To Be A Wife

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Abstract

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CAROLYN Fairchild, an attractive woman of forty-eight, stepped from the elevator and walked down the carpeted hall to her apartment. She picked up the mail and smiled when she saw a letter addressed in her daughter’s handwriting. Carolyn went into her apartment, sat down in the flowered Queen Anne chair, and adjusted a clip which held her long black hair in a chignon at the back of her neck. She took a cigarette from the gold box on the end table and lit it, slowly blowing the smoke upward in a fine stream as she exhaled. Then she opened her daughter’s letter and read:

Dear Mother,

Greetings from the frontier country. I’m getting to feel a little more comfortable here every day and Jim says that soon I’ll feel right at home. Mother, sometimes I just don’t see how I can. Most of our neighbors are older than Jim and I and sometimes they treat us as if we were just kids. I know they mean well, though, and if I’m going to be one of these country folks, I guess I’ll soon learn to like them, but right now I
think I could easily sell the Brooklyn Bridge to any of them.

The week before last, we made hay. Jim cut it and raked it one day and then two days later he and the neighbors baled it. He wasn't sure whether it was quite dry enough, but they all use the same baler so Jim had to take his turn. I had a nice lunch all planned. I decided that the men might accept me if they knew I could cook, so I was going to have that spaghetti dinner that you served when the Hancock's visited us last winter, but Jim just laughed at me when I told him and I felt like crying. So, with Jim's help, I planned roast beef, boiled potatoes and gravy, buttered corn, baked beans, cole slaw, bread and butter, and apple pie with plenty of coffee. Can you imagine? I didn't see how food like that could impress anybody, but Jim says that's what everybody always serves to the men and that's what they expect. I had an awful time. Hazel Oaks came over to work and offered to help me with dinner. I hated to admit that I couldn't handle it alone, but I was glad to have some advice, and long before noon I was taking orders from her in my own kitchen. She really was a big help, but from now on I'm sure I can manage things alone.

Jim said they seemed to like the dinner, but none of them told me so. It couldn't have been too bad or they certainly wouldn't have gobbled it down like they did. I've never seen anybody eat so much so fast in all my life. No table manners whatsoever. Why, they even buttered the whole piece of bread.

Jim and I haven't done anything really nice together for a long time. He has been helping the other men bale their hay and he is really tired after he gets the chores done and we eat dinner. Oh, the evening meal is always called supper around here.

I'm getting rather used to the farm now. It's quiet and clean out here and I'm sure the lonesomeness will wear off. I don't like the cattle very well, though. We have a big herd of brown ones with white faces. They look so mean that I'm afraid to have Jim go in and feed them, but he says they won't hurt you. I stay away from them, anyway. In fact, I never go out of the house-yard.
It's almost time for the mailman to come, so write soon.

Lots of love,
Millie

Millie signed her name, put the letter in the envelope and addressed it. Then she went out onto the porch and down the steps.

The grass on the lawn was fluffy and the big lawn looked like a big green carpet. The maple tree in the corner of the yard was twisted and one large branch was completely dead. Close to the top of it hung a small piece of rotten rope, probably the remainder of an old rope swing. The leaves on the rest of the tree were still under the beating sun.

Millie put her hand up to shade her eyes while she looked up at the sky, as she had seen her husband do, to look for signs of rain, a welcome relief from the hot days. Then she stopped and laughed, "I don't even know what I'm looking for," she told herself.

She reached the rusty old mailbox just as the mailman drove up to it.

"Morning, Mrs. Roland. Got a letter there?"

"Yes. Thank you," she said, as she exchanged her letter for the mail, folded into the daily newspaper, through the mailman's car window.

"Sure is hot, isn't it?"

"Yes, it certainly is; but maybe it will rain," she said, trying to sound as if she knew it might.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. Not for a couple of days, anyway." He drove off.

Millie leafed through the mail as she walked slowly back toward the house. "Maybe I got a letter from Mother," she thought. She looked hopefully through the mail. An advertisement from a metal corncrib company; a Hereford cattle sale handbill; an envelope from the Farmers' Cooperative Elevator, no doubt a bill; and the Des Moines Register.

She went into the house and had just begun to read the paper when she heard a car turn into the drive. Millie went to the back door while Hazel Oaks got out of a green pick-up truck. She was a short, plump woman with short gray hair curled tightly by an obviously new permanent. She was
wearing a faded but clean cotton print dress which buttoned down the front with at least three kinds of buttons.

"Good morning, Mrs. Oaks. Come in."

"Hi, Millie. Thought I'd bring your pan back on my way home from town. That sure was good apple pie you sent home with me when you had those men for dinner. Even Seth said so, and he usually don't say anything 'bout what he eats.

"Well, thank you. If I can ever learn to manage a meal the way you did that one for all those men, then I'll feel I've accomplished something."

"Oh, it comes with practice. You'll learn. That bunch wasn't even a very big one compared to some of 'em we get."

"Won't you have some coffee, Mrs. Oaks?"

"Sure, and call me Hazel. Everybody else around here does."

Millie put cups and saucers on the kitchen table and put some cream into a pitcher. "Let's go into the living room."

"What for? Millie, you've got a lot to learn about us farmers. We always have our morning coffee and we always drink it in the kitchen. We never dirty cream pitchers at our house unless we have some real fancy company. If anybody wants cream, just dump it outta the bottle. Milk'll do it if you don't have cream. Most people can't tell the difference anyway."

They sat down at the kitchen table to drink their coffee. Millie thought, "What can I talk to her about? We don't seem to have anything in common." But she didn't have to worry long for Hazel kept up a constant chatter about all sorts of things.

"Say, d'ya hear Dorothy Hillgarden talk to her daughter this morning? Oh, no, I s'pose not. Say, there's a pair. If you wanna hear any news, listen to them two on the phone. Her ring's two shorts and a long. Her married daughter calls her every morning about nine o'clock and they really hash out all the news. Speakin' of the phone, if you ever wanna call me, just ring a short, a long, and a short. And another thing, don't say anything too confidential on this line. Everybody listens in. Say, I just got the best stuff t' use for washin' eggs."

"Washing eggs?"
"Sure, don't you hafta do that, or don't you have any chickens?"

"Yes, but. . . Well, I guess Jim must do that. He keeps the eggs in the basement and just brings up what we eat. I guess he sells the rest. Am I supposed to wash them?"

"Well, around here the women mostly take care of the chickens. That egg money sure comes in handy when you want a new dress or something."

"Oh." Millie felt foolish but didn't know just what to say. Hazel glanced up at the electric clock hanging above the refrigerator. "Is it quarter to 'leven already? I gotta get home and get dinner. Seth wants it ready to eat right at noon."

Her chair made a screeching sound as she pushed it back from the table. She put the palms of her hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet.

"Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome. I'm so glad you came. I hardly ever have visitors."

"Sorry I was so slow about bringing your pie pan back. Come and see me sometime."

"I will. Good-bye."

Hazel raced the engine of the pick-up and then skillfully turned it around in the small space in front of the garage. She waved to Millie and then drove down the lane.

Millie hung the dishtowel on the rack beside the sink and put away the dishpans with a clattering noise.

"Quit puttering around in there, Millie, and come out and enjoy this cool evening breeze," Jim called from the front porch.

"In a minute, darling."

She took a clean glass from the cupboard and dipped herself a drink of water from the sweating water pail at the end of the sink. "I will never be able to drink from the dipper like everybody else around here does," she thought to herself. The very thought of all those germs made her jaws tighten.

She put the glass in the sink and called, "Jim, I think I'll go up and take my bath first. I feel so sticky. Jim, did you hear me?"
“Yes, dear. I heard you; but hurry up, this south breeze really feels great.”

“O.K. I’ll be down in a jiffy.”

Jim smiled to himself. “I’d like to see the day when Millie’s bath would just take a jiffy,” he thought. She always filled the tub full of warm water, added plenty of perfumed bubble bath, and then soaked in that until the water got cold.

“The poor kid,” he thought to himself, “this is a different kind of life for her, but she’ll get used to it. Sometimes I feel sorry for her, though, like the day she wanted to give that fancy dinner to those working men. It’s a good thing Hazel Oaks came over to help her out. I wish she’d learn not to be afraid of the animals, though. I can’t seem to make her see they won’t hurt her. She keeps saying that she wants to be a real farm wife, but darn it, if she won’t come out in the barnyard sometime, how is she ever going to learn?”

Millie, wearing a fluffy blue housecoat, opened the screen door and walked out onto the porch. Her auburn hair, which fell in soft waves around her neck, framed her white, heart-shaped face. She opened her mouth to say something, and then stopped for a moment and watched her husband.

Jim, his legs and stockinged feet hanging over one end of the porch swing, was snoring lightly. She leaned over him and kissed his forehead. He opened his eyes and sat up.

“Well, don’t you look fresh. Millie, you’re just as pretty as the day I married you.”

“Which was exactly one month and six days ago,” she laughed as she sat down beside him and rocked the swing back and forth. “Got a cigarette?”

“Sure.” He held the wooden match for her.

They sat there swinging back and forth, not saying a word.

“Jim,” Millie broke the silence, “What are you going to do tomorrow?”

Jim yawned and ended it with a huh, huh, huh. “Well, those cattle that I’ve been keeping in the yard are ready to sell. I put them in the barn tonight, and the truck’s coming at five o’clock in the morning to take them away.”

“At five o’clock! Why, Jim, it isn’t even light yet at five o’clock.” Jim mussed her hair with his large, rough hand. “It
is too. Honey, the prettiest part of the day is around five o'clock. Everything's all fresh and dewy, like it's just been washed and hasn't dried yet. Why don't you get up early tomorrow morning and watch us load the cattle?"

"Are you kidding? I have enough trouble getting up at eight-thirty. I think you can load those cattle without my supervision, and you know I'll never go near those mean old things. The sooner we get rid of them, the better I'll like it."

"But Millie, you'll have to get used to them sometime. That's how we make a living, you know."

"Well, why can't we just raise corn and stuff that doesn't hurt anybody? Oh, Jim, I'm afraid I'm just not cut out to be a farmer's wife."

She buried her head in his shoulder.

"You'll get used to it. Just give yourself a chance. Let's go to bed. My day starts early tomorrow."

Several hours later Millie turned restlessly in her sleep. She dreamed that she heard firecrackers, and put the pillow over her head to keep out the sound of them. After a few moments something awakened her and she sat straight up in bed. She looked out of the window over the front yard and saw that the whole outdoors had a rosy glow.

"Is it five o'clock already?" she asked herself. Then she heard the firecrackers again. She jumped out of bed, grabbed her robe, and ran out into the hall to look out the window.

The minute she reached the bedroom door she screamed, "Jim, the barn's on fire! Jim, wake up, the barn's on fire!"

Jim sat up in bed.

"Oh, my God!" He jumped into his jeans, slipped on his shoes, and went tearing down the stairs calling, "Call the telephone operator, Millie. I've gotta get those cattle outta there. Oh, my God, I knew that hay was too wet."

Millie raced down the stairs behind him. She ran to the telephone on the wall in the kitchen and turned the crank, producing a long "rinnnnnnng." No one answered, so she tried again and again. She began ringing frantically and yelling into the mouthpiece. "Operator, operator. Oh, somebody answer this thing."

Someone's voice came through the receiver. "Millie, this is Hazel Oaks. What's wrong?"
“Our barn’s on fire,” Millie yelled back.

“Number please.”

“Operator, send the fire department out to Jim Roland’s farm. It’s three miles straight south of town.”

“We’ll be right there, Millie.” Hazel Oaks’ voice came through the telephone again.

Five or six receivers clicked, and Millie stood there for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. Then she snatched the dishtowel from the rack, tied it over her head, and took Jim’s jacket from the hook behind the door. Soon she was running through the gate between the houseyard and the barnyard, pulling the big jacket over her fluffy, blue robe.

When she reached the barn, she put her hands in front of her face to keep back the intense heat while she looked up. The shingles were almost all burned and the rafters were flaming.

She heard Jim inside the barn trying to drive the cattle to safety.

“All right, you sonofabitch, move!” was followed by the crack of wood against one of the animals.

At the north end of the barn Millie heard a desperate bellowing.

* * *

By the time Jim had chased the cattle out of the barn and into the pasture, the yard was full of cars and people were running toward the burning barn. Someone had opened the door to the hog house and the pigs were squealing and running all over the yard.

“Get the tractor,” someone yelled. “We’ll pull out all this machinery.” Some men were running here and there, shouting instructions at each other, some with a purpose, but most of them aimlessly.

Jim, his head bent, came running out of the barn, holding his handkerchief over his mouth and nose. Seth Oaks came to meet him.

“You O.K. boy?”

Jim gasped for fresh air. “Think so, Seth. Hey, the bull! My three-year-old bull is in the north end o’ the barn. I gotta go get him.”
Seth grabbed Jim by the arms. "Oh, no you're not. You'd never make it back there in time to get him out now."

"But, Seth, he's worth five thousand dollars."

"You're worth more'n that. You can't stand any more smoke, boy."

"Hey, where's Millie? Millie! Millie! Has anybody seen my wife?"

"She's not in the house. I was just up there," said Hazel Oaks, coming toward Jim. "Thought she might be scared up there alone, but I couldn't find her."

"Millie! Millie!" Jim began to run wildly through the crowd. "She wouldn't have gone into that barn. Oh, God, where is she?" he screamed, and started to run back into the barn, but the smoke forced him to turn around. Millie, are you in there?" he choked in the thick, black blanket.

The only reply was the violent cracking of dry, burning wood.

The siren of the fire truck, followed by a long line of car lights, raced into the drive and down toward the barn. The firemen, local merchants, jumped off the truck and began shooting water onto the flaming barn, but the two small hoses didn't diminish the orange mass as it grew higher and higher.

By this time Jim was crying, "For God's sake, somebody find my wife. Hazel, go up to the house and look again. I know she's in that barn. I just know she is. Millie! Millie!" He began to scream again and several men held him back as he started to run toward the barn.

"Here, drink this Mr. Roland," said one of the women who had come with the county's Red Cross emergency truck as she handed him a cup of hot coffee.

"Hey, look," somebody yelled and pointed toward the north door of the barn.

All eyes turned toward the door while Millie came through it wearing her husband's large jacket. Her head was bare and one side of her hair was hanging over her dirty face. She was tugging at a rope, the other end of which was fastened to the halter of the three-year-old bull with a white dishtowel tied over his face.