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The Last Housewife in America

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To find where the Stewart family lives, start from Cincinnati and work south down the interstate. Even when the sky is starless, it's easy to find the way. First comes the sign welcoming you to Kentucky. Next comes the city of Covington. Soon comes the town of Florence, which has two exits and a mall. The road at the second exit is wide and glossy until a certain curve, when the bright store signs fade and the suburbs come to an end. There are lights ahead, but they are different—no longer fluorescent and concentrated, but scattered yellow pinpoints on the far rim of a field. They are the porch lights of houses on a street called Red Clover Court, which is about to come awake. The street is a cul-de-sac. The houses are new. The first interior light, a bedroom lamp, is switched on before 6:00 a.m., followed by lights in the bathroom, the hallway, the kitchen. Before long, up and down the street, more lights come on as people hurry to shower, dress, assemble children, feed babies, pack diaper bags, load cars, get on their way. By sunrise, the migration has begun. Lights go off, doors are locked, garage doors rise, cars pull away. The rush is toward the highway and downtown Cincinnati, and as the last car turns out of sight, Red Clover Court seems suddenly abandoned.

At one house, however, a woman still stands by the front door. Her name is JoAnn Stewart, and she is waiting for her husband, Scott, who

is coming down the hallway in a charcoal suit, his shirt wrinkle-free, his red tie knotted tightly, his briefcase in hand.

"Bye, honey," she says, rubbing him on the back.

Next comes her son Ben, blond and fresh, who will take the school bus to first grade.

"Use your manners," she says, kissing him on the cheek.

Then comes her other son, Brian, a big, happy boy, who will spend the morning in preschool.

"You have a good morning, okay?"

The door closes, and JoAnn is alone, and with no hesitation, she sets out to do what she does every day, what her mother used to do, and her grandmother before that. She sets out to be a housewife. She clears the breakfast dishes. She reaches for the vacuum. She reaches for the dustcloth. She reaches for the laundry. There is a smile on her face, and soon she begins to whistle.

In every life, days unfold in particular ways. Mostly they are steered by a watch: a succession of precise minutes and seconds, of deadlines and adjustments, of calculations and trade-offs in which a lingering morning kiss can mean a 10-minute wait for the next train. For JoAnn Stewart, days follow a different pace, one that is an anomaly. They are guided not by devices but by more forgiving measures—the length of a wash cycle, or the time it takes to bake a potato, or the type of light coming in through the kitchen windows. There are clocks in JoAnn's house, but when she is alone, they are unnecessary. When it's bright out, she knows, it's time to think about lunch. When the light begins to fade, it's time to think about dinner. Hers is an imprecise life with one precise aspect: Even though she knows being a housewife is an aberration, that is exactly what she wants to be.

JoAnn is 34 years old, a year younger than Scott, who works in public relations for Procter & Gamble. She has a relaxed grace and an effortless smile, and she talks in a way that makes Scott and the boys want to wake up and see why she is so happy. Her voice is the thing. There is a melody to it, a lilt—not Southern, exactly, which is so often twitters and sighs—but excited and uplifting. "Look," Brian will say, handing her an old feather he has brought in from outside. "Where did you find that?" she will ask, as if the feather were the most precious thing in the world.

She is like this all the time. Most nights, she is the last one to fall asleep. She will get into bed, turn out the lights and listen in the dark to the final sounds of a vanishing day. She will hear Scott's quiet breathing and the boys down the hall, turning under their covers. Sometimes the sounds lull her to sleep; other times she remains awake, sifting through her life. She thinks of growing up, how she used to come home from dates, fix herself a bowl of cereal and talk to her mother, who always waited up for her. She thinks of what life is like now. Just in the paper today there was a story about a woman who gave birth, put the baby in a plastic bag and threw the bag in the trash. Just threw a baby away!

Occasionally, one of the boys stirs with a bad dream. "Stop it," Ben will holler sharply, or, inexplicably, as on one night, "Purple." She gets up to check on him. He is sprawled across the sheets, eyes closed, one leg bent at the knee, the other hanging down in the space between the bed and the wall. The nightmare, whatever it was, is gone. She gets back into bed. She thinks of the house. She can visualize every inch of it, every corner, every blemish, every smudge. It's so ordinary, she sometimes thinks of her life. It's a thought that carries no hint of regret.

Monday. Cleaning day. She always starts with the beds. Hospital corners are adjusted. Sheets are tucked tight. Bedspreads are smoothed. Pillows are fluffed. The beds always go quickly, but from there on, the morning gets harder. After breakfast and dishes, she is vacuuming Ben's room. A minute later, she is on to Brian's, then the upstairs hallway, then her bedroom. From vacuuming, she sorts through the laundry, empties the trash, straightens the closets. In her closet, she finds a stray ball and tosses it toward Brian's room. "Whoops," she says as it ricochets off a wall, but she doesn't pause. She dons yellow gloves, picks up a sponge and sprinkles Comet in the bathroom sink. "I've tried some other ones. It's one of those things. My mom used Comet," she says. She pours Pine Sol into the toilet. "There's a big difference. I've tried the cheaper ones, the no-name ones. You don't have to use as much of this, and the smell is better."

She tackles the mirrors with Windex and a paper towel, although frequently she uses a coffee filter instead. "I was at Hardec's, and I saw someone using one on the windows. I went up, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'What do you mean? Washing the windows.' 'No, I mean with the

coffee filter.' 'They have us use it. No lint.' I've used them ever since. They do work. On car windows, too."

From there, it's on to the first floor, the vacuum bumping down the stairs, the dustcloth flying over the bookcases, more Comet, more Pine Sol, more Windex. By late morning, she is done with the heavy work, at least until Friday, when she will do it all again. In the interim, she will straighten up, adjust, arrange, cook meals, run errands, wipe counters, do laundry, work in the garden and begin every day by throwing together the beds. She makes 21 beds a week. She washes and folds 100 pounds of laundry and goes to the grocery store at least twice. She serves 28 breakfasts, 15 lunches and 24 dinners. Plus drinks. Plus snacks. Plus, she mows the lawn and shovels the sidewalk and has taken charge of the landscaping and is thinking of painting the house.

"I don't know. I look at my mom," JoAnn says one afternoon, trying to explain why she has chosen to live such a life. Brian is on the floor watching TV. Ben is on the couch. She is making them cinnamon toast. "I think she's happy. I see her as someone who accomplished the major goal she had. I don't think she's regretful."

"Mom," Ben calls.

"I think I'm a reflection of her thinking," JoAnn goes on. "What Scott and I are doing, what's important to us . . ."

"Mom!"

"I think of her as a stable force . . ."

"Mom!"

"A kind of . . ."

"Mom, look at my moustache!"

"How can I put this?"

"Mom, I'm a shark!"

"You know, there are some women who work their whole life, who look back and realize the world goes on, and think, What good am I?" The toast pops up in the toaster. She puts it on a plate, smooths on some butter, sprinkles on the cinnamon. "I don't know. We're not as important as we think we are," says JoAnn. "I can think of people we know, and they work and work, and that's all they do."

Later, when Scott comes home, he walks into a house that seems new. The floors have been mopped, the teak furniture oiled, the fireplace mantel dusted. There is nothing thick or stale in the air; rather the smell is of lightness, of lemons and clear water. Scott goes upstairs to change,

where the bedroom carpet is still lined with the brush of the morning's vacuum. JoAnn starts to assemble dinner and allows herself to wonder whether Scott knows how much she has done. "Probably not," she says. "But I don't know everything he does, either."

What he does is drive his Toyota Camry, the budget version with the stick shift, the one he had to borrow money from his in-laws for, out of the neighborhood. He drives past the spot on the highway where sometime last year a child was hit by a car and the chalk outline of the body took three months to fade. He turns onto the interstate, drives across the Ohio River and into downtown Cincinnati, where he parks under an overpass and heads on foot toward the edifice that is Procter & Gamble.

Especially in the morning, the sensation is of thousands of people hurrying in from every point of the compass. Scott is 6' 5", and his stride is long. He climbs a steep hill and walks past the different Procter & Gamble divisions, past Market Research, past Chemicals, past Corporate, past a man named Bob, who is P&G's liaison to bottlers across the country. "Hi, Bob," says Scott. "Morning, Scott," says Bob. Scott walks to the oldest building in the compound, shows his badge to security, takes the elevator to the fifth floor, turns the first corner and ducks into a small office with a nameplate by the door that reads, T. S. STEWART.

He likes to be at his desk by 7:30 a.m., before his boss, before the secretaries. "Just to get a jump on the day," he says, but the truth is he loves his job, and he loves P&G "Tide, Cheer, Dash, Bold, Era. You're talking about everything on the shelf," he says with pride. "It's just phenomenal. Oxydol, Comet, Top Job, Mr. Clean, Spic and Span. Coast, Camay, Safeguard, Lava." He spots a bottle of fabric softener on his desk. "And, of course, Downy."

The bottle of Downy is next to a photograph of Ben, Brian and JoAnn, which is next to a report entitled *P&G Statement Regarding Proposed Vermont Ban on Disposable Diapers*. For the past year, the ruckus over disposable diapers has been Scott's specialty, and he has traveled across the country to persuade journalists that P&G is as concerned as anyone about the environment. "It's exciting work," he says. "I can't think of anyplace else I'd rather be." He tries to call home as often as he can. Late last year, when he was in New York, he was walking along when he realized he was outside Macy's. Macy's of New York. Macy's of *Miracle on*

*34th Street*, one of JoAnn's favorite movies. He couldn't get to a pay phone fast enough.

"Guess where I am?" he said.

"Where?" she said, trying to hear him over the honking in the background.

"Someplace you'd like to be."

"Give me a hint."

"It has to do with shopping and Christmas."

"Macy's!"

Later he called again, after he had been inside. "Do you believe they have wooden escalators?"

He is on the phone a lot, once or twice a day to home and much of the rest of the time to any reporter who wants to know Procter & Gamble's position on diapers and recycling. A call comes in from Canada. Scott invites a new member of the Public Relations division into his office to listen. He shuts the door and talks to the Canadian reporter about the health benefits of disposable diapers, of the lack of leakage, of the recycling experiments P&G is conducting. He hangs up. The new employee, a woman, stares at him in amazement.

"It just flows out of your mouth!" she says to him. "It's so clear! I knew just what was being asked by your answers. Your bridges to the larger issues!" She shakes her head in disbelief. "I'm so impressed."

"Well," Scott says, a little embarrassed. "Thanks."

She leaves. He looks at his watch and tries to imagine what JoAnn is up to.

"Probably doing housework," is his guess.

Actually, at the moment, she is running errands. She goes her way, Scott goes his, and at night they sit on the couch, her feet on his lap, or his feet on hers, and talk about what the day was like.

She asks, "How was work?"

He asks, "How were the kids?"

They both answer, in detail. Beyond such talk, however, their worlds rarely collide. His job doesn't take them to a lot of parties, and besides, she only owns a couple of dresses, which are surrounded in her closet by endless sweaters and blue jeans. That's the way they both prefer it. Sometimes, though, some function comes along that they need to go to, and before they even arrive, they know what's bound to happen. Like

at a Christmas party last year. They were in the kitchen with five or six other people when one of them, a woman, turned to JoAnn and said, "What do you do?"

"I stay home," JoAnn said. "I have two sons."

The woman chewed on this for a moment, as if tasting old cabbage. "Well, you *do* work then," she finally said.

The inclination was to walk away, or to fume a bit over such condescension, or at the very least to stop smiling, but JoAnn didn't. Maybe it was because she had heard those things enough times over the years to let them pass without a ripple. Or maybe she had come to realize that other people, especially women who own rows of dresses and eel-skin appointment books, don't know what to make of her.

"It kind of sounds shallow," she acknowledges of her life. "It sounds Victorian. It sounds boring. But it's not. Not to me."

Nor to Scott. It is what they wanted from their first date, back in November of 1978. Both had just graduated from college. He took her to the revolving bar on top of the Louisville, Kentucky, Hyatt. He ordered a daiquiri, and she ordered a gin and tonic, and at some point, when they felt comfortable enough with each other to share some dreams, she mentioned that if she married and had children, she would want to stay home. That's nice, he said, that's great. The bar kept spinning, past 11:00 p.m., past midnight, and every so often, when the table faced toward the west, they could see across the river to Indiana, where they had both grown up in families much like the kind they were talking about now.

He was raised in New Albany, in a brick split-level; she in a nearby town called Floyds Knobs, in a brick-and-glass house surrounded by woods. After college, he took a job running New Albany's job-training program, and she became director of the city's Parks department. Which is why they met. She employed a lot of the people he trained. So one day, he went to see her. Twelve years later, he can still remember what she looked like that day, and what she said about marriage, and most everything since.

"You remember the date of our first kiss?" he asks JoAnn one night.

She looks at him blankly.

"November 4, 1972; 2:02 a.m."

She thinks about that, and then she thinks about how long ago that was. In the time since, she has grown up. She went from being a daughter



to a wife to a mother, leaving behind an empty room in a house that her parents eventually moved out of and sold. That house, the one she had lived in from childhood to college, had meant everything to her. Her parents had made it a wonderful place for a child to grow up, just as she is trying to do now.

She should have stayed away from that house. But one time she went back. It was last year, a hot day in September. She drove out with her parents and her brother Jon. They went as much for reminiscence as anything, and when the house appeared, so did all kinds of memories. Then they walked in the front door. Jon, sensing immediately that the house had changed, froze. JoAnn made it down a hallway before realizing the same thing. She turned around and excused herself. She walked back toward Jon, who whispered to her, "I'm going to be sick."

"I know," she whispered back.

"I can't believe it."

"I know."

They went outside, walked around a nearby pond, came back to the house. Their mother was out front, pacing aimlessly.

"Where'd you go?" she asked them.

"Couldn't take it," was all Jon could manage to say.

"I know," she said. "It makes you kind of sick."

Their father came out. They got in the car and drove off. "Time goes on," he said, laughing. Then he stopped laughing, and a long stretch of silence descended.

One time, when JoAnn was 16, a boy she knew died in the course of a day. He was slightly younger than she, the son of her parents' best friends. He was playing baseball, and as he stood at the plate, the catcher somehow misfired the ball. Maybe he was holding the ball too tightly, or maybe he was off-kilter. In any event, the ball didn't arch back toward the pitcher as it should have, but went fast and straight into the back of the boy's head. He was wearing a helmet, but it didn't matter. He went home a little dizzy, developed a fever in the evening and died soon after from a blood clot. It was 2:00 a.m., JoAnn remembers, when the phone in her house rang.

"I remember the moon was real bright. I couldn't make out any of the conversation, but you could tell by the voices. I can remember seeing

the headlights pulling out of the driveway, and I ran up and saw the note they left, and I went back to my room and just lay there."

That was when JoAnn, who had grown up with no real misfortunes in her life, learned that people can die before they're ready. After that, she learned that they can die deliberately, in ways both indifferent and resigned. There was a friend in college. One night, they ordered some pizza, and the friend went back to her room to wait, and when JoAnn went to get her a few minutes later, she was sitting on her bed with one wrist slit open, casually watching the flow of blood as if it were science, not suicide.

Later, after college, when JoAnn worked at the Parks department, the acts of distress weren't as methodical, but the results were the same. There are housing projects in New Albany—not like a large city's, but projects nonetheless—and a lot of the young girls who lived there got pregnant. There was one girl, JoAnn remembers, barely 15, who treated pregnancy as a financial equation—one baby meant so much money a month, two babies meant that much more. Another girl she remembers would talk about how the boys were accusing her of being a lesbian because she wouldn't sleep with them. The girl was determined to hold out, though. She had plans to finish high school and go on to college. But then word came back that she had given in, that she was several weeks along, and JoAnn was overcome by a suffocating feeling, a realization that some lives are carved from a lack of choice and guided solely by disenchantment.

Self-esteem, she decided after that, is what's missing in a lot of children. Which is why, on the night when she got a little dreamy with Scott, she said that when she became a wife and mother, she would very much like to stay home.

Wednesday. JoAnn drives Brian to preschool and stays for a while. She knows Brian better than anyone does, and yet when he stands next to the other children, she is struck by how fast he is growing. "Look at his feet and hands," she marvels. "Like paws on dogs."

Next she goes to Ben's school to eat lunch. He is glad to have her there, just as she used to like it when she would climb onto a school bus for a field trip, and there, among the volunteers, would be her mother. She and Ben walk to the cafeteria, past the school lobby where a JUST SAY NO banner is hanging, past the office of the school counselor who

conducts a weekly class for children whose parents are divorcing, past the office of the school psychologist who treated two elementary-school children last year after they'd threatened to kill themselves. The day's lunch selection is pizza. JoAnn sits across from Ben and three of his friends. Everyone is yelling, and it's hard to hear, but at one point JoAnn catches the word *therapy*. She turns to the little girl who is sitting next to her, and the girl leans forward, presses her face close and hollers, "I'm in therapy."

"Oh," JoAnn says. She smiles at the girl, and the girl smiles back, and they both return to their pizza, and JoAnn thinks to herself, Well, why not?

She heads home. It isn't far. Nothing is, actually. It's two miles from the house to the school, three to the grocery, three to the toy store, three to the mall. Dinner that night is pork chops, potatoes, green beans, salad and rolls made from scratch.

"These are good rolls, Mom," Ben says reaching for more.

Meanwhile, across the street at the Cooper residence, dinner hasn't even been started. In fact, Casey Cooper and his wife, Terri, are still unwinding from work. He has been up since 6:30 a.m. She has been up since 5:00. They both have full-time jobs, and their children, twin 15-month-old girls, go to day care.

"We had a choice between me working or having a small house in a neighborhood we didn't like," says Terri. "For me, it was more important to have this. I grew up in a neighborhood like this, and I want my kids to have it, too."

"We're exhausted a lot of the time," Casey says. "We come home, we've both already worked eight hours, and we have everything to do. The worst is when the kids are sick."

"It's hard. I miss the kids, I miss seeing the little things they do," Terri says. "I get a break at work and think, I wonder what they're doing?"

Down the street, at Dave and Joyce Crail's house, life is much the same. They get up at 6:00, give a bottle to their baby, Andrew, dress while he drinks it, pack his diaper bag, leave by 7:00, drop Andrew off at day care, get to downtown Cincinnati by 7:45 and grab breakfast from a vending machine. Dave usually has soda and cookies, Joyce usually has soda and Cheez Doodles. They are always tired. Once, when Andrew woke

up early, Joyce went to comfort him, lay down on the floor, shut her eyes for a moment and awakened 12 hours later.

"There's times when I wish I could stay home," Joyce says. "But then, we wouldn't have this house. But then I think material things shouldn't be that important . . ." She lets out a sigh. "It's pretty resolved."

"No question," Dave says to her. "You quit, we move."

Next door at Tom and Judy McMeans's, the talk is of the time that Judy did stay home.

Tom: "When Judy didn't work, I got 'I'm going nuts. The kids are driving me crazy. I need to talk to an adult.'"

Judy: "He was my only release."

Tom: "I was tired of hearing it."

Judy: "I can't imagine what JoAnn's life is like."

JoAnn, on the other hand, can easily imagine theirs. She sees the rush of cars in the morning and the returning tide at night. She hears their stories and knows how hard it must be. She knows also that as much as she believes in what she's doing, they believe in what they're doing, as well. And who's to say who's right? There are no guarantees, not about anything. Scott wasn't the only one who passed by the chalk outline of the dead child. She did, too. And the children who do make it through childhood, and through ordinary games of baseball, and the pressures of adolescence, and the first days of college—she knows they can end up bleeding alone on a bed.

Who can say what will happen to Ben? Or Brian? Or her? She has known other women who stayed home, and she saw how they soured, grew lethargic, watched TV, wore their bathrobes most of the day. She thinks that in a few years she will probably want to do something else to keep her life interesting, maybe some volunteer work, maybe something like art lessons, but who knows? Who, for that matter, can say what will happen to her and Scott?

In their 10 years of marriage, they've had their share of fights. A few times she fled the house and went for long, long drives; one time she got out a suitcase and began to pack. But even as she was packing, she knew it was for show, that she could never leave for good. But marriages, even good ones, can fall apart. She knows that, too. One afternoon a few months ago, she and Scott found a message on their answering machine from an old friend who, like JoAnn, had chosen to remain home for her

husband and children, and had done just that for 15 years. The message was that her husband was gone. The friend began to cry. The message ended. JoAnn called back, of course, and asked what in the world had happened, and the friend said her husband had suddenly announced he'd had enough. "I don't love you," he'd said. She had looked at him, uncomprehending. "I don't *like* you," he'd gone on. "I haven't loved you for a long time."

"And?" JoAnn said, trying to imagine how such words must feel.

And, the friend said, she'd tried to wave off what he was saying as nothing more than silliness. He was probably tired. He'd probably had a bad day. "I'll start dinner," she had said to him. "Your favorite."

And?

He'd left.

So it is on a Saturday that JoAnn goes for a visit.

The friend is inside her house, waiting. Her husband, she says, came back, but only for a few minutes. This time, she got angry and slapped him, and he grabbed her around the neck, and the children, who had been watching, came at him, hitting him until he ran off. Now he was in an apartment, and she had no idea what to do. Fifteen years without working is a long time, she reminds JoAnn.

There is nothing JoAnn can really do except listen, and she does that through the afternoon and into the evening. When she leaves, it is dark. "It will be okay," she tells her friend. Then she gets into her car, heads toward the highway, and begins to cry, not only for her friend but also for more general reasons, for the way so many lives work out. The miles go by. She fiddles with the car radio awhile, turns it loud, shuts it off. She is not really paying attention to the highway signs, but at one point she realizes she is more than halfway home. And with that, a feeling of anticipation comes over her, an ache to get back. She begins to go faster. She is absolutely buoyant. She pulls into the driveway and hurries inside, where Scott is awake, waiting. "Tell me about it," he says. She does, but first she throws her arms around him.

"Ben. Brian. Come on."

It is the following Saturday, 21 beds and 100 pounds of laundry later. JoAnn, Scott thinks, could use a day to herself, so he loads the two boys into the car and heads toward Indiana. The morning is foggy, but as he

swings over the Ohio River, the fog has lifted enough for a glimpse of some old buildings on the far bank. "New Albany," Scott announces, "and Floyds Knobs is somewhere over there in the clouds."

He drives through downtown, past a furniture store with a sign in the window that reads CLEARANCE. "That sign has been there since I was growing up," he says. He goes past the place where he and JoAnn had their wedding reception ("It's bankrupt, the owner had a cerebral hemorrhage"), past one of the houses where he grew up ("The woman next door has cancer now"), to the Green Valley Convalescent Center, where his father, sick with Parkinson's disease, is being fed lunch.

"How's Dad?" Scott asks his mother, who visits the nursing home every afternoon.

"He had a bad night three nights ago," she says.

"Hallucinations?"

"They had to give him a shot."

Scott puts his arm around his father's shoulder and says, "Everything's going fine," slow and loud. His father looks at him and starts to say something, and Scott moves closer, so his ear is next to his father's mouth. He waits, not at all impatient. Sometimes the words come out, sometimes they don't. This time, they don't, so Scott moves away, smiles and says, "Everything's going well."

He looks at his mother. She is a woman who has been taking care of somebody or something since she became an adult. First she took care of her children, then, 18 years ago, her husband got sick and she began taking care of him. Sometimes, as he grew sicker, friends would ask her out, but she would say no, she had to be home with her husband, he depended on her. Every morning she would make him breakfast, every afternoon she would wash his hair, and every night she would put him to bed and worry about the day when he would be so sick he would no longer be able to stand. Eventually the day came. His legs gave out, and he fell, cutting open his head. So she put him in the nursing home and has been coming every day since, feeding him lunch, leaving with his dirty laundry, showing up the next day with the laundry cleaned, in time to feed him lunch again.

Scott imagines that his mother has some regrets about how her life has gone, but he has never asked. The closest he came was a day last

winter. "When Dad dies, where do you want to go?" he said. "What do you want to do?"

At first she didn't answer, but then, sounding suddenly tired, she did. "I don't care to go anywhere," she said. "I just want to be able to go to the mall."

That was the end of it. Now, on a Saturday afternoon, she reaches for a box of tissues that she uses to wipe off the corners of her husband's mouth. She takes out several and puts them on the edge of the bed, within her husband's reach. "Your dad has trouble pulling Kleenexes out of these boxes," she says. Scott looks at the box and sees they're not Kleenexes at all, but Puffs, a Procter & Gamble product. "There's a toll-free number you can call and complain," he says. He looks at his father. "Well, what do you think?" he says. He leans close. This time, the words do come out.

"Nothing different," his father says.

There is a recurring vision JoAnn has, not a dream exactly, but something she likes to imagine. It is 15 or 20 years down the road, and her sons are getting married. Scott is there, of course, stoic as ever, and she is next to him, a little teary and proud that everything worked out. Or is it relieved? Regardless, the boys say their vows to women she can't quite make out, lift veils of lace, leave the church, turn the corner and are gone. That's what she sees. What she can't see is what comes next. But she has some ideas.

The boys, and their wives, and their children, live nearby and always stop by to visit. She and Scott grow old together, without sickness or wheelchairs or regrets. Her days wind down as gently as they built up, so that when her last moments are at hand, she is able to look back with contentment at the kind of life it has been. She leaves behind a wonderful home, a home important to the people she loved, so much so that if ever they came back to visit, they would be startled by any change.

For now, though, it is late Saturday afternoon on Red Clover Court, where a woman adrift in time is waiting for her husband and children to return. Her house is quiet. Quiet and clean. Quiet and clean and smelling like winter air. Everything is in place. Everything is perfect. The only thing missing is a family. Five o'clock comes and goes. So does 6:00. It gets dark. She waits. Finally, she hears a car. A moment later, the front door bursts open.

"Hey, Mom!"

She turns. She smiles.

"Hey, Ben!"

### ■ Author's Afterwords . . .

The housewife story was one of the first magazine pieces I ever did, and I was pretty nervous about the form. I must have seen statistics somewhere about how few households were left with the man working and the woman staying home. I wanted to find a woman who didn't seem conflicted about her role as a stay-at-home wife and mother. I wanted to examine her decision to be a housewife rather than any conflict she felt about staying home.

I found JoAnn through a friend who had grown up with her. I called her up and she was great. I liked her voice. She wasn't ambivalent about staying home. There were things going on in her mind. She was happy with her life.

I had spent years by then writing about the fringe of society, and I was tired of it. It's easy to do, and I wasn't learning that much new about life itself. One of the nice things about journalism is we get to take the measure of ourselves as we're learning about other people. This kind of journalism lets me immerse myself in the lives of other people who are engaged in things I'm curious about.

I was probably with JoAnn about a week and a half. I stayed in a hotel nearby. I was around as long as she could stand me being around. I knew I had to be there early and late and in between. But you can only be around a person so long before they want you gone. So I'd stay for a while, go away and come back.

I didn't go in with a story written in my mind. I didn't figure out the story until after I'd taken my last note. I only knew I wanted to begin with her as a stereotype and for her to go beyond stereotype in the story to become a dignified individual. You can't be more stereotypical than a lead that mimics the beginning to the old *Donna Reed Show* on TV, as JoAnn stands at the door and kisses the family goodbye as they all go on their way, and she's left there smiling. And then she cleans. But slowly, section by section, she becomes an admirable individual.