

From *Housewife* (1974)

Chapter 6, 'Four housewives'

Sally Jordan Sally Jordan lives in a three-bedroom council house on an estate isolated from the rest of the borough by a motorway. The area is bleak, but her house is decorated and furnished with a fastidious attention to detail. The interview took place in the 'front' room. Sally was nervous at first - she chain-smoked - but later became more forthcoming. She is small and dark and sprightly, and looks a great deal older than her years.

'I'm twenty-seven - nearly twenty-eight. I've got three children, one of nine, one of eight, and one of four and a half. Two boys and a girl: the youngest's a girl. They all go to school - I got the four-year-old in because at the time I worked in the school kitchens, and they let her in because I worked at the school. My husband's a dustman - a refuse collector, they call them, don't they? His working hours vary: some days seven till three, maybe other days seven till five, or it can even go on seven till seven. He always starts at seven. He works Saturday morning till one.

I've got a part-time job: I'm a shrink wrapper. If I fill in a form and have to put what I am, I put "shrink wrapper". I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's what I actually am. I would rather describe myself as a shrink wrapper than as a housewife. I pack tins in cellophane, and the cellophane shrinks - that's what shrink wrapping is. The tins go to cash-and-carrys and supermarkets. My hours are nine till one Monday to Friday; in the school holidays a friend two doors away looks after the children. I normally have time off if they're ill.

You want to know what I do every day? My husband gets up first. I get a cup of tea and toast in bed, then I get up. I get up with the aggro - the miseries, about ten to seven. I come downstairs like a mad bull and I don't stop till I leave the house at twenty-five past eight. I try to do as much as I can before I go to work. I come down, lay the table for breakfast, get dressed, and then I charge around doing what I can: the children make their own beds. I make my bed, I carpet sweep: if I'm hoovering, I leave that till I come home, I dust, draw curtains, drink tea, smoke a million fags with nerves, and then I make sure the children are all dressed and ready for school. That time goes very quick. My boys go to school on their own, the little girl goes with my friend next door. I don't take her, but I collect her.

I get to work early, so I can have coffee before I start. I get there about twenty to nine, put the kettle on, make myself a cup of coffee, and I'm supposed to start at nine, but by the time I actually get down there it's ten past. We have a tea break, it's supposed to be a quarter of an hour, but we have a half hour. We finish at one o'clock. Then I have to do all my shopping, buy the dinners, and that; Thursdays and Fridays are busy shopping days. Wednesdays I don't do any.

I come in, prepare me dinner - get the vegetables ready - and then I do washing, ironing, have a cup of tea. I do hand washing every day for about an hour; I leave the other things for a machine wash. I've got a washing machine, a twin tub, and in the winter I dry the clothes on a clothes horse, or I lug them down the launderette, and in the summer they hang on my line in the garden. Sometimes I iron of an evening: I do a big load on Saturdays, about two hours, and then maybe in hour and a half on Sundays.

After I've had a cup of tea, it's usually time to go and pick up my little girl. I come back about a quarter to four, change the little girl's school clothes, and then the boys come in at four. I lay the table. And then you hear my mouth, from then till they go to bed. I've got no patience. I used to, but I haven't now.

I cook an evening meal. My children have dinners at school, but they also have dinners of an evening: I don't do tea for them when they come in from school. We have dinner about five usually, unless I'm doing a roast, and that takes a bit longer. I put my husband's in the oven.

After that I wash up, put the dishes away, sweep the floor, wash the floor, and then where the children have been playing I come in here and tidy up. They go to bed at seven. I take them up, but the two boys have their light on for half an hour to read. The light goes off at half past seven, and then I come down, make a cup of coffee, and I sit down

This is for equality: my husband comes in, he'll have his dinner, he'll have a rest - he'll go to sleep. He'll wake up about half past seven, when I give him a cup of coffee, he'll have a bath - I haven't got an immersion heater, I have to light the boiler for his bath even in the summer - he'll get dressed, then he goes down the pub. Every night. He goes about eight and he comes back when it closes: in the week, about eleven, and at the weekend, at twelve. He's done that ever since we've been married.

Saturdays he finishes work at one. I get up, do breakfast, I get the washing machine out, and that takes me a long time because my machine is rather an awkward thing. One day it'll go, another day it won't. And then I do my place through from top to bottom - polish, Hoover everywhere. I finish about one and I do a late dinner, because although my husband finishes work at one, he doesn't come home till half past three; he goes to the pub. Me and the children have ours about two, his goes in the oven, and then it gets thrown out because he never eats on a Saturday. But I still cook from habit.

Saturday afternoon he goes asleep, and I sit there. He sleeps till about six, has his bath, gets himself dressed, and then he goes down the pub. Sundays he gets up and goes to football about half past nine, and he comes in about twenty to three. He has his dinner, goes asleep, wakes up about six, has his dinner, has a wash, gets dressed, and at eight o'clock he goes down the pub. Most Sunday nights I have a babysitter, and

I get ready and go down the pub too. I like a game of bingo - one night a week I might pop off for a game. If I win I might go a second time.

[Do you like housework?]

I don't dislike it, but I suppose it's because I'm not at it all day. I go to work, and I'm only on housework half a day. The times when I haven't worked and I've been doing housework all day I've gone mad. I make a point not to do housework all day, because I wouldn't like it. A woman's work is never done; she's on the go all the time. I mean even before you go to bed you've got something to do - emptying ashtrays, wash a few cups; you're still working. Even if you go to bed at twelve o'clock, you've still got something to do before you go up.

I don't like my place looking untidy; I don't like to see a place cluttered. There's a place for everything. When I first came out of hospital [after an operation] I was told not to do any heavy lifting, but I still had to have everything in its place. I don't know why I'm like that. Perhaps it's because my mother was like it. She's the same: if there's supposed to be cushions on the chair, they've got to be on the chair and not on the floor....

My mother's a very tidy housewife. I suppose I take after her in a lot of ways. I don't like my husband to come in and find the dinner not ready, and I don't like him to come in and find me ironing. He used to stipulate, as far as he was concerned he didn't want to see his wife washing and ironing, so I always have that done before he comes in. My mother's the same. I was never given the opportunity to help around the house when I was young. My mother would do things even when she was ill and then she'd turn around and say we did nothing for her.

[Do you find housework monotonous on the whole?]

Well, I suppose I do really, because it's the same thing every day. You can't sort of say, "I'm not going to do it," because you've got to do it. Take preparing a meal: it's got to be done, because if you didn't do it, the children wouldn't eat. I suppose you get so used to it, you do it automatically. When I'm doing housework, half the time I don't know what I'm thinking about. I'm sort of there, and I'm not there. Like when I'm doing the washing - I'm at the sink with my hands in water, and I drift off. I daydream when I'm doing anything really - I'm always going off into a trance, I don't hear people when they talk to me. I do it at work too: I stare into space, I'm working at the same time. I can't say there's something specific on my mind, because there isn't...

I'd like to get away sometimes, but you see my husband's a bit old-fashioned; he can go out, but I've got to stay in. I can go out with him, and I'm allowed to go to bingo once a week - with his sister - but if I suggested a dance or the pictures, I'm not allowed. He puts his foot down, he's rather possessive there. I think it's wrong, but my trouble is that from the time we've been married I've been a very weak person. I've let my husband rule my life, and now I'm trying to make changes, and it's too late, you

see. We argue about my working, because I work in a warehouse where all men work, and he's always telling me to pack it in, but that is one thing where I have stood my own ground and said I won't pack it in. I enjoy my job. I won't give my notice in because it's an easy-going firm, we've got no bosses over us, we're our own bosses, we work in a happy atmosphere, if you're off sick they do pay you and I like working there.

I left school at fifteen. I didn't stay on at school because I wasn't very brainy. I suppose I always had it in my mind to end up getting married and having children. My parents wanted me to be a shorthand typist. When I was at school I worked as a Saturday girl in Woolworths and I had to sign a contract to say that I'd work there fulltime, so I went there for a week to fulfil the contract when I left school. Then I went to Featherstone Brothers as a coil winder for about three months - it's an aircraft-maintenance factory - and then I went to the birthday-cards place, and I made birthday cards for about nine months. These jobs were all from fifteen to eighteen: I got married when I was eighteen. Next I did screw-plating in another factory for three months; then I went to a sweet factory and made peppermints - I ate more than I made. From there I went to Simpsons, where I stayed till I got married, and that was doing screw-plating too - wiring the screws to be dipped in metal. I started there on August the tenth, I got engaged on August the fourteenth, I got married on May the sixteenth, and I left in the June. I was having a baby...

I don't know whether it was because I used to see my friends wheeling prams, or what, but there was never any other question in my mind than getting married and having children. Even when I used to play with dolls as a child. Really, you're prepared for motherhood. I think now when I buy my little girls' toys ... she's got a cot, and dolls, and she's got a pram, and you buy the ironing board and iron and a little washing machine - and it's all miniatures of what you have in real life later on. It's like being prepared for the future. I don't think that's right. It was only the other day I thought it's like playing house all over again, but for real. And I think I'd rather buy her trains and motor cars - you know, something constructive for her to play with - instead of preparing her. I can't really explain how I feel about this. But I think right from birth you're like a robot, you're programmed: it's as if you're born, you get the toys - the prams and everything - and then later on you get the real things. It's all planned for you. It's not the same for boys - even when they're younger they're allowed much more freedom...

Sometimes when I'm sitting and thinking, and I think I'm preparing her for what I'm going through now, I don't want her to have the life I've had, even up till now; I'd rather her be more independent than me.'