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CLUTTERBUSTING

with Karen Tatman

DON'T you just love eggs for dinner? **As I write, my beloved is overseas (but will be back by the time this is published so sorry, no family secrets!) and my desire to produce tasty, nutritious and well balanced meals has gone to hell in a handbag. We actually had Weet-Bix the other night ... mmmm!**

The funny thing is, all my married girlfriends totally get it. My Mother, of course is another story - and for the record, I'm pleased to report that no, we haven't developed scurvy - yet. But there's nothing quite like the temporary absence of a bloke in the house to bring on a rousing chorus of "Yippee! It's toast for tea!" from most of the sisterhood.

You know, I have little doubt that had my life's journey taken a different path, I would have made an excellent mad biddy whose shopping list was heavy on the cat food (no, not for me, not quite that mad), good marmalade, vodka and olives - and fairly light on the porterhouse and salad greens.

I actually find it amusing that so much is made of the culinary arts in women's magazines and all those lifestyle shows but when it comes down to it - if we're cooking for ourselves and youngish kids, we're pretty happy (or in some cases deliriously so) with eggs on toast and, I don't know, maybe a Fruche for dessert?

I've no doubt there are women in the world who would still go to a whole lot of fuss and bother on a desert island. But I'm not one of them. I suspect Cup-A-Soup was invented with me in mind ... but I digress.

Interestingly, over the past week, it's not just dinner that's changed. The whole evening ritual has taken on a distinctly different rhythm. I find I'm naturally reverting to the schedules that worked so well when the children were very young. Early baths, early bedtimes and pretty much everything done (including the uniforms and tomorrow's lunches) by about 8pm. I'm blown if I know why it usually takes so much longer.

It really is a most peculiar phenomenon because, when you look at it logically, there's actually far more to do (okay, less dishes, but more other stuff). But I seem to have slipped into a highly organised groove, which as my mother will attest, is nothing short of a miracle.

Then, as if by magic, I have two or three hours to myself before bedtime. It's a bit like that very first weekend you get away as a couple without the kids.

Remember that? So many possibilities, you don't know where to start - apart from maybe catching up on some sleep! Except now it's just me.

But I'm pleased to report that I've made excellent use of my time. I've idled, I've puttered, I've daydreamed, I've had very long (although not terribly deep) baths and, so far, not felt one bit guilty about any of it.

I've also spent a fair bit of time curled up on the couch with the cat and Shakin' Dog (who's excellent company providing you don't startle him) watching movies, reading actual books (as opposed to magazines) and making a decent start on sorting out a box of photos just in case I ever get the urge to do some of that scrapbooking stuff again (okay, unlikely, but you never know ... I do have all the gear).

Later, I check the e-mail for news from my beloved (and outbid notices from E-Bay ...) and send him witty little updates on how we're all faring. It's reminding me of the time in our courtship (don't you just love that word?) when, once again, he was travelling. Of course, back then (creak, creak ...) it was all snail mail. But I think it was nicer when You've Got Mail actually meant you had mail, as opposed to the Mastercard statement.

Then, when I'm ready to turn in, I do my final rounds - put extra wood on the fire, say goodnight to Shakin' Dog, tuck blankets around the children and make a last cup of tea.

Bedtime is a revelation. I sleep with the window open, the electric blanket on two, and the radio on quietly in the background. Three little preferences that I'd forgotten I had, that somehow got lost along the way. It all feels strange, but also strangely decadent. A bit like a holiday I suppose.

I then sleep like a dead woman.

I have a wise friend who has experienced family life in it's many permutations and combinations. When I told her about the past week, she was quick to point out that holidays from bustling family life were "rather nice to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there".

And it's true. I wouldn't. The bustle is what makes life interesting. And knowing that this fortnight is just that, only a fortnight, makes all the difference.

But it does go to show that you really don't need a plane ticket to go on vacation ... and, just now and then, eggs are a perfectly acceptable dinner.

