you see in the outsize 'ladies' shoe departments? Well, now you know.

'I think someone's had too much wine,' he said to the table. Ah yes, when all else fails, roll out a condescending old chestnut and pronounce the wife drunk or insane.

'And I think that you couldn't pass a driving test now if your life depended on it,' I retorted.

The morons guffawed in unison at the ridiculous challenge, and my husband joined in the braying laughter.

'I'm serious,' I said levelly. 'You pass a driving test and I'll eat my hat.'