

"My husband said that if he had married me for my domestic skills, he would have filed for annulment within the week..."
Hair and make-up: Stephanie G-M and Sheila Carton. Sittings editor: Fiona Golfar





HOMIE SCHOOLING

As someone who once used her fridge to store clothes, *Violet Henderson* was not a natural homemaker. So she devised her own brand of finishing school and embarked on a rather unusual education. Photographs by *Pamela Hanson*

It's 2pm. Sun fans through an open window, gauze curtains billow lightly in the breeze, a mirrored dressing table sparkles, a mahogany side-table gleams, and in this bedroom that smells of furniture polish, I'm tucking a crisp white sheet beneath a super-king-size double mattress. Although domestic bliss, this – apparently – is not. "It's a disaster!" wails Anne Barnes, Claridge's deputy head housekeeper, as she stares, transfixed by my second attempt to make a bed properly. "It's lumpy and..." – she pauses, a little unnecessarily, I can't help thinking – "...terrible! We're going to have to start it again." And she brushes past me with ruthless efficiency to dismantle my work before it goes down as the absolute pits of Claridge's immaculate bedmaking history. All I can think is, she should see my bed at home.

The truth is, I've never been a natural homemaker. I have one of those for a mother, the sort so accomplished she can do hospital corners in her sleep, change a plug in five minutes flat and is totally sure her soufflé for dinner for 20 will always rise. And all her life she has resented that her education was rooted in home economics and not subjects further reaching. So I grew up in a home rigorously "made", with a vaguely political conviction that I would liberate my mind from valances and vacuum cleaners; instead I would have a dazzling

career. It was the early Noughties, *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal* and *ER* were playing on the television (for the first time), I'd discovered Susan Sontag, and got in to an Oxford college where only 19 per cent of my year was female. I don't remember even once thinking about making my bed and I ate almost every meal from a plastic container, in which afterwards I'd extinguish a cigarette (or a whole packet). They were very good years, but they weren't pretty.

Then I got older. And like most people who get older, I began to find slumming it less attractive, whatever its rousing political connotations might be. Troublingly, I began to really, really like interiors and could find myself quite taken aback by a colour scheme. Add to the equation marriage, soon a baby and the terrifying knowledge that one day we will move into my husband's beautiful family home, where eating out of plastic containers would be criminal. Let's just say I've woken up and smelt my lack of a Nespresso machine.

I'm not the only one to have felt homemaker stirrings. Right now homemaking is fashionable. Not the Fifties version, which revolved around the totems of cleaning and ironing, but its more liberal, artistic cousin, who is considerably more fun. It's practically impossible to name a golden-haired

Hollywood celebrity who isn't evangelical about baking, or a west London girl who doesn't have an Ikat cushion. And as feminist historians have announced that we are now safely ensconced in feminism's third wave, it's no longer demeaning for women to turn on their ovens, because they are sufficiently empowered to reclaim the tasks (cake-making) and symbols (aprons) that patriarchy formerly imposed on them without feeling as if they are relinquishing their position in society (probably because, exhaustingly, they've still got their day jobs).

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Social media is playing its part, too, because as it grows, promoting perpetual publicising, an equal and opposite trend is pushing back, so now the chicest parties are thrown in private houses behind closed doors. The home is reasserting its social power. As is its new maker, a hyper-competitive beast who knows her Zoffany from her Zuber, her Hemsley sisters from her Deliciously Ella, and who employs a full-time decorator to transform her home, only to claim in public that they did nothing more than "help" her.

If I'm going to enter the fray – and come out on top – I need to get some education. After consulting *Vogue's* homemaking guru (and editor-at-large) Fiona Golfar – whose cushion-plumping skills alone earned her this accolade (the cushion comes off the >

sofa, it's punched from either side, bashed on your knee and thrown down to the back of the sofa) – we've devised a special finishing school where the best in the business of interiors, floristry, butchery, cookery, etiquette and, of course, bedmaking will improve me. Although when I tell my husband, who is on first-name terms with all the staff at our local Thai takeaway, that I'm soon to be the perfect wife, he is only bemused. "I'll believe it when I see it. Had I married you for your domestic skills, I would have filed for annulment within the week."

DAY ONE

So here I am at Claridge's, towards the end of lesson one, and although it's not going well I'm not going to give up. Because according to my all-round heroine Edith Wharton, who wrote her treatise *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897 before she ever penned a prize-winning novel, "We have to make things beautiful; they do not grow so of themselves. The necessity of making this effort has caused many people to put aside the whole problem of beauty and fitness in household decoration as something mysterious and incomprehensible to the uninitiated." Her use of the word "fitness" is portentous, because I'm now fully aware that if I changed my sheets every day, I could jack in my Pilates class. But then don't I represent a generation so committed to investing our time and energy into physical fitness that we've turned positively idle around the house?

A pillow flies over to my side of the bed. Like all good homemakers, Anne isn't appreciating my dilly-dallying, she wants to get on with the task in hand. As we stuff our pillows into white pillowcases, she recaps the rules of bedmaking according to the gospel of Claridge's housekeeping.

Rule one: buy 300-thread-count Egyptian cotton – any higher and your sheets will soon wear thin and rip, any lower and they won't be soft enough. Rule two: there are two sides to Egyptian cotton, a rough and a smooth side. (It's just unfortunate that I personally can't feel the difference.) Cover the bed with the smooth side facing up.

Rule three: you need three sets of bedding in rotation per bed – one for on the bed, one for the laundry and the other ready and waiting in the cupboard. All of this linen should be the same design (and that's white).

Rule four: the best way to iron your sheets is on a roller iron. If you don't have one, send your sheets to a laundry that does, otherwise you won't have perfectly

smooth linen. Rule five: never use a fitted sheet. You can neither press them flat enough, nor stretch them creaseless over a mattress; plus, they move.

Rule six: tuck in the bottom sheet first. Start at the head of the bed, work down one side and then around, leaving the corners untucked. Rule seven: before you attempt a hospital corner, watch a Youtube tutorial and then do your tucking standing with your back to the headboard – you get a better angle that way. After that I can't help you, but I at least now know what a hospital corner looks like and I can appreciate the unfathomable skill that goes into them.

Rule eight (as I warned, bedmaking is exhausting): before putting on a duvet cover, spread the duvet over the bed and turn down the top quarter. Turn the cover inside out and hold the left-hand top corner of the cover to the left-hand top corner of the duvet, then from the other side of the bed, pull the duvet cover across. This is the most efficient way of putting on a duvet you will ever find. (You're welcome.)

Rule nine: duck down is the softest material for duvets and pillows. Rule 10 doesn't really apply to bedmaking, but if you want to keep towels as fluffy as when you bought them (rather than finding cardboard replacements hanging on your rails), tumble-dry them until they are damp. After that, hang them on a washing line.

Did I go home and remake my bed? I did, actually. And this non-bedmaker has been making her bed ever since. My cleaner was so surprised she sent me a congratulatory text. Did I bin all my fitted sheets and my non-duck-down-filled bedding? If I am honest, nearly, but then I did some online reconnaissance and calculated that would cost well over £1,000 for three bedrooms. I know it's not exactly in the spirit of the piece, but if I'm going to spend that sort of money then I'd rather buy something I really need from Céline.

DAY TWO

I'm off to my favourite restaurant in London, Wiltons, the benchmark for British taste, because I believe there should be benefits to adult education. Waiting for me on a sea-green banquette is Emma from *The English Manner*, a company that teaches etiquette, protocol, social skills and household management. Today I'm learning how to throw a dinner party. Emma opens with a few practical tips. She picks up a knife. "Begin laying your table when all your dining chairs are already positioned at the table; that way you won't risk laying in the wrong place." >



Above: "I can't even boil an egg." Violet makes a cake under the close instruction of a chef in one of the immaculate kitchens at Leiths School of Food and Wine in Shepherd's Bush. Below: studying the principles of butchery – because no woman should ask a man to carve – with her teacher, Kane, at HG Walters in Hammersmith. Some of the cheapest, leanest cuts of meat have of late become unfashionable because they require slow roasting. Violet now knows better



PAMELA HANSON



Above: Violet consults Gavin Houghton about his moodboard, pinned with swatches of fabric and inspiration images, in a Chelsea townhouse that he decorated. Below: learning how to arrange a vase of flowers with loose symmetry, in John Carter's Fulham studio. Bottom right: attempting yet another hospital corner at Claridge's



Above: in Valentino couture, proudly showcasing her precisely cooked game at Wiltons. Below: Emma from The English Manner – a company that teaches perfect protocol – shows Violet how to lay a table correctly



OPPOSITE: VIOLET WEARS JACKET AT WILLIAM VINTAGE. THIS PAGE: STRIPED DRESS, SACAL DRESS, AT WILLIAM VINTAGE. BOOTS, SAINT LAURENT BY HEDI SLIMANE. BLACK & BODDIE ANGLAISE TOP AND WHITE BLOUSE BOTH CHLOE. JEANS, MIH JEANS. DENIM DRESS, PROENZA SCHOUER. THANKS TO JOHN CARTER FLOWERS

Finally accomplished,
Violet reclines in
a Valentino jumpsuit
(on a bed made with
perfect hospital corners).
Even the dog, Towzer,
looks more relaxed



Emma is very well spoken. "Use a dinner plate so you get the right spacing between your knives and forks, and the base of your cutlery should measure an inch from the edge of your table. The table centrepiece, be that flowers or..." "Straw baskets filled with Burford Brown eggs and ever-so-lifelike chicks, like those that decorate Carole Bamford's Easter lunch?" I interject. "Or that," Emma continues, looking startled, "should never eclipse the person opposite, because that will make for a bad party. If you are going to serve bread [Emma often does at her own dinner parties], provide a butter knife [looks like a paint spatula] but never a bread knife because you only ever break bread at the table [a hangover from biblical times]." But my favourite of all Emma's facts is that you should only place the spoon for pudding – never say "dessert", you'll only be exposing your lack of French (dessert means a final fruit course, served after the cheese) – above the plate when you are eating with children, because in that position the spoon is a reminder that for those who get through their main course there is a sweet reward.

Oh! Thank God! For this, I tell Emma, is much easier than bed-making and I sink happily into the banquette, cross my legs, rest one elbow on the table and with the other hand grab a glass of wine nowhere near its stem. "You would never do that at a real dinner party, would you?" she asks, looking aghast at me. "No, Emma," I lie. "Never." And we talk happily about placement: how the guest of honour should always sit to the right of the host or hostess; how, really, you should always place a newly married couple next to each other until after their first anniversary; and how bad-mannered it is to leave the table to go to the loo during lunch or dinner (although Emma says "lavatory" because she is more polite than me). We agree that every hostess has a duty to stipulate a dress code, particularly if the party is at home, and mentally I promise to remember to reply to an invitation within 48 hours of having received it, because "it's very poor not to", says Emma.

DAY THREE

"Have you thought what colour scheme you are going to have for your baby shower?" Florist John Carter looks at me

inquisitively as he holds a tulip in his west London studio. I haven't a clue what I'm going to have for lunch in two hours' time. "It would look fantastic if you just laid a brightly coloured gerbera head on top of each place setting's napkin, and then you could pick up the same colours with sweets in glass jars. It's so important to have fun!" John believes that flowers at home should be "natural and simple, not wound in tight balls. It looks so pretty on a dining-room table if there is a row of flowers in vases, mugs and tumblers, all of which are different shapes and sizes." Most of John's business is making bespoke weekly arrangements for his super-chic clients (he is responsible for dazzling us at Cartier's summer events), but for friends who want to go it alone he also gives lessons. His primary instruction is symmetry: "what you do to one side of

I'm now aware that if I changed my sheets every day, I could jack in my Pilates class

the bowl, do to the other". It's also important to establish a palette that works with the room where the flowers will be placed (although John particularly likes using whites, greys, pinks and greens). To keep flowers in bloom longer, cut a vertical centimetre into woody stems. And scrub your vases. John turns to me in his ivory cable-knit jumper, "Would you like to sit in dirty bath water?" I shake my head furiously. I've read my Mrs Beeton, I know homemakers are all about cleanliness. "Neither do plants. So change their water once a day and add a quarter of a Milton Sterilising Tablet to it. Flowers hate bacteria."

Later that day I'm holding a meat cleaver, surveying a carcass in HG Walter, a family-run butcher's shop in Hammersmith that supplies the River Café and Nigella Lawson. Now I've got over the smell (not to go into it too thoroughly but in the bowels of the shop there is quite a specific scent), I'm really enjoying myself. I've long harboured an ambition to become a surgeon. My teacher, Kane, who gives many a lesson here to the dedicated meat-lover, is showing me how to cut close to the bone, along seams of fat, through joints. A key aspect of traditional homemaking was to know about meat and how to handle it, because in the Fifties quinoa and gluten-free couscous hadn't yet hit home menus. And today, the modern homemaker has completely failed in her objective if she presents a perfectly cooked joint only to

helplessly ask a man to carve. But Kane's mind is on bigger things. "There isn't enough slow roasting any more," he says with a shake of his head, "we're up against this whole culture of instant food." Shin, leg, neck, skirt, silverside – "these are the leanest parts of the animal and yet hardly anyone wants to cook them, but everyone seems to want to lose weight." My ears prick up. "Plus, they are so well priced." Dejected, he throws a limb down on to a cutting board. "But, Kane," I say reasonably, "if only we all had the time to spend hours in the kitchen," and I gesticulate to my ink-stained diary bulging out of my bag in the corner of the room. Kane shakes his head again. "Because no one has the time to whack something in the oven while they're watching a DVD on a Sunday night ready for dinner the following week?" And just like that, he won the argument. After my lesson, I looked around the rest of the shop and learned that they make home deliveries – another time-saving device, I noted. And the butcher made the most exquisite homemade-looking pies...

DAY FOUR

More food. Of Mrs Beeton's 1,003-page *Book of Household Management*, 900 are devoted to recipes, because eating is, after all, the most usual excuse for visiting another person's house. Trouble is, if no one likes your food, getting enough friends over for a dinner party could turn into a tough gig. In keeping with the general theme here, I'm not a natural cook – or perhaps, more truthfully, I've been sceptical of food ever since I was 15 years old and, along with the rest of my schoolfriends, began dieting. When I lived alone in London, I turned off my fridge and my oven and used them to store my clothes. I no longer want to go without eating, but nor do I want to spend hours of my day thinking about food. And so, as I spiralled up the stairs to Kitchen Three in the immaculate Leiths School of Food and Wine in Shepherd's Bush, I'll admit I was resentful that I was giving up my precious Saturday to learn how to concoct a three-course lunch.

I ended up enjoying every second. With almost twice as many men as women in the class, we cooked quail, made champagne jelly and grilled butterflied prawns. The Leiths message chimed with all that I had learnt in HG Walter: buy good ingredients, prepare in advance and make producing food easy for yourself because, as our sage teacher pointed out, there is nothing more appetite-killing than a frazzled host. So, cook with your own glass of wine > 190

twenties, all equally challenging, vivid characters. She certainly wasn't modelling her career as America's next sweetheart: "I was aware that the business did want to sexualise me. And I wouldn't have done Michel Gondry's film *Human Nature*, where I am covered in hair, if I wanted to be a sex symbol," she attests. (Directors Arquette has worked with read like a roll-call of cinema's great auteurs – Gondry, David Lynch, John Boorman, Stephen Frears, Martin Scorsese, Tim Burton and, of course, Linklater.) And if she has felt a little absent over the past 10 years, it is because she focused on steady roles in popular American television series (winning awards as she went), a lifestyle that allowed her to be a mother. "You are not going to be the greatest parent if you're making purely artistic choices to the detriment of your child's needs," she says. "And I definitely had times where it was, 'I need a job. It doesn't matter what it is...'"

For those of us who were fans in the Nineties, seeing her on the Oscars stage that night, with her impassioned cry for women, was like a reunion with a treasured old friend. Harlow accompanied her – "She gave me a big hug and said, 'Good job, Mom'" – along with Rosanna and her brother Richmond. And her date was her boyfriend, the artist Eric White. She describes herself with a rueful chuckle as a "recovering romantic". The habitual denim overalls were for once replaced by a sweeping off-the-shoulder cream dress by Rosetta Getty. "There were a lot of whining moments," she admits of the numerous award ceremonies she had to prepare for. "I'd say, can't I wear my overalls today?" She catches me scribble "tomboy" and "overalls" on my notepad. "But I also have a lot of high heels!" she pounces, pretty blue eyes narrowing. "So you can't pigeonhole me."

Evading expectation, dodging stereotype are the true constants in Arquette's career trajectory. She acknowledges the negative traits implicit to her industry, the anxiety that the highs and lows usher in. "I think it can be a very painful business. But because of my family, and the way they allowed us to question things, I was able to define my career, not be dictated to." She has kept the same agent for 26 years and her friends are mainly from childhood. "This means sanity," she elaborates. "And I minimise the reality of being an actor at home with the kids. We don't watch my work. We don't have posters of my movies. I don't hang out with stars."

Before her surprise sweep of the awards season, Arquette had signed to a new television series, *CSI: Cyber*, a spin-off from the vastly successful global franchise *CSI*, in which she plays the female lead. Unlike most, she does not see television as a lesser medium than film. "Lots of people can't afford to go to the movies. We went to, like, two movies when I was a child... we couldn't afford food. I remember not having shoes for a period of time. So television is not secondary, it has a vital role." And although film offers are growing, Harlow remains her priority; one tempting offer was recently declined by Arquette as it clashed with her daughter's school summer holiday. A decision not made lightly because, with typical self-effacement, she doubts the longevity of the current golden glow. To that end, there are other projects lined up: a clothing and toy line for children, and an autobiography. "I know acting is a short-term gig," she shrugs sweetly. "I'm kind of amazed that I've been able to pull it off this long."

As for that uninhibited 24-year-old, she wants to tell her to quit smoking. Has she quit smoking? She screws her face up in mock horror: "No! It's the bane of my existence. I hate it." Later, I glimpse her in the paved garden, cigarette in hand, overalls back on, head tipped inquisitively to one side, taking pictures of spring blossom on her camera. Hollywood's angelic upstart, all grown-up but still deserving our attention. ■

"*CSI: Cyber*" is on Channel 5 this autumn

(for health-and-safety reasons we didn't actually do that at Leiths) and if you're going to serve a three-course dinner party, make sure that two of the courses are already prepared – in order to limit time at the stove when the party is in full throttle. I left the school with the distinct conviction that I'll be revisiting it. In a way, I already have, since three days later I tried roasting another two quail. And do you know what? Apparently, it beats Thai takeaway.

DAY FIVE

I'm in a home nicer than my own, but only a few streets away. As much as I would have liked this Chelsea townhouse to have been a vision of my homemaking future, it is, in fact, someone else's present-day domestic perfection: the recently finished project of decorator Gavin Houghton, a former *Vogue* art director, who is today going to share with me tips of his trade. We perch on a pair of candyfloss-coloured upholstered chairs and discuss the many moodboards he works from, pinned with fabric swatches and inspirations. Aside from de-boning a leg of lamb, this is the most fun I've had all week, but I know better than to mistake decorating for the sugary-soft face of homemaking. Of all this subject's many skills, interior design is the most fiercely contested, because how your Pierre Frey curtains interact with your Madeleine Castaing ottoman will say as much about you as your Miu Miu skirt – more maybe, because it will implicitly drag your whole family into the matter. I've seen women go crackers over brass fittings. Taking out their iPhones, discussing distributors, American import taxes, harrumphing in taxis on the way home that X and Y will be sure to copy, so it's "all about being original". And then there is the fear that none of your friends will want to copy you at all.

Given the ferocious circumstances, Gavin is wonderfully relaxed. "If you try too hard, it will look like you've tried too hard," he says laconically. Around me swirl shades of dusky blue, green, reds, pinks and brass in peaceful harmony. "That's why it's important to fill your house with your stuff – your invitations, your photos, your bric-à-brac. There is nothing worse than a room that feels like a hotel lobby, showing no sign of whoever-lives-there's character." Gavin has transformed the homes of musicians, writers and *Vogue* staffers. "I really cannot forgive a symphony of beiges with an accent of amethyst," he says with a grimace as he re-adjusts an art deco-style brass lamp, made by Soane. "It's a known decorating fact that the more layers you add – by that I mean the more mismatching fabrics and different variations of natural tones (steer away from acids and metallics) – the calmer a room gets, and the more it gives you. I like it to take me a while to get to know a room." And off he goes, talking about Vanessa Bell's Charleston as his great visual inspiration, how he likes pictures to be hung low (so you can see them), how spotlights should only ever be used in shop windows, the joy of real log fires, of picture rails, of lamps (their light makes people look attractive), how to turn wardrobes into larders and cabinets into sink units, and why no matter how great the security risk your art poses, you should never live behind net curtains because we need daylight...

But eventually I must leave Gavin, and my ideal home, for my own house. My *Vogue* finishing school over, I have a faint awareness that I might have only just begun a bigger, lifelong journey. Because homemaking is and isn't about hospital corners: on the one hand it necessitates discipline and preparation and menial tasks, but on the other hand it is perhaps the most creative thing you can do, to define a space for yourself within this largely impersonal world. In fact, it's thrillingly, headily empowering. And never in a million years did I think I would write that. ■