

DOMESTIC BLISS



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“Domestic Bliss” is a weird little tale about a marriage that improves a little too much. Written for submission to the [On The Premises](#) 21st short story competition, where it took first place. This was also my first short story sale.

Harry noticed the difference right away. Mary-Ann stood in the doorway of the house, which usually meant she was real mad; she planned to chew him out the minute he stepped inside.

Except, she didn’t. “Evenin’, Harry. You look pooped.”

Not: *Where in the blazes have you been? Dinner petrified an hour ago. But that’s all right, you’re used to eating cold gravy. ‘Cause you gotta have your gravy Harry, don’t you.*

The tirade changed with the day, but invariably included a dig about gravy. What was wrong with gravy, anyway?

Harry pushed past her, not interested in playing whatever game she’d cooked up with his gravy. With a walk particular to him, a sliding stride that eased on out from under sloped shoulders, he moved into the sitting room—you know, the room where folks sat and drank and were all civilized like—and pulled up in front of the wooden trolley where they kept the liquor.

“I fixed you a drink,” Mary-Ann said behind him.

He could see that. Sitting in a small puddle of ice sweat was a glass of bourbon. A decent sized pour with three ice cubes, just the way he liked it. A frown wrinkling his brow, tired skin pulling against his tired hairline, Harry reached for the glass. He picked it up, sniffed at it, bushy brows bumping upward, and took a swallow. Tasted like bourbon.

Perfume drifted around his shoulder, a slightly obnoxious scent he did not recall. Still, the sharp notes addled his senses a bit. He turned around and looked into his wife’s eyes. Those twin green orbs were not Mary-Ann’s.

Her eyes had been that exact green when they met. That flash of emerald, lit by a spark of wickedness and thought, had made him think: That’s the girl for me. And she had been for some years—until the gravy thing. Or, until she got as worn down as he was, tired as his hair, receding back from life in a final effort to preserve itself. Only Mary-Ann wasn’t the retiring sort. She nagged everyone else into that state. Sucked out their youth and used it on herself. Some sorta witch-fangled beauty treatment.

“Who are you?” he said as his body stiffened with a sort of panic. Curiosity tempered the process, leaving his lungs pliant.

“Why, I’m your wife, Harry. Don’t you recognize me?”

Looking at the shiny new Mary-Ann in front of him, Harry asked the next logical question. “What are you?”

She smiled. Her lips did not spread into a predatory grin; she simply smiled and tilted her head. The angle was sexy. A heated flush shot down from the bourbon patch in his chest, all the way to his groin.

“You’re a sharp one,” she said. Then she reached into the pocket of her dress—no apron, he noted now; no starchless fold of grimy cloth that turned his wife from woman into potato sack—and pulled out a small book. “Here’s what you need to know.”

Harry extended fingers gingerly toward the book, then looked down at the cover.

Your New Wife™. Mary-Ann, model 1B.

“Huh?”

She pushed the little book forward so it slipped under his fingers, which curled instinctively around the edge. “Instructions,” she murmured, her voice all breathy.

Skin prickled across his scalp and down his back. His tired brain surged into sluggish motion. Eyes narrowing, Harry said, “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I—”

The book pushed up against the meat of his palm. “Just read the book, Harry.”

She sounded so much like Mary-Ann, then, Harry moved to do as he was told. He scowled as opened the book.

Congratulations on your purchase of a New Wife™ Model 1B.

Harry looked up. “I didn’t purchase any, ah, New Wife.” What the hell was a New Wife, anyway? Angling his chin forward in a belligerent manner, Harry inspected the woman in front of him. Mary-Ann stood completely still. His eyes narrowed again. “Is this some kinda joke you planned, Mary-Ann? If it is, I don’t wanna play it. I’m tired and I’m hungry.” His usual state of being, seven o’clock in the evening version.

Her face brightened as if someone had switched on a lamp inside her skull. “Well, then, come on and eat. You can read my instructions afterwards.”

Harry clicked into survival mode. Whatever his harridan of a wife had schemed up would be better dealt with on a full stomach. He didn’t care if the damned gravy had congealed. He sloped on out of the sitting room and into the dining room, ‘cause didn’t you know civilized folk had to have a room for each? Which meant a house with lots of rooms, each of which needed lighting and heating and all the furniture and knick knacks. Except all they needed was a house that had a kitchen with a couch for napping and then another room behind that for proper sleeping. Didn’t need a door in between, neither. Wasn’t like anything but sleeping would ever happen in that other room. Not anymore.

The dining room was lit with candles and looked real nice. A cloth with scalloped edges fell halfway down the table legs. He noticed the edges because the cloth was so white and not at all fussy. Set on top were two plates from the good china set, which they never used because it had to be washed by hand and really was only for display, anyway. Flanking the plates: shiny flatware, from the good set. Their wedding set. At point sat cut crystal glasses, beaded with moisture from the cold water inside. Even from the doorway he could see three cubes of ice in his. An array of covered serving dishes ruled the middle, and opposite his water glass, the gravy boat, a film of plastic wrap across the top.

Mouth gaping a little, Harry turned to Mary-Ann. Fear pinged through his veins now. His wife had gone to a lot of effort to set up whatever this was and he would have to pay, literally and figuratively. “Looks real nice, Mary-Ann,” he said. She smiled softly again, her lips at the same exact width as before.

“Why thank you, Harry.” Her smile clicked one degree wider. “Sit down, why don’t you. Eat!”

The air hanging over the factory floor stank of machine oil and sweat, like it always did. A new odor slid under the funk, though. Something sharp, acrid. Brimstone and hellfire. Harry reckoned it was fear and it stung his nostrils every time the gaze of his fellows slid away or bounced from face to machine and up again. They all moved like machines, their muscles jerky with tension. The roar of gears and grinders seemed louder—or maybe the lack of shouts just made it that way.

Three hours into his shift, the bell clanged the way it always did and Harry straightened up, away from his console, fingers already dipping into the pocket of his overalls for his rag. He liked to keep his fingers clean, when he could. Otherwise, by the end of the day he looked like he'd painted himself for war. Maybe he had, in a way.

His fingers brushed the pages of the small book he'd shoved into his pocket, thrust there by the same delusion that suggested he'd do something other with his break than lean against the cinderblock wall of the yard and stare vacantly up at the clouds, mind too dull to form them into fanciful shapes. He joined the crowd of greasy overalls shuffling out to the yard, leaning out in rhythm to snag a cup of coffee on the way. Steam fogged the nervous faces as everyone settled into their customary positions; small groups, two or three men conversing quietly together, the loners who stared at the sky, and the drifters, men like Harry who sometimes joined one group, sometimes another, but often ended up just staring at something that didn't move, didn't puff out gouts of oily smoke, didn't heave and jerk beneath his hands, part of a process, part of a machine, voiceless, nameless—

“Harry!”

Harry turned and smiled at Frank. “Hey, Frank. How's it?”

“Good, good.” Frank danced nervously from foot to foot, as he always did. His coffee cup wavered upwards and his movement steadied long enough for him to take a sip before he resumed his shimmy. “You?”

Lips twisting, Harry studied the other man. “All right.” He enunciated each word, letting them go all slow like in the hopes Frank might catch the buried treasure beneath.

Frank jerked and bounced in front of him. “Right, then.” He sipped his coffee, then hissed as it spilt across his stained fingers. Swallowing, licking his lips, he regarded Harry a moment longer, then said, “And Mary-Ann? How's your wife?”

Harry saw it! The flash in the other man's eyes. Harry leaned forward, then back, rocking from toe to heel, and pushed his hand back into his pocket where his fingertips bumped into the top of the manual. “Well, now,” he drawled. “MaryAnn is just fine, thank you for askin'. I'll tell her you did so. I think she'd like that.” His eyes narrowed as he waited for Frank's response.

Salty blonde brows shot up over widening blue eyes. “Ah, you do that.”

“How's Bethany?”

Frank's thin lips pressed together, then he leaned forward. “You know something,” he said in a coffee scented murmur.

Harry remained fixed in position, his expression barely changing. “What do you know?” he bit off quietly.

A small book edged out of Frank's overall pocket, then quickly dropped out of sight. A relieved sigh unfurled in Harry's lungs, pushing his ribs in before it warmed the back of his throat. It wasn't an elaborate joke, then. Or, maybe it was. Maybe all the wives had gotten fed up.

“Did you try anything?” Frank asked, eyes cutting left and right.

Giving in to temptation, Harry let his eyes follow. What he saw didn't hardly surprise. Fellows stood in twos and threes all over the yard, like they always did, but their head were bent closer together and hands were buried in greasy pockets. Earnest conversation flowed liked a small machine sound, whining and hissing through the yard.

Hm.

He wasn't going to tell Frank all he'd tried. Harry didn't think of himself as a good man, any sort of saint or model of respectability. But he followed a few old rules, the ones that never

changed. He didn't talk about what he did in the bedroom—or at the dining room table, starched skirts thrown up, lacy panties pulled down, his New Wife™ as soft and flexible as the real thing, or as she had been ten years ago. How she'd actually cried out his name, his *name*, and gripped his shoulders, then his hips. How it had been good. So damned good. Spur of the moment like, but that sudden inventiveness of his baser instincts capturing them both by surprise. It had been a rush; the thrill and the idea he should finish it up before they both came to their senses.

"I, ah..." His tongue swiped across his lips, a mistake at the factory. He gulped at his coffee and swallowed the bitter, oily taste all together. "I set a program to run while I was at work today."

Frank's eyes turned into dinner plates—ones with the wrong pattern, but round and shiny all the same. Then a blush crept outta his shirt collar, crawled up his neck and stung his cheeks.

Harry grinned and leaned forward. "What's Bethany up to, then?" He both did and did not want to hear what Frank might arrive home to. Just as he had a prohibition on sharing his bedroom secrets, he didn't really want to hear those of his friends. But curiosity poked, nonetheless.

"Out. I sent her out," Frank gasped. "To her mother's." He leaned forward as well, their closeness bordering on uncomfortable intimacy. "You look kind of happy, Harry. What does that mean?" Frank straightened. "What does it all mean?" This last whined softly like a new-polished saw blade.

Harry blinked. "It means I get the gravy," he said.

"But where are our wives?"

"Home! Cookin' and cleanin' and rearranging furniture, I hope. I want the damned couch under the window. Don't care if the upholstery fades. We can put a rug over the back or something. I want to nap in the sun Sunday afternoon."

Frank rocked back. "That's not your wife, Harry."

"'Tis now."

Harry closed himself up. It was knock-off time for this conversation. Frank hadn't nudged Bethany across the dining table. He'd spent his night wondering where his wife was when she'd been right there in front of him. New and improved, all soft and sparkly. Not hard and flinty. 'Course, Harry couldn't remember if Bethany had been as much of a nag as Mary-Ann. He just assumed so. Wives were wives, weren't they?

Frank pulled at his ear, fingers painting a line across the ridged flesh. "First I thought she was up to something, you know? Had dinged the car or wanted a new hat. Dunno why hats cost so much, or why a woman needs more than one. Like gloves? Just get a white pair, I say, or brown. Don't brown go with everything?"

"I'd like to paint the walls brown. Brown is a good color," Harry agreed. This was a better topic of conversation. Couldn't last, though.

"But it wasn't her. It was this robot thing." Frank leaned again, his coffee-scented breath bitter, now. "Buttons all up her back."

Harry's brows angled upward. He hadn't inspected Mary-Ann's back. "What are the buttons for?" he asked. He'd given his instructions verbally, right before he left the house.

"Did you read the manual?"

"Not much." His hand made a bulge in his pocket again. "Planned to take a peek at it now."

Their break was almost up.

"You can change hair color, breast size, hips, everything."

You kinky devil. Harry pressed his lips together, lest he say that out loud.

“It ain’t natural,” Frank whined. He looked from side to side again, his whole head moving this time. “And everyone’s all riled up, see? We all got one of these new wives, I bet. And no one knows what to do about it.”

Harry shrugged. “What’s to do?” he asked. Inside, a little worry bloomed. Where was the real Mary-Ann? He’d sorta assumed the one in his house had been made out of the old one. New and improved like.

Frank gave him an odd look. Then, pursing his lips, nodded down toward their steel-capped toes and drank the rest of his coffee.

The blank space of wall in the sitting room looked empty, like they’d just been robbed. Sucking on his glass of bourbon, Harry turned a slow circle and inspected the rest of the setup. It met with his approval. The couch reclined beneath the large window, the coffee table looked to be within ankle reach—should he choose to sprawl rather than nap—and the stuffy velvet curtains had been replaced by some gauzy material that moved against the windows. The new, blank wall countered the rest of the crap, like the fussy cabinet with the creepy little dolls inside. His gaze slid to one of the doll faces, all vacant black eyes and plaster smile.

“How’s it look, Harry?”

A shiver advanced down his spine, one cold finger after the other. “Looks good.” He drained his glass and set it down. “I’ll test it out on Sunday.”

He look up at Mary-Ann’s perfectly made up face. Didn’t look so much different, he thought, until he recalled he hadn’t actually inspected his wife’s face in some time. The small lines around her eyes were new. Fine creases that he could imagine slipping into furrows if she squinted in anger.

“Where’s Mary-Ann?” he asked, spine tucking closer into his back.

“I’m right here, Harry.”

“The real Mary-Ann.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, showing him just how those lines could deepen. “I am the real Mary-Ann.”

He’d like to ask why she’d squinted at him like that, but they just didn’t talk about feelings and reactions and so on. They bickered and then flung themselves aside when they ran out of things to say. Would this Mary-Ann bicker with him? He supposed not, and that would be a good thing, right? Evenings of peace and quiet and gravy.

“Are you ready for dinner?”

“Sure.” He produced a smile for the wife who had arranged a room just as he liked it and had then invited him to dinner rather than harangue him to the table from the front door.

After dinner, he tested the angle of the couch. Sprawled, with his socked feet propped up on the coffee table. He been tempted to heft his boots up there, watch flakes of dried dirt drift down to the carpet, listen to the way the hard rubber heel squeaked along the rolled edge of wood. Just to see if Mary-Ann would react. She’d smacked him across the side of the head with a wooden spoon, once. The damn thing cracked against his skull, stinging the top of his ear. Still, he hadn’t hit her back. He might not be a good man, not a saint or whatever. But he was not a man who hit his wife.

Thoughtfully, Harry reached up to fiddle with the flexible top of his ear, reminiscing on the sting. She'd been mean as a snake, his Mary-Ann. Green eyes flashin' all the while. Why had he put up with it?

"Don't suppose I'm a man who leaves his wife, neither."

"What's that, Harry?"

Mary-Ann stood framed by the wide arch that opened the sitting room to the hall. Foyer, if you wanted to be fancy like.

Harry patted the couch next to him, then looked down to the hand that made the gesture. Clearing his throat, he said, "Come sit." He leaned forward to scoop up the small book resting on the coffee table.

Mary-Ann glided over to the couch and sat next to him so delicately, the cushions didn't even dip. She'd always been like that as he recalled. Most graceful woman he knew; even in anger she managed an economy of movement. A well-oiled machine, that was Mary-Ann. She smelled like dish soap and gravy. Under that, he caught the strident notes of perfume, same as yesterday. Something oily, exotic.

He flipped open the manual to the page detailing the buttons on her back. "So, are you at the default setting?"

"Factory standard," she replied as if they were discussing the weather.

"Can I see the buttons?"

Green eyes flashed with mischief. Her lips crooked into a sneaky little smile—which highlighted another fine line he had not noticed. His gaze flicked side to side, taking in the fact she had small parentheses on either side of her mouth. Laugh lines. Whenever did Mary-Ann laugh?

Mary-Ann began sliding out of her dress, her movements slow and sinuous. She looked like a snake shedding her skin. Harry's shoulders bunched into another shiver. He stared at her half-exposed breasts, and recalled he'd spent time looking them over before. Many, many times. His wife had fabulous tits, even covered by a structured scrap of lace, as they were now. His desire rose, a heated thing squirming beneath his skin. Harry swallowed it down and lifted a finger before revolving it through the air.

"Turn around."

She pouted and then complied.

The buttons were embedded in her spine. Feeling his brow wrinkle less attractively than hers might, Harry leaned forward, grasped her shoulder and turned her slightly so the light fell on the row of shiny round bumps that seemed to sit above each knob of backbone. They were set into flesh, the skin around bunched like a sleeve. He swiped a finger around the wrinkled skin, then up over a button. It was smooth and warm. Without referring back to the manual, he pushed it. The button depressed until the top rested flush with her skin, then clicked. Then it pushed back at his finger, gently. Harry let it pop back out. He looked up at Mary-Ann's head. Her wavy auburn tresses, always so artfully arranged, glimmered and then faded a shade. Harry pressed the button again.

When they had achieved a strawberry blonde shade that looked right nice in the warm glow of the lamp, Harry peeked at her profile and noted her brows had altered to a complimentary color. Slightly darker, but obviously the brows of a woman with lighter hair. Her lashes remained dark, which made a nice contrast.

Throughout, Mary-Ann said not a word. Then, as he nodded his approval, she said, "What do you think?"

“Looks nice,” he said, a familiar twist of anxiety grabbing at his guts. He never knew how to give out compliments. Wasn’t entirely sure he knew what counted as nice, neither. Or what to do about a custom-designed wife.

He referred to the manual again, sliding the same page back and forth as he memorized the function of each button. Then he reached up and depressed the one second lowest on her spine. Mary-Ann held out her hands to display the altered color of her nails.

“Seems a pretty useless adjustment,” Harry remarked.

She shrugged, the crease between her breasts deepening. “It’s all cosmetics, Harry.”

That it was. Pursing his lips, he studied the description of the last button. It wasn’t cosmetic at all. Pushing that button would alter Mary-Ann’s personality.

We recommend allowing two days to pass between personality enhancements. The full effect might not be immediately obvious.

How much would she change with each press?

He kinda liked her as she was now. All pliant and softly amusing.

Harry reached up and pressed the button. Mary-Ann purred in her throat and rolled him back on the couch. His shirt quickly joined her dress, then his pants. Holy mother of God.

He still felt flushed, even in the dark, brimstone stink of the factory floor. He hadn’t followed the instructions. He’d pressed that button again, right before they peeled themselves off the couch and staggered into the bedroom. Green eyes sparkling, Mary-Ann admonished him, then picked him up and tossed him on the bed. Was a wonder he could walk.

The same odd quiet that held the factory in check the day before had increased, which made the cavernous floor echo even more loudly with machine noise. Harry noted that phenomenon first, then began catching the gaps between the infrastructure. The factory usually buzzed with men and a few women, all of them indistinguishable in their greasy overalls. Today it seemed half empty, which only highlighted the fact a few of the fellows had been missing yesterday, too.

Harry looked for Frank and found him nervously punching buttons on his console. Looking around to clock the position of their foreman, Harry sidled over to his friend.

“Frank.”

The slender man tensed and then looked up. “Oh, Harry, it’s you.” Purple thumb prints rested below his blue eyes and the blond fluff on top of his head stood straight up, making it seem thinner than usual. Harry smoothed his hand over his own forehead, palm sliding back too far as always before it slipped over the groomed strands of hair he still possessed.

“You don’t look good, Frank. What’s the news?”

Frank shook his head and turned back to his console, gaze fixing on a button before he jabbed at it. Harry took a hold of his arm and applied enough pressure to turn the man back around without seeming to insist upon it.

“You’re worrying me.”

“You should get back to work, Harry. Mind your own business.”

Frank’s eyes widened, then, and he seemed to shrink back, away from his skin. Harry turned around, wondering what had alarmed the other man so, and saw a cadre of uniformed men weaving their way across the floor toward them. He turned back to Frank and shook him.

“Frank! What did you!”

“It wasn’t her!” Frank whined, bubbles of spit forming at the corners of his mouth. He began to shake. Harry let him go and stepped back just in time to be swept further aside by an extended baton.

“Frank Werther?”

Frank’s head bobbed and shook.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Bethany Werther.”

“It wasn’t her!” Frank wailed.

The uniforms moved through their routine, another well-oiled machine. One cuffing the suspect or perpetrator or whatever they wanted to call Frank. Another patting down overalls that used to be blue. He’d be painting his face with grease afterwards. Harry stood aside, horror knotting and twisting his insides.

By the time the break bell ran, his throat had unlocked. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he loped into the yard and took a place near the wall where he could catch the sun. He turned his face toward the sky and basked. He picked out shapes in the clouds. They were crude, all of them, but he had to do something with his thoughts, something other than reflect on what Frank might have done.

It hadn’t been Bethany, right? Not the real Bethany?

Harry noticed the difference right away. Mary-Ann stood in the doorway of the house, which usually meant she was real mad; she planned to chew him out the minute he stepped inside.

Except, she didn’t.

She dragged him bodily across the doorjamb, his boots scuffing the skirt along the bottom of the wall, and then pushed him back against the same wall, her mouth fastened to his, her hands already pulling buttons off the clean shirt he habitually changed into before he left the factory.

“My boots,” he protested between nips of teeth and flicks of tongue. “Dinner?” he tried when his pants dropped to the floor.

Harry liked sex. What man didn’t? But they’d been at it four times last night and then there’d been the session across the dining room table the night before that and he felt a bit, well, drained. Empty like. He’d been wondering if he might not test the nap-ability of the couch that evening, let Mary-Ann do whatever it was she liked to do when she wasn’t harassing him.

Before her hand could grab him again, Harry pushed her away, firm but gentle. He didn’t want to hurt her, after all. “Wait, Mary-Ann, I’m tired.”

She pouted and the purse of her lips didn’t strike him as sexy as it had last night. Sliding a hand around her waist, he felt for the button that altered her personality and depressed it again. Damn the instructions. He couldn’t be living with a woman who wanted him morning, noon and night. Not with the weekend coming on.

Mary-Ann growled and thrust him back against the wall. Between stabs of panic as he fended off stronger bites and the claw of nails, Harry wondered if he should have fiddled with her breast size instead. Thing was, he’d always liked Mary-Ann’s bosom just the way it was. Just as he liked her eyes.

He pushed the button again and Mary-Ann shuddered against him. Harry pushed the damned button again. She pulled away, staggered back into the hall and twitched in place for a good thirty seconds. Mouth slightly agape, Harry flinched against a premonition. What if she

exploded? Horror twisting him tight, he wondered if he'd be arrested for murder after his wife flew into fleshy pieces, staining the pristine white paint of the foyer.

Mary-Ann did not explode. She settled, blinked rapidly a dozen and a half times and then showed him a demure smile. "Well, Harry!" her voice seemed to have risen by a degree or two. "You look all disheveled. What do they do to you at that factory? Let me get you a drink and you can tell me all about your day."

She wanted to hear it, too. Every gruesome detail. The telling of it allowed him the time to catch his breath, though. Stop squinching up with remembered terror, put himself back together. Stop imagining life behind bars and start thinking about life with the unpredictable robot that had replaced his wife. He'd adapt, wouldn't he? Like someone had pressed a button. He'd figure out how to react to each version of her. Learn the triggers and cues, work on just the right reactions, arrange himself around Mary-Ann in the way he'd always done. Marriage was a damned trial of its own.

Lying in bed that night, pleasantly unmolested, Harry listened to the all but nonexistent breath of the woman next to him. Mary-Ann had always been a quiet breather. That's how she snuck up on him, he supposed. He'd marveled at how quiet she could be with her mouth closed and how loud she became once her lips started flapping. Though, come to think of it, he hadn't heard her just talk for a while, now. Not until she'd... gone.

A twist of melancholy unfurled inside of him as he thought back to the Mary-Ann he'd courted and wed. Was she still inside the woman next to him? The robot with adjustable boobs and moods? Had she ever been? Or had she slipped away some years before, without his notice, replaced by the new lines marking her face?

He'd ask her in the morning. Nothing in the instruction manual cautioned him against just talking with his New Wife™. He'd try that.

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