

IRA LEVIN'S
THE STEPFORD WIVES
(Excerpt)

"Today the combat takes a different shape; in stead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go."

—Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex

T H E W E L C O M E W A G O N L A D Y ,
sixty if she was a day but working at youth and vivacity (ginger hair, red lips, a sunshine-yellow dress), twinkled her eyes and teeth at Joanna and said, "You're really going to like it here! It's a nice town with nice people! You couldn't have made a better choice!" Her brown leather shoulderbag was enormous, old and scuffed; from it she dealt Joanna packets of powdered breakfast drink and soup mix, a toy-size box of non-polluting detergent, a booklet of discount slips good at twenty- two local shops, two cakes of soap, a folder of deodorant pads—

"Enough, enough," Joanna said, standing in the door way with both hands full. "Hold. Halt. Thank you."

The Welcome Wagon lady put a vial of cologne on top of the other things, and then searched in her bag—"No, really," Joanna said—and brought out pink-framed eye glasses and a small embroidered notebook. "I do the 'Notes on Newcomers,'" she said, smiling and putting on the glasses. "For the *Chronicle*." She dug at the bag's bottom and came up with a pen, clicking its top with a red-nailed thumb.

Joanna told her where she and Walter had moved from; what Walter did and with which firm; Pete's and Kim's names and ages; what she had done before they were born; and which colleges she and Walter had gone to. She shifted impatiently as she spoke, standing there at the front door with both hands full and Pete and Kim out of earshot.

"Do you have any hobbies or special interests?"

She was about to say a time-saving no, but hesitated: a full answer, printed in the local paper, might serve as a signpost to women like herself, potential friends. The women she had met in the past few days, the ones in the nearby houses, were pleasant and helpful enough, but they seemed completely absorbed in their household duties. Maybe when she got to know

them better she would find they had farther-reaching thoughts and concerns, yet it might be wise to put up that signpost. So, "Yes, several," she said. "I play tennis whenever I get the chance, and I'm a semi-professional photographer—"

"Oh?" the Welcome Wagon lady said, writing.

Joanna smiled. "That means an agency handles three of my pictures," she said. "And I'm interested in politics and in the Women's Liberation movement. Very much so in that. And so is my husband."

"*He* is?" The Welcome Wagon lady looked at her.

"Yes," Joanna said. "Lots of men are." She didn't go into the benefits-for-both-sexes explanation; instead she leaned her head back into the entrance hall and listened: a TV audience laughed in the family room, and Pete and Kim argued but below intervention level. She smiled at the Welcome Wagon lady. "He's interested in boating and football too," she said, "and he collects Early American legal documents." Walter's half of the signpost.

The Welcome Wagon lady wrote, and closed her note book, clicked her pen. "That's just fine, Mrs. Eberhart," she said, smiling and taking her glasses off. "I know you're going to love it here," she said, "and I want to wish you a sincere and hearty 'Welcome to Stepford.' If there's any information I can give you about local shops and services, please feel free to call me; the number's right there on the front of the discount book."

"Thank you, I will," Joanna said. "And thanks for all this."

"Try them, they're good products!" the Welcome Wagon lady said. She turned away. "Good-by now!"

Joanna said good-by to her and watched her go down the curving walk toward her battered red Volkswagen. Dogs suddenly filled its windows, a black and brown excitement of spaniels, jumping and barking, paws pressing glass. Moving whiteness beyond the Volkswagen caught Joanna's eye: across the sapling-lined street, in one of the Claybrooks' upstairs windows, whiteness moved again, leaving one pane and filling the next; the window was being washed. Joanna smiled, in case Donna Claybrook was looking at her. The whiteness moved to a lower pane, and then to the pane beside it.

With a surprising roar the Volkswagen lunged from the curb, and Joanna backed into the entrance hall and hipped the door closed.

PETE AND KIM WERE ARGUING LOUDER.

"B.M.! Diarrhea!" "Ow! Stop it!"

"Cut it out!" Joanna called, dumping the double handful of samples onto the kitchen table.

"She's kicking me!" Pete shouted, and Kim shouted, "I'm not! You diarrhea!"

"Now *stop* it," Joanna said, going to the port and looking through. Pete lay on the floor too close to the TV set, and Kim stood beside him, red-faced, keeping from kicking him. Both were still in their pajamas. "She kicked me twice," Pete said, and Kim shouted, "You changed the channel! He changed the channel!" "I did not!" "*I was watching Felix the Cat!*"

"Quiet!" Joanna commanded. "Absolute silence! Utter —complete— total—silence."

They looked at her, Kim with Walter's wide blue eyes, Pete with her own grave dark ones. "Race 'em to a flying finish!" the TV set cried. "No electricity!"

"A, you're too close to the set," Joanna said. "B, turn it off; and C, get dressed, both of you. That green stuff outside is grass, and the yellow stuff coming down on it is sunshine." Pete scrambled to his feet and powed the TV's control panel, blanking its screen to a dying dot of light. Kim began crying.

Joanna groaned and went around into the family room.

Crouching, she hugged Kim to her shoulder and rubbed her pajamaed back, kissed her silk-soft ringlets. "Ah, come on now," she said. "Don't you want to play with that nice Allison again? Maybe you'll see another chipmunk."

Pete came over and lifted a strand of her hair. She looked up at him and said, "Don't change *channels* on her."

"Oh, all right," he said, winding a finger in the dark strand.

"And don't *kick*," she told Kim. She rubbed her back and tried to get kisses in at her squirming-away cheek.

IT WAS WALTER'S TURN TO DO

the dishes, and Pete and Kim were playing quietly in Pete's room, so she took a quick cool shower and put on shorts and a shirt and her sneakers and

brushed her hair. She peeked in on Pete and Kim as she tied her hair: they were sitting on the floor playing with Pete's space station.

She moved quietly away and went down the new-carpeted stairs. It was a good evening. The unpacking was done with, finally, and she was cool and clean, with a few free minutes—ten or fifteen if she was lucky—to maybe sit outside with Walter and look at their trees and their two-point-two acres.

She went around and down the hallway. The kitchen was spick-and-span, the washer pounding. Walter was at the sink, leaning to the window and looking out toward the Van Sant house. A Rorschach-blot of sweat stained his shirt: a rabbit with its ears bent outward. He turned around, and started and smiled. "How long have you been here?" he asked, dishtowel-wiping his hands.

"I just came in," she said.

"You look reborn."

"That's how I feel. They're playing like angels. You want to go outside?"

"Okay," he said, folding the towel. "Just for a few minutes though. I'm going over to talk with Ted." He slid the towel onto a rod of the rack. "That's why I was looking," he said. "They just finished eating."

"What are you going to talk with him about?"

They went out onto the patio.

"I was going to tell you," he said as they walked. "I've changed my mind; I'm joining that Men's Association."

She stopped and looked at him.

"Too many important things are centered there to just opt out of it," he said. "Local politicking, the charity drives and so on ..."

She said, "How can you join an *outdated, old-fashioned*—"

"I spoke to some of the men on the train," he said. "Ted, and Vic Stavros, and a few others they introduced me to. They *agree* that the no-women-allowed business is archaic." He took her arm and they walked on. "But the only way to change it is from inside," he said. "So I'm going to help do it. I'm joining Saturday night. Ted's going to brief me on who's on what committees." He offered her his cigarettes. "Are you smoking or non-tonight?"

"Oh—*smoking*," she said, reaching for one.

They stood at the patio's far edge, in cool blue dusk twanging with crickets, and Walter held his lighter flame to Joanna's cigarette and to his own.

"Look at that sky," he said. "Worth every penny it cost us."

She looked—the sky was mauve and blue and dark blue; lovely—and then she looked at her cigarette. "Organizations can be changed from the outside," she said. "You get up petitions, you picket—"

"But it's easier from the inside," Walter said. "You'll see: if these men I spoke to are typical, it'll be the *Everybody's* Association before you know it. Co-ed poker. Sex on the pool table."

"If these men you spoke to were typical," she said, "it would be the Everybody's Association already. Oh, all right, go ahead and join; I'll think up slogans for placards. I'll have plenty of time when school starts."

He put his arm around her shoulders and said, "Hold off a little while. If it's not open to women in six months, I'll quit and we'll march together. Shoulder to shoulder. 'Sex, yes; sexism, no.'"

" 'Stepford is out of step,' " she said, reaching for the ashtray on the picnic table.

"Not bad."

"Wait till I really get going."

They finished their cigarettes and stood arm in arm, looking at their dark wide runway of lawn, and the tall trees, black against mauve sky, that ended it. Lights shone among the trunks of the trees: windows of houses on the next street over, Harvest Lane.

"Robert Ardrey is right," Joanna said. "I feel very territorial."

Walter looked around at the Van Sant house and then squinted at his watch. "I'm going to go in and wash up," he said, and kissed her cheek.

She turned and took his chin and kissed his lips. "I'm going to stay out a few minutes," she said. "Yell if they're acting up."

"Okay," he said. He went into the house by the living- room door.

She held her arms and rubbed them; the evening was growing cooler. Closing her eyes, she threw her head back and breathed the smell of grass and trees and clean air: delicious. She opened her eyes, to a single speck of star in dark blue sky, a trillion miles above her. "Star light, star bright," she said. She didn't say the rest of it, but she thought it.

She wished—that they would be happy in Stepford. That Pete and Kim would do well in school, and that she and Walter would find good friends and fulfillment. That he wouldn't mind the commuting—though the whole idea of moving had been his in the first place. That the lives of all four of them would be enriched, rather than diminished, as she had feared, by leaving the city—the filthy, crowded, crime-ridden, but so-alive city.

Sound and movement turned her toward the Van Sant house.

Carol Van Sant, a dark silhouette against the radiance of her kitchen doorway, was pressing the lid down onto a garbage can. She bent to the ground, red hair glinting, and came up with something large and round, a stone; she put it on top of the lid.

"Hi!" Joanna called.

Carol straightened and stood facing her, tall and leggy and naked-seeming—but edged by the purple of a lighted-from-behind dress. "Who's there?" she called.

"Joanna Eberhart," Joanna said. "Did I scare you? I'm sorry if I did." She went toward the fence that divided her and Walter's property from the Van Sants'.

"Hi, Joanna," Carol said in her nasal New Englandy voice. "No, you didn't scay-er me. It's a nice night, isn't it?"

"Yes," Joanna said. "And I'm done with my unpacking, which makes it even nicer." She had to speak loud; Carol had stayed by her doorway, still too far away for comfortable conversation even though she herself was now at the flower bed edging the split-rail fence. "Kim had a great time with Allison this afternoon," she said. "They get along beautifully together."

"Kim's a sweet little girl," Carol said. "I'm glad Allison has such a nice new friend next door. Good night, Joanna." She turned to go in.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Joanna called.

Carol turned back. "Yes?" she said.

Joanna wished that the flower bed and fence weren't there, so she could move closer. Or, darn it, that Carol would come to *her* side of the fence. What was so top-priority-urgent in that fluorescent-lighted copper-pot hanging kitchen? "Walter's coming over to talk with Ted," she said, speaking loud to Carol's naked-seeming silhouette. "When you've got the kids down, why don't you come over and have a cup of coffee with me?"

"Thanks, I'd like to," Carol said, "but I have to wax the family-room floor."

"Tonight?"

"Night is the only time to do it, until school starts."

"Well can't it wait? It's only three more days."

Carol shook her head. "No, I've put it off too long as it is," she said. "It's all over scuff-marks. And besides, Ted will be going to the Men's Association later on."

"Does he go every night?"

"Just about."

Dear God! "And you stay home and do housework?"

"There's always something or other that has to be done," Carol said. "You know how it is. I have to finish the kitchen now. Good night."

"Good night," Joanna said, and watched Carol go— profile of too-big bosom—into her kitchen and close the door. She reappeared almost instantly at the over-the-sink window, adjusting the water lever, taking hold of something and scrubbing it. Her red hair was neat and gleaming; her thin-nosed face looked thoughtful (and, damn it all, *intelligent*); her big purpled breasts bobbed with her scrubbing.

Joanna went back to the patio. No, she *didn't* know how it was, thank God. Not to be like that, a compulsive hausfrau. Who could blame Ted for taking advantage of such an asking-to-be-exploited patsy?

She could blame him, that's who.

Walter came out of the house in a light jacket. "I don't think I'll be more than an hour or so," he said.

"That Carol Van Sant is not to be believed," she said. "She can't come over for a cup of coffee because she has to *wax* the *family-room floor*. Ted goes to the Men's Association every night and *she* stays home doing *house work*."

"Jesus," Walter said, shaking his head.

"Next to *her*," she said, "my mother is Kate Millett." He laughed.

"See you later," he said, and kissed her cheek and went away across the patio.

She took another look at her star, brighter now—*Get to work, you*, she thought to it—and went into the house.

(End of excerpt)