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How To Be a Good Wife

Written by Emma Chapman

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EMMA CHAPMAN

How To Be a Good Wife

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*For Kate and Keith Chapman
for teaching me everything I know*

'Come on my history horses!'

‘And below is always the accumulated past,
which vanishes but does not vanish, which
perishes and remains’

– Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

1

Today, somehow, I am a smoker.

I did not know this about myself. As far as I remember, I have never smoked before.

It feels unnatural, ill-fitting, for a woman of my age: a wife, a mother with a grown-up son, to sit in the middle of the day with a cigarette between her fingers. Hector hates smoking. He always coughs sharply when we walk behind someone smoking on the street, and I imagine his vocal cords rubbing together, moist and pink like chicken flesh.

I rub the small white face of my watch. Twelve fifteen. By this time, I am usually working on something in the kitchen. I must prepare supper for this evening, the recipe book propped open on the stand that Hector bought me for an early wedding anniversary. I must make bread: mix the ingredients in a large bowl, knead it on the cold wooden worktop, watch it rise in the oven. Hector likes to have fresh bread in the mornings. *Make your home a place of peace and order.*

The smoke tastes of earth, like the air underground. It moves easily between my mouth and my makeshift ashtray: an antique sugar bowl once given to me by Hector's mother. The fear of being caught is like a familiar darkness; I breathe it in with the smoke.

I found the cigarette packet in my handbag this morning underneath my purse. It was disorientating, as if it wasn't my bag after all. There were some cigarettes missing. I wonder if I smoked them. I imagine myself, standing outside the shop in the village, lighting one. It seems ridiculous. I'm vaguely alarmed that I do not know for sure. I know what Hector would say: that I have too much time on my hands, that I need to keep myself busy. That I need to take my medication. Empty nest syndrome, he tells his friends at the pub, his mother. He's always said I have a vivid imagination.

Outside is a clear circle of light. Hector's underpants, shirts and trousers move silently in the breeze. Holding the cigarette upright, the glowing tip towards the ceiling, I notice the red-rimmed edges of my fingernails. A shadow shifts across the table. I see a hand, reaching out: the fingers spread open to take it. It is small, with bitten-down nails, a silver ring gleaming on the index finger. Without thinking, I offer the cigarette, but when I look again the hand is gone. The hairs on my arms

How To Be a Good Wife

rise. I turn quickly, my heart beating, but the room is empty.

With a shaking hand, I stub my cigarette against the delicate china and cross the kitchen. Folding a piece of paper towel around the butt, I wrap it with an elastic band, trying to trap the smell. It still emits the stench of stale smoke. Dropping the sugar bowl into the steaming water in the sink, I hide the cigarette packet in the teapot. I put the paper parcel on the window ledge outside the front door. The air is fresh and cold, like plunging my face and chest into ice water. I will dispose of it later, on my way to the market.

I check my watch again. Twelve twenty-five. I set it every day by the clock on the evening news: it is important for me to know the correct time.

Standing at the open front door on the raised porch, I look out at the dirty stretch of lane. Beyond it, the wide green fields spread towards the edge of the rising valley. The clear blue sky opens up above the darkness of the mountains, and as I look up, I feel dizzy.

The tree at the end of our drive is losing its browning leaves: they pool deliciously at its trunk. I long to hear them crunch under my shoes, to run across the valley and through the dark forest until my lungs burn. The cold wind would lash my face, blowing through my hair: my

feet would kick up the dirt. I wouldn't stray from the path.

Holding on to the wooden door, I don't step outside. At one o'clock, I will go to the market. *Your husband belongs in the outside world. The house is your domain, and your responsibility.*

I look at my watch again. Twelve thirty.

Behind the closed front door, it is silent in the house. There is no microwave beeping, no sound of a car door slamming in the drive outside. The washing machine is not even churning: I couldn't scrape together enough for a wash today. The only sound is my breathing, in and out, in and out. The house is always empty now, except for me and sometimes Hector.

The weak midday light slants across the beige carpet. Kylan smiles down from the various pictures on the walls. His first day at school, standing proudly beside Hector's car with his socks pulled up and his new blazer over his arm. In skiing goggles, his face pink and lips rubbery around slightly crooked teeth. Several of him as a baby, his hair sticking up unnaturally and the same gummy smile. I miss him: the stiffness in his crying body, his tense screams, and how he would calm when he found himself in my arms. He has forgotten now, but he felt like this once.

How To Be a Good Wife

There is only one picture of Hector and me together: our wedding photo. We stand in the church doorway, Hector looking straight at the camera, while I smile up at him. He looks like a husband should: strong and protective and content. If I look closely, I can make out the few grey hairs on his head, the lines around his eyes. My white face is startled by the new light of the churchyard: I was just twenty-one, like a child, my body impossibly slender in the narrow wedding dress. I look happy, but I can't remember if I was. It's so long ago that a dull fog has fallen, and no matter how I grasp, only a few details remain. The particulars of running the house have taken up the space, replacing the old moments. I have a few: Hector's rough hand clasping the top of my arm as we walked through the dark church towards the bright square of daylight. And the feeling of exposure: the eyes of the photographer on my face; Hector's parents standing to one side, watching.

Hector's mother organized everything: she liked things to be done right, and made it quite clear she thought I was too young to understand. Her wedding present to me had been a book: *How To Be a Good Wife*, which she said would teach me everything I needed to know. I still have it somewhere, old, and well-thumbed. I learnt every page by heart.

My apron strings catch on the kitchen door handle and I stop to free myself, noticing a smudge low down on one of the panes of glass. When he was a child, Kylan's finger marks were always there, like ghosts. Now, it looks as if someone with dirty hands has smeared them across the whole bottom panel. I fetch the polish from under the sink, feeling strange that I haven't noticed something so obvious earlier, and rub until the glass comes clean. *You must persevere when cleaning glass, mirrors and silver. The smudges cling on: they do not want to be removed.*

As I scrub at the panel, an image forms like a developing photograph. Hector nervous, standing over me, telling me I have missed a spot, to hurry up, to make sure the house is perfect before his mother arrives. Before we were married, she used to visit on a Sunday to clean the house and cook Hector's dinners for the week ahead, kept in Tupperware containers in the fridge. The first time I met her, Hector had insisted that we clean the house from top to bottom, and though it seemed pointless to me if she was to do it all over again, I did as he asked. Everything needed to be perfect, he repeated, she would notice the slightest mark. It was only later, his mother tutting under her breath as she corrected my work while Hector stood with his fists clenched, that

How To Be a Good Wife

I saw he had involved me in a lifelong battle between them.

When we heard the doorbell, he pulled off my apron and rubber gloves and we went into the hall together. I see him now, telling me to smile, as if it's happening all over again. The way she looked me up and down, shook my hand and smiled tightly. She asked me where I was from, where I went to school. Did I want children? Hector answered for me. I only nodded.

I hear their voices, through the kitchen door. I am on the other side, out of sight.

'She's very young, Hector.'

'She looks younger than she is.'

'Where did you meet her?'

'We met when I took that holiday to the island.'

'Does she live locally?'

'She's staying here for the time being.'

She breathed in sharply. 'Staying here? How long for?'

Hector sighed. 'I don't know, Mother,' he said. 'Her parents died recently and she doesn't want to be on her own.'

'Well, if you're sure. It just all seems a bit fast. But then, you're not getting any younger.' A pause. 'She's very thin. Is she ill?'

‘She’s been through a tough time, with her parents. She’s a good girl.’ There was a silence. ‘I’m going to marry her.’

Now, I am here still, standing with my head resting against the closed kitchen door. My heart is hammering. The words seem to have come out of a place I don’t go any more. Yet I heard them, as clear as if I was hearing them in that moment. I can’t lose the feeling of something in the wrong place.

I go to the tall wooden cabinet in the hall where I keep my china dolls. Hector has bought me a new one each year since we’ve been married. Twenty-five dolls for twenty-five years. I keep them away from dust, looking at them only through the glass panes, opening the door as little as possible to keep them preserved. Brunettes, blondes and redheads, each face perfect in its own way. My favourite is a blonde-haired doll, sitting in pride of place in the middle row, her perfect curls and pale grey eyes catching the light. I look for her now and for a moment I am confused by what I see. She is facing the wrong way. I feel my throat tighten. Hector knows not to touch my dolls. I wonder if this is his idea of a joke.

Opening the cabinet, I pull on my white gloves. Lifting her out, I tilt her up and down, watching her eyes flick open and shut. I trace her lips with my fingers, always slightly parted, always smiling.

How To Be a Good Wife

I hear something on the other side of the front door. Startled, I drop her. Looking over my shoulder, I bend to pick her up, my heart thumping. She has landed on her head, but there is no visible damage. There is a noise at the front door again, and my head rings, as if it was me who took the fall. Slipping her back into the cabinet, I walk quickly through to the kitchen, shutting the door behind me. I slide a knife from the draining board and wait.

The front door creaks open, and then shuts. Steps travel slowly across the hallway. I let my breath escape.

I open my eyes. It's Hector, standing on the other side of the kitchen doorway, watching me.

We watch each other through the thick glass panels: we don't smile. At the bottom, I see his brown leather brogues, the laces tied. In the middle, his corduroy trousers are pressed stiffly, his hands in his pockets. At the top: his calm blue eyes; the steady line of his mouth, slightly curved down at the corners; his greying hair brushed sparsely. He has deep creases in the skin of his cheeks.

He sees: slippers, the bottom of my black everyday trousers. The neat red apron, a pale pink cashmere jumper, the knife glinting by my side. My make-up-less face, no doubt severe in the bright daylight. My hair tied into a neat dull chignon at the back of my head, dark

blonde with the beginnings of grey. *Before he arrives home, freshen your make-up; put a ribbon in your hair.*

I risk a smile: as he smiles back, the lines around his eyes shift. Now that he's here, I feel better, and almost silly that I worked myself up before, thinking someone was breaking in.

I turn, slipping the knife under the surface of the water in the sink. Hector opens the door.

'Hi,' he says.

I glance at the kitchen clock. Twelve thirty-five.

'You're home early,' I say.

Hector nods. 'No classes this afternoon,' he says.

I have to look away from him, down into the water. I begin to wash the knife. The soap slips off the gleaming metal as I slide it onto the draining board.

Hector is still standing there, watching me.

'How was your day?' I ask.

'It smells of smoke in here,' he says.

'I burnt some toast.' I keep my hands below the surface of the water. 'Have you been touching my dolls?'

'What do you mean?' His voice is slow, careful.

'My dolls. Someone has been moving them.'

He comes towards me; I stay still. He raises his hand and I feel the warmth of his palm on my forehead, dry and papery.

'Are you feeling all right?' he asks.

How To Be a Good Wife

'I'm fine,' I say, opening my eyes.

'Not still feeling sick?'

'No.'

'Have you taken your medication?'

I shake my head.

Hector opens the cupboard above the sink. I hear the rattle of the bottle.

'Open your mouth,' he says.

I let my jaw go slack. The pink pill moves past my eye line, and when I feel it on my tongue, I swallow. He gestures, and I open my mouth again.

He checks. 'Good girl,' he says, putting his hand at the base of my neck. 'I'm going to have a shower.' He turns to leave.

I pick up the knife from the draining board and begin to wash it again.

Without looking up, I listen to him climb the stairs. Once I am sure he is gone, I let my legs go, sinking against the kitchen counter. Cupping a hand to my mouth, I expel the small pill, letting it drop into a gap between the skirting board and the floor. It has been so long now since I remember actually swallowing one.

I haven't mentioned it to Hector. He would want to have a discussion, to remind me of how I get without them. Just the thought of it gives me a headache and I put

my hands up to my temples, rubbing at them, pushing the pain away.

The last time I stopped taking my pills, Kylan must have been eleven or twelve. He had just started getting the bus from the end of the lane with Vara, his friend from the farm. I found that now he was away more, at senior school with its additional after-school activities, there was less for me to do in the house. When he was younger, I was so busy, I barely had time to think: he was always there, wanting me. But now, there was only the washing, ironing, dusting, and making his dinner. I had already had time to make stacks of stockpiled meals, waiting in the freezer. I started to look for the shadows of dust that fell on things.

But it wasn't just that there was less to do and the house was so quiet. I felt him slipping away from me. In the evenings, I would meet him from the bus and ask him questions as we walked home, but he wanted to talk less and less. He kept more to himself, and I missed the shape of his child's body, grasping after me. One day, he told me he didn't need me to collect him from the bus stop any more. I said that I liked to, but he insisted that he could walk down the lane by himself. Hector said it was normal, that he was growing up. But it was easy for him to say: Kylan had started talking to him more.

How To Be a Good Wife

So I stopped taking my pills because I wanted something to happen. I suppose I wanted him to notice me again. I almost welcomed the weariness that came without them: the heavy darkness I dimly remembered which begin to follow me around again. I would be doing a job in the kitchen, and before I knew it, I would be out on the porch step, numbly watching the horizon. Kylan would come in from school and find me there. Dinner was never ready, and his bed hadn't been made. Sometimes I cried without understanding why, and couldn't stop even with Kylan's warm body against mine, his hair against my nose. I remember clinging on to him, whispering in his ear, waiting for it to pass.

Eventually, Kylan told Hector, and he got it out of me that I had stopped taking my pills. He said it wasn't good for Kylan to have to do everything himself. *Children need order and routine: to be surrounded by stability.* That's when he started to check up on me.

'Some people just need a little help, Marta,' he said. 'It's nothing to be ashamed of.'

And now, Kylan isn't here again and the silent house makes me want to scream. He isn't coming back this time, and there's no reason for me to hold it together. There is even less to do these days. Skipping my pills is like an experiment, one I allow to continue because in

my worst moments, I long for something bad to happen. If it does, maybe Kylan will come back and help to take care of me.

And I like the warm, strong feeling I get from fooling Hector. It is better than feeling nothing at all.

Thinking I hear him on the landing, I make myself get up and take out the ingredients for bread. I stand, watching the neat packages of flour, yeast, butter, waiting for the whirr of the bathroom fan, the sounds of the shower. I want to seem busy, but the pressure of Hector above me makes me feel tired and after some time, I put the ingredients away again, into their proper places.

I check my watch: five minutes to one. In the hallway, Hector's mahogany walking stick is propped against the wall. A recent addition, since his knee operation, a reminder that he is getting old. The doctor said it was only temporary, but I have a feeling Hector likes it, that it makes him feel distinguished.

I pick up the bundle of letters lying on the doormat and dust the front of them. On one of the envelopes there is a faint brown smudge, which I ignore.

The names on the letters do not seem familiar.

*Mrs Marta Bjornstad. Mr and Mrs Hector Bjornstad.
Mr and Mrs H. C. Bjornstad.*

Before I leave the house, I put all the letters, even the

How To Be a Good Wife

ones with just my name, into a pile on the hall table for Hector. *Let your husband take care of the correspondence and finances of the household. Make it your job to be pretty and gay.*

When my watch reads one o'clock, I pull on my red tartan coat and navy headscarf and leave the house.