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Housework, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Combat Boots

by

Karen Devers

There it is again on my compuscan, “Male homekeepers demand helpers—government should provide.” Even with all the energy-saving gadgets they have, men still want the work made easier. I am beginning to wonder if they aren’t trying to ease out the back door and out of the house! Well, Jack is one man who I know is happy with his choices.

“Great breakfast, hon,” I raise my tea cup to Jack and smile. He really can create the most imaginative fruit dishes. We are having our quiet time together over the early meal. “Any big plans for today?”

“All the mattresses need to be turned over and the lawn’s got to be mowed. I really don’t want to work on those solar panels until next week, though. I’ll ask Guy to give me a hand—it’s really a two-woman job. How ‘bout you?”

“I’m still working on the historical imaging package for Femtech and I may have to go to a conference in Seoul next week. Should only be for a few days, though. I’ll be back to see the kids on Sunday.”

“Good, ‘cause they really feel bad when you miss a performance.”

“I know, Jack. I’ll be there, don’t worry.” With a kiss and a hug, I grab my compcase and step into the transmodule waiting outside the kitchen door. I set the music tones for “calming,” adjust the destination controls, and sit back to enjoy the ride. This is precious, creative time to meditate and let my imagination flow; so different from the frantic dashing around I remember from my childhood. Then, everyone struggled to maneuver individual vehicles, trying not to hit one another or a pedestrian. Well, that was a man’s world. Today things are different.

Much of my development work is done at home, but today I’m traveling to my Femtech team site to check on our progress. Within the boundaries of our cooperative effort we each have a good deal of freedom. I’ve been exploring a special project as a possible prototype for future imaging texts. I’ll meet with the team later, but first I want to check on my project.

My create-space has a circular format with lots of soft pillows surrounding the comps and tone centers. I like to be comfortable while I work! Leaning back on the pillows, I reach over and pluck a series of tone codes. A woman’s face and upper torso appear in front of me. She is sitting at her desk on a polished and rather ornate wooden chair, writing with a quill pen. I can hear the faint rasping as she forms the letters rapidly. She is humming a tune quietly to herself.

“Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*, isn’t that?” She looks up with a start at the sound of my voice. Her features are strong and even; her gaze is intense and thoughtful. As she recognizes me, her brow knits a bit and her lips pull into a quizzical smile.

“Yes, Beaumarchais weaves a delightful tale and Mozart compels it to memory with his catchy tunes.” She pauses, carefully placing her quill back in its tapered holder, “I thought

yesterday that a vision such as this would not repeat itself, but it is my good fortune that it has. I welcome the experience, although I hardly know what to make of it. You said your name is Ellen, yes?"

"Yes, Mary. I hope I didn't startle you?"

"One must expect to be startled by the unexpected and the inexplicable! How are you today?"

I tell her about my evening and my morning, and she's very surprised at the many ways in which our lives differ, though our daily concerns are quite similar. Mary Wollstonecraft is not one to avoid a lively discussion, and soon she focuses her curiosity on changes which have taken place between her time and mine.

"How are the economic chains which bind generations of women finally broken, Ellen?" Her steady gaze grows wistful as she tries to understand the future.

"Mary, it couldn't have been done without the emphasis on education which you saw as a necessary step toward emancipation."

"Even an uneducated woman will long to taste freedom, but without the skills and ability to reason, she will not be able to pull herself out of her pitiful situation. Education is essential. What after that, my friend?"

"Marriage—," I began, but the word drew an immediate reaction.

"—the trap which ensnares women with its promise of security in the embodiment of a husband. And what of work which a woman needs to keep her body strong and her mind sharp? Oh, but I expect too much from such a fragile creature as woman. I am feeling faint just from the effort of speaking about it." She raises the back of her hand to her forehead, rolling her eyes upward.

"And it's my fault of course. I provoked you."

"Oh, of course! I'll just have to summon up my strength from the depth of my soul. I do have one, you know." She smiles, "Please continue. ..."

"The economic realities of your day and for generations afterwards depended on the belief that scarce resources needed to be managed. Whether they were taken from someone else or carefully guarded, the fear was that ultimately there was only so much food, land, or energy available. Coupled with the politics of power hierarchies, this meant that those in power could maintain control over those not in power. Men successfully dominated women as long as the economics of scarcity supported the political hierarchies."

"Isn't it true that there are limits on available resources?"

"Mary, during your time in history, technology goes through a major shift with the invention of the steam engine and the electric motor. The Industrial Revolution will thrust society out of an agrarian, horse-powered way of life. The technological revolution, which occurs one hundred years later with the advent of the computer and a vast communication and distribution network, creates entirely new resources!"

“The new inventions of my day give men an excuse to separate women from the world outside the home. Ellen, are you saying the technological revolution brings women back into the world equally with men?”

“Eventually, after much struggle and inequality. The economics of scarcity provided justification for the political enslavement of women as cheap labor outside the home and free labor inside the home. This did not change easily.” I can see Mary’s eyes darken with the pain of her own frustrations as I say this.

“You know, Ellen, the middle class women of my day are so dazzled by their pretty clothes and lulled by the sweet promises their husbands make to them that they believe their survival lies in not disturbing the waters of wedded bliss. They cannot see another path, and their husbands do their best to champion this strategy for their own benefit. Like a horse pleased with the blinders she wears on her eyes, the wife sees only the smooth path at her feet and nothing of the verdant hills teeming with possibilities and wonders on either side of her. How did the women of future generations gain the courage to remove their own blinders?”

“They adopted new models for living, Mary, rejecting the scarcity model of economics as obviously outdated. After all, technology always develops new options. We don’t ride around in a horse and buggy any more!”

“No, I suppose that is true,” she laughs, and her cheeks flush pink as her smile broadens. “Please, go on.”

“As they became more educated, women recognized that being kept as a wife wasn’t enough. They swept into the workforce to supplement their husband’s income or develop their own career, but they still had prime responsibility for the home and family care.”

Mary’s mouth opened in surprise, “You mean women happily did two jobs while the husbands still had only one?”

“Well, I didn’t say ‘happily.’ In fact, I know that my grandmother divorced her husband over just such an imbalance. Anyway, many women were overwhelmed and underpaid, earning much less than a man, especially as they got older. And men were leaving families and starting new ones while being financially responsible for both. Many men ran from these responsibilities and left the woman to raise the children alone.”

“It sounds perfectly dreadful. ... Did the men like that arrangement?”

“Actually, they didn’t like it any better than the women and the children ...”

“Yes, what about the children? They must have been horribly confused by all of this disruption.”

She looked genuinely concerned and I thought again of the strength this remarkable woman had honed by the years of her own struggles and difficulties. Her concern for the children was real, even though they were far removed into the distant future.

“Mary, you know how adversity can be a powerful motivator.”

Her eyes crinkled as she nodded her head. "Of course," she smiled knowingly, "they found a better way!"

"Some of us did and the others came along for the ride. The techno revolution gave women the means to become independent people. It was no longer economic reality to learn a trade, work all of your life, get a pension, and take care of your wife and kids along the way. Instead, flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to learn new tasks quickly became the new economic reality for everyone."

"So both men and women lost their security and gained their independence." I looked at her with admiration. With her quick mind she would have thrived in our time.

"Yes, and that was the other change that occurred. Men decided to free themselves from their own bondage. Many men discovered that they liked staying home and doing the tasks which keep a household going and caring for the children. The heavy work was easy for them, and today many men take pride, as my husband does, in the smooth running home under their management. I'm running a business and doing consultant work, so I'm in and out of the house. Jack and I, as most couples and singles have done, choose the roles we want based on our interests as individuals, not because of our gender."

"Your peaceful state of mind shows readily on your features. It sounds as though giving themselves the freedom to make choices not based on gender allowed the men to grant women the same freedom." When I nodded, she continued, "Ellen, what do you recall from your own life that made you want to take your blinders off?"

I thought back over my own family and smiled as I recalled a favorite story told to me by my mother: "My mother's name is Frances, and she likes to tell me about her experiences when she was growing up. She tells one story about how she wanted to go to her high school prom, a dance, but she didn't want to wear the high-heeled shoes all the other girls would wear. She wanted to wear combat boots! These were black, lace-up, leather military boots. So, she wore the combat boots with black tights and a knee-length blue lace dress and had a wonderful time."

"What did her mother, your grandmother, say about that?"

"She was supportive and my mother describes her as a hippie rebel when she was young, so she understood the need to express oneself. I still have a photograph of my mom wearing those combat boots, standing beside her date, surrounded by balloons, and perfectly happy."

"You have had some independent women in your family."

"Yes, they have helped me learn to craft my life and take responsibility for my own choices." Mary Wollstonecraft looked at me with a knowing, half-smile. I couldn't resist speaking to her about her work. "We owe so much to you, Mary. You were very courageous."

She gave me a puzzled look, "Whatever do you mean, my friend? Why would you owe me anything?"

I wanted to be certain, "What is the day and year, Mary?"

She paused briefly and said, "It is March the third, in the year 1790. I am working on a book that defends the rights of man. Perhaps you have read it?"

I nodded and looked at this determined young woman who was thirty-one years old, only a few years younger than me. She was helping to define a philosophy that would affect the course of history. I suddenly realized that she had not yet written *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and that she had only seven more years to live. My mind choked at the thought, but steadied as I reminded myself that I didn't know my future either.

"It has been wonderful talking with you, Mary." My voice was getting shaky and I felt incapable of choosing the right words. I had, through the miracle of technology, peered into someone else's life and shared some of my own. I dared not interfere any more than I already had. "Thank you for taking the time away from your writing."

"Ellen, when a vision summons, I attend! Beyond that, I have enjoyed our conversation immensely. I will store your kind words away to give me strength when adversity strikes. The public can be a trial and a disappointment, you know."

"Your public stretches far beyond those of your own time and place. Take heart, we all will benefit from your intelligence and your courage. Do what you can. Your efforts are appreciated more than you will ever know."

"Thank you, Ellen. I shall hold your vision close to my heart. Farewell and Godspeed!"

"Good-bye, Mary."

I pluck the toning strings and Mary Wollstonecraft's image fades into memory. Leaning back on my pillows, I wave my hand and the room transforms into a sunset glow. I think of Mary's warm laughter and ready wit, I picture my mother dancing with the other young people in her combat boots, and then I think fondly of Jack and the kids. Sometimes emotions cling to the billowing tail of the technology racehorse. Taking a deep breath, I hang onto the tail as best I can.