

Excerpt: *The Best Place to Be*, by Lesley Dornen

The Old Economy Husband

It was that summer, the summer we were fifty and the little Cuban boy went home to no mother, not the first West Nile virus summer but the second, the Hillary and “Survivor” summer, you know that summer, the summer the women were manhandled in the Park and the kids lined up for Harry Potter, the summer we were fifty, all of us, fifty and holding, the ones a little older and the ones a little younger, fifty and holding, like thirty and holding only fifty, and it was summer and the ones who were rich were and the ones who weren’t but we were all fifty, every one of us, and holding.

We were in the city that summer because we couldn’t afford a vacation and we couldn’t afford a beach house, because our oven died and it was vintage 1929 or something and connected to the dishwasher in some complicated way having to do with converted residential hotels--in other words irreplaceable--and one thing led to another and now we had twenty thousand dollars worth of European-made appliances on order. It was the summer we renovated the kitchen.

“Will you call the Miele place in the morning?” I asked Richard. “Will you remember to because I can’t face it. Will you?” Our contractor was useless. Also he was in Brazil.

“I’ll do it,” Richard said. “I said I would.”

“Because you have to sweetie, O.K.?” What was I, deaf? He said he would.

One minute I was disgusted with myself for owning a fancy dishwasher I couldn’t even pronounce--Meal? Mee-lay? May-lay?--the next I was in a rage over the incompetence of the people responsible for getting it to me. Those were the two ways I was.

Everything that used to be in the kitchen was spread out all over the living room--one thing about a renovation was you saw all the stuff you never used with sickening clarity, the useless stupid juice glasses and the dust encrusted early-eighties cappuccino maker and the rusted flour sifter and the grimy oven mitts from the Caribbean vacations, cartons of junk you dragged guiltily down the hall to the recycling room for the building staff to pick over. The bathroom was now the acting kitchen and a lot of stuff that used to be in the living room, specifically the dining room, was in my office.

We ate dinner there, in front of the TV. It was summer so there was nothing on. We were watching a biography of the actress Jane Seymour, Dr. Quinn, with the hair. How her first husband left her and her life was terrible, then she had a baby, then her life was terrible again, then she had another baby. Like that. Terrible, baby, terrible, baby, commercial, baby, baby, with some husbands thrown in and a castle and the hair.

Richard carried our dirty dinner dishes to the bathroom--it was his week to cook and like a champ he'd brought in take-out burritos--and reappeared with dessert, from somewhere, on plates: Pie. He kissed the top of my head. "Do you know that you're my fave?" he said. He said it a lot lately, probably picking up those voodoo vibes of double-dose Zoloft, of Tylenol PM addiction, of nightsweaty breakdown. Those crazy fifty-year-old women! He said "You're my fave" instead of "I love you" instead of "Take whatever hormone you want just don't get cancer" instead of "I'm sorry I already had children in my first marriage and didn't want any in my second and you didn't get to be a mother." Fine. He wasn't exactly sorry, but it was fine anyway. He was my fave, too. That was me, married to the one man who made me feel like my fiercest, most clear-hearted twelve-year-old self and not any of the men who made me feel that other way,

that euphorically grandiose, desperately insecure, wildly libidinous twenty-five-year-old way.

We ate the pie.

Dr. Quinn was looking back, saying it was all worth it. I picked up the pie plates, headed for the bathroom, and considered walking straight out the door and shoving everything down the compacter. Throwing out was definitely doing it for me lately. I made a few mistakes: Our income tax files from 1990 to 1995, a set of Berlitz tapes (French), the zip-in lining to Richard's raincoat. But why tell him now, when it was only July and he wouldn't need the coat until November. If I were a mother, my kids could be grown and gone by now. Or they could be triplets about to turn three. Or murdered or run over or autistic or kidnapped or cancer-riddled and bald or schizophrenic or in prison or nanny-shaken or searching for their real mother or late getting home from school. At least I'd been spared that, that's what I told myself, because I knew I'd never survive that, any of that, not a chance.

It was my first summer on earth as an orphan. Wasn't that every kid's fantasy? Well, it had been mine. I loved the Hayley Mills "Biography." *The Parent Trap* was a great movie. My mother died last spring. I was used to my father being dead--he died three years ago and I barely knew him. Now I was fifty, not a mother, not a daughter, and the kitchen was in the living room and I didn't know how I was supposed to behave.

We went to bed, Richard instantly asleep and making those putt-putt noises. I bounced around violently a few times, blew softly into his ear, huffed off to the living room sofa for a read, came back to bed and by then he'd quieted down. I fell asleep with

my book open. At some point Richard woke, bookmarked my page, turned out my light, nuzzled my lips with my bite guard until I put it in.

He was long and lanky, my husband, as straight-arrow decent as Jimmy Stewart. Not neurotic or tricky, not the least bit mean. He'd never taken a drug, not even pot. "Are you sure you're even an American?" I asked him. He never got pissed off at me, just came home with that open look on his face, now and then passing on stories about his temper---losing it with the pokey old people in the supermarket checkout line, with the virago in the laundry room who took his still-wet clothes out of the dryer, with the punk who threatened him on a streetcorner. When he cupped my head with his hand while we made love, I was startled all over again at the largeness of it, at what a man's hand can be, and I liked it, those big fingers twining my hair, I really liked it a lot, that largeness. I just kept forgetting how much I liked it, sexual memory malaise, like one of those eccentrically damaged Oliver Sacks people who couldn't remember a conversation beyond five minutes ago. *The Woman Who Couldn't Retain the Memory of Pleasure*. Doesn't every marriage contain its own evil twin? Maybe I was ours. Maylay, Mai Lai, malaise.

In the morning, Richard made the coffee in the bathroom and we asked each other how we slept and read the *Times*.

I was happy to get out of the apartment. Besides the money, it was why I took the job ghostwriting Winston Winter's book on etiquette. Three days a week I took the bus from lower Fifth Avenue to Winston Winter Lifestyles on upper Madison Avenue.

Winston was Manhattan's most famous party and wedding planner. Today we were working on Chapter Seven: How to Raise a Gracious Child.

I'd always made a decent living as a magazine writer. My specialty was sex and dating, the five-friend, two-shrink service piece dissecting the romantic lives of single women in their twenties and thirties and, occasionally, in their early forties though not in any of the unmentionable decades after that, for *Marvelous Woman* magazine. I even wrote a column for single women called "On Your Own." Then one day I realized that I couldn't write another word on that subject. What else was there to say? How could I ask one more woman or one more representative for women what was going right or wrong in her life, what she wanted that she didn't have, what she wound up getting even though she had never claimed to want it and never asked for it. I couldn't even bear to read any more articles about women's lives, especially the serious ones written by the very smartest women that showed irrefutably all that remained wrong with women and the culture that served women despite everyone's best intentions and efforts. I couldn't bear thinking, Yes! Exactly! My brains hurt from nodding my head in so much agreement.

"Just do what you want for a while. We'll dip into the nest egg if we have to," Richard said when I told him how adrift I felt. He was an Old Economy husband. He never wanted to dip into the nest egg, ever. His willingness to dip into it now alarmed me. Was now the time for the dipping to begin? And if now wasn't the time, when was the time? I asked him again to explain the financial strategy of investing for the long haul.

"Isn't the haul getting shorter by the minute?" I said.

“Well, that’s one way to look at it,” he said.

I said no the first time Winston Winter Lifestyles asked me to write the etiquette book. Ghostwriter? Way too beside-the-point--whatever the point was. They said, “You don’t understand! It’s not just a guide to etiquette! It’s a guide to the new spiritual etiquette!” Then they offered me a little bit more money, enough to make their original offer feel that much more insulting. I’ve noticed that people tend to offer you things when you say no to them, one more important lesson I’ve learned too late in life for it to do me any good. Didn’t I have to earn *some* money? I mean, I’d never *not* earned money. Richard’s salary had already taken a dive. After years of Wall Street money-managing, he was handling finances for a small foundation. He had an office near the Empire State Building. What about haircuts? Was the nest egg expected to pay for those? What about long-term care insurance? Not to mention the looming face lift expense. I was beginning to suspect that the whole thing was careering toward some horrifying endgame in which people behaved either well or badly, in which strategies either panned out or didn’t pan out, in which being a person with good bone structure meant one thing and truly understanding what it means to forgive and forget meant something else. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I wanted to train a golden retriever puppy to be a working companion for the handicapped, then weep when the time came to turn the dog over to its grateful new owner.

***The Best Place to Be*, a novel in stories by Lesley Dornen, is available in bookstores everywhere and online from Simon & Schuster.**