

Homework

Introduction

1000 words

A few years ago, in Britain on a house exchange, I spent a few nights with friends who'd been neighbours in London, and now live in a farmhouse in Essex. I've known Diana for years, which is why I'm grasping for words to describe the way she lives without sounding critical. The quickest thing I can say is that Diana doesn't care much for housekeeping. She is passionate about her family, and wants them to be happy and healthy. But she sets no store by a well-made bed, or by keeping muddy boots outside. For Diana these things just don't matter.

When she showed me the room where my husband and I were to sleep, I had the immediate thought that I'd be able to sleep there as long as I didn't turn on the light. However before I could do this, I had to find something to put all the bits and pieces scattered over the sofa bed into, much like wiping crumbs from a table after a meal. Hunting around I found a Batman rucksack, already half full of assorted toys, into which I wiped bits of puzzle, coins, playing cards, cutlery and a few desultory sultanas.

The next morning I went out for a walk, stunned by the beauty of the river and the landscape around, and by how totally different it was from the narrow Victorian street Diana and I shared five years earlier. I hadn't gone far when I realised that without gumboots I wouldn't get much further – and turned back. Entering the kitchen in my socks, I found Diana sitting with her feet perched on a chair by the wood-burning stove, reading the magazine from a Sunday paper. Her puppy was gnawing at the leg of her chair and one of her boys was slathering peanut butter on bread. Diana, oblivious, sat sunk in a long article. She looked content. She wasn't trying to make sense of her life by taking a long walk, as I was. She wasn't trying to plan her next book, as my husband was. She wasn't trying to finish a film review before lunch, as her husband was. I envied her.

As it turned out I was wrong. Returning from a bracing walk I was met by the smell of lamb and potatoes. Diana, her dark brown hair falling like a curtain over her face, was pressing pastry into a flan tin. A cloth was on the table and the children were being

called in to lunch. Lunch was generous – dumplings and three vegetables – and everyone seemed glad to be there.

After the kids pushed back their chairs and ran into the garden – my daughter was especially fond of their dog – Diana told us a story. When her son Sam – then nine – was a toddler, she'd kept up a studio to paint in. But she rarely used it. Two days a week she would set up childcare and catch the train to her studio in East London. When she arrived she'd sit in front of a primus stove, rub her hands, drink coffee from a mug, and chat. Only rarely did she pick up a brush and paint. Eventually a friend suggested she should see a therapist. 'My life is a mess,' Diana told the therapist in her first session. 'I want to paint, but I can't concentrate. My husband complains that I neglect our home. But I just don't care. I love my son and want lots more children, but it's just not working.' 'Look,' the therapist said, stopping her. 'It's simple. As well as terribly obvious. You're an artist, not a housewife.' For Diana, ever after, it really was that simple. These six words, in a single session, set her free.

From that day on Diana was happy. And because she was happy her family life chugged along. Her fridge was bare to my well-stocked eye, but her heart was full and guests a constant stream. And now that they live in Essex her studio is fifteen steps from her backdoor. Propped and stacked along the walls of a shed that she insulated herself sit scores of canvases. Inside she holds local art classes for women who, bewildered by the pace of their lives, regularly meet. The therapist was right. Diana is an artist.

I can't help admiring Diana's disregard for housekeeping. However I know myself well enough to know that I can't escape three unmade beds, and cornflakes stuck to breakfast bowls, just by walking out the front door. And it isn't just because I'm not an artist. It's because I have an imaginative investment in an attractive home. It's an important part of who I am. I like to be able to walk back into our kitchen, hungry for the next meal, without finding dirty dishes in the sink. The so-called small things in life are for me the important things. I appreciate it when the cannellini beans in our evening meal aren't from a can, when bay leaves flavour the chicken stock, and when the last gasps of afternoon light give our back room a warm glow. I seek beauty in my home, rather than on a canvas in a studio.

I never thought much about the value of looking after a home when I was younger. Perhaps I was too busy, too preoccupied – or just too much in denial of what my mother

did when I was growing up. The day I turned the corner, the moment I decided that it really was worthwhile – and to the degree it was worthwhile it was up to me to make it happen – was the day I sat down for Sunday lunch at Diana’s house by the estuary.