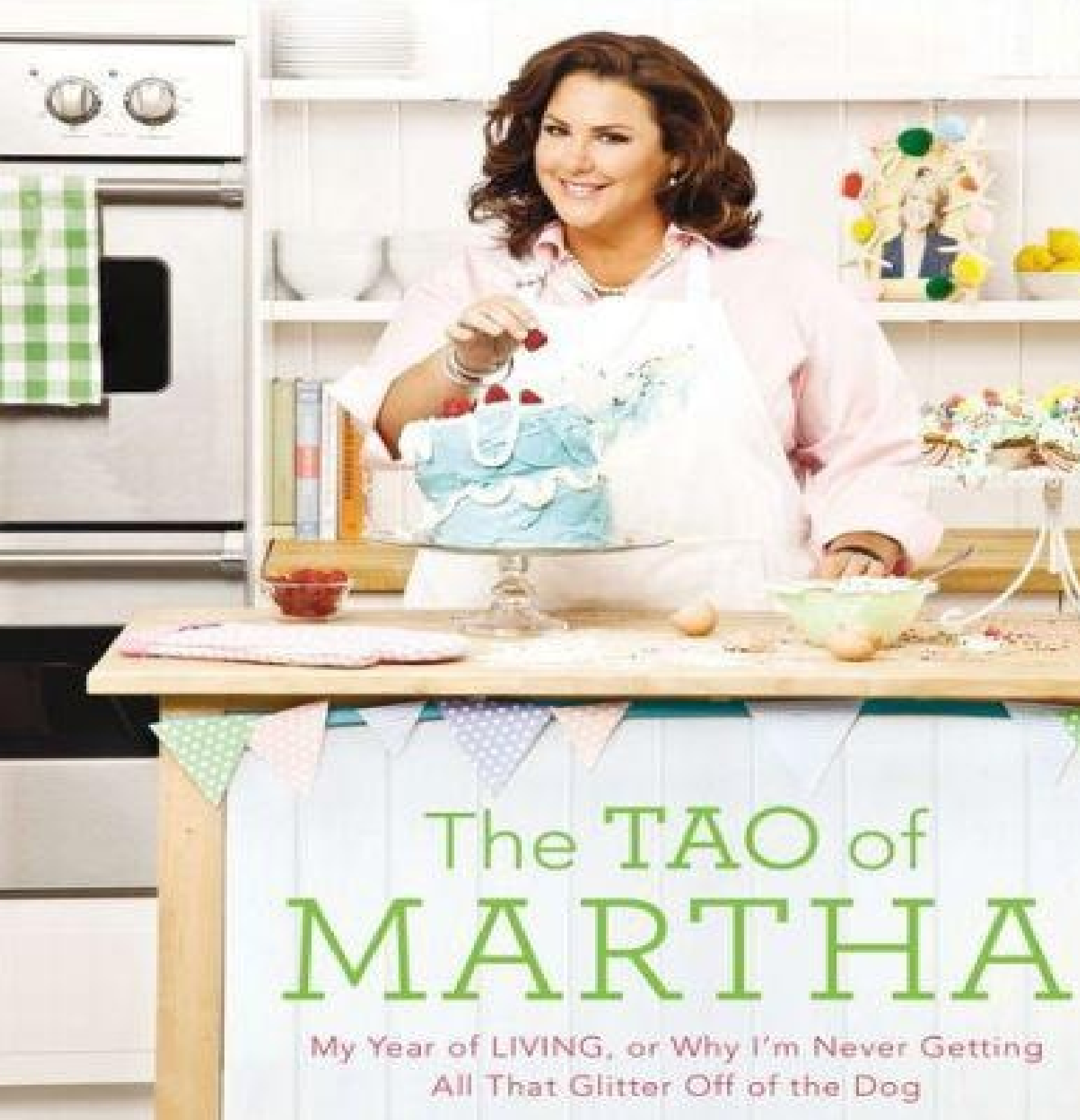


New York Times Bestselling Author

JEN LANCASTER



The TAO of MARTHA

My Year of LIVING, or Why I'm Never Getting
All That Glitter Off of the Dog

Other Titles by *New York Times* Bestselling Author

JEN LANCASTER

Bitter Is the New Black

Bright Lights, Big Ass

Such a Pretty Fat

Pretty in Plaid

My Fair Lazy

If You Were Here

Jeneration X

Here I Go Again

The TAO of
MARTHA



My Year of LIVING, or Why I'm Never
Getting All That Glitter Off of the Dog

JEN LANCASTER

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For friends, old and new,
and for the divine Miss M (she knows why)



C·O·N·T·E·N·T·S

PROLOGUE

- 1. RESOLVED**
- 2. GET IT TOGETHER ALREADY**
- 3. LET US NEVER SPEAK OF THIS AGAIN**
- 4. THE TAO OF STEAK KNIVES**
- 5. THANK YOU, EASTER BUNNY, BAWK BAWK!**
- 6. THE NEW GIRL(S)**
- 7. MY CAT FROM HELL**
- 8. MUCH ADO ABOUT DIRT**
- 9. I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN**
- 10. ZUCCHINI RICH**
- 11. I NEVER PROMISED YOU AN ORGANIC GARDEN, EITHER**
- 12. BABY, YOU'RE A FIREWORK**
- 13. PUT A BIRD ON IT**
- 14. THE AMBIEN DIARIES**
- 15. BANANA GRABBER**
- 16. MY KINGDOM FOR A CROCK-POT**
- 17. EVERY DAY IS HALLOWEEN**
- 18. TRICK OR TREAT!**
- 19. LIVING, ZOMBIE STYLE**
- 20. GOBBLE, GOBBLE**
- 21. NOT SEMIHOME MADE**
- 22. I'M AWARE NOW, DAMN IT**
- 23. AND THEN WE CAME TO THE END**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Life is too complicated not to be orderly.

—Martha Stewart, *Harper's Bazaar*



Martha, you're making us all look bad.

—Every Other Woman in America

“You think Martha Stewart shoves her clutter in a gun cabinet?”

I clamp my lips together, saying nothing in response as my husband, Fletch, points to the pile of junk we just unearthed. He’s not smug; rather he’s amused, but the difference doesn’t much matter.

Despite his having finished his army tour of duty seventeen years ago, Fletch’s bearing is still distinctly military. He’s practically standing at attention, sporting his fresh short haircut, shiny shoes, heavily starched gingham oxford, and flat-front khakis. I squirm under my meatball-stained work shirt and yoga pants, with bonus unwashed ponytail.

I’m loath to admit that he’s right—I’m sure Martha would have never stuffed her countertop untidiness into the bottom of the kitchen gun cabinet in the first place.

Martha probably doesn’t even *have* a kitchen gun cabinet.

Then again, I can’t imagine anyone who lives on the grid opting for a kitchen gun cabinet.

The only reason we currently possess this handy fridge-adjacent firearm storage is that it came with the place. The previous owner was a retired naval officer and huge military history buff, so the house once showcased many of his treasures. (We’re presently hanging our Christmas stockings on the fireplace hooks that used to hold a cavalry saber.) He erected a set of glass-front locked gun cabinets. Why he felt the breakfast nook was the best place to display his Enfield musketoons, I can’t say.

Maybe he was a Civil War reenactor?

Maybe he was paranoid?

Or maybe he simply enjoyed gazing at his artfully lit and secured vintage weapons stockade over eggs Benedict?

Personally, we moved from our sketchy Chicago neighborhood to the northern burbs specifically so we *didn’t* have to eat breakfast fully armed, but who am I to judge?

Plus, the old owner installed a new cedar shake roof and a dual-zone HVAC system, so in no way is the gun cabinet indicative of other instances of poor judgment. Rather, it’s just a tiny anomaly that gives the place a bit of character. At some point, I’m going to convert it to a china cabinet, so it’s totally fine.

Of course, I’ve been saying that for more than a year now.

I tell Fletch, “The good news is that I found my recipe.”

Seriously? I’ve been tearing the house apart for three days looking for this one cookbook that contains the best Bolognese sauce recipe on the planet. The reason I couldn’t just buy another copy or find a duplicate online is that all my notes are handwritten in the margin. Although the recipe itself is stellar, the tweaks I’ve figured out along the way are what make it legendary. (The mortadella must have pistachios, okay? *Must.*) We’re throwing a post-Christmas, pre-New Year’s dinner party on Thursday, and without this recipe, I may as well open a can of SpaghettiOs and call it done.

Fletch gingerly picks through the other items I’ve unearthed in the cabinet. He waves a handbag at me. “You felt the gun cabinet was the best place to stash this purse?”

I can’t help but admire the gorgeous pea-green leather with contrasting chocolate trim. “Show a little respect. That’s a Chloe bag. Got it for seventy-five percent off at Nordstrom. You know how hard it is to snag a deal like that? Please. You’d have an easier time finding a unicorn or a professional athlete who hasn’t banged a Kardashian. Point is, I’ve been meaning to have it reconditioned, so I brought it downstairs.”

“When? Six months ago?”

I nod and he sighs, moving on to the next item in the pile. He reads a slip of paper. “And your prescription for blood pressure medication?”

I press my hand to my heart. “Huh. That would explain my racing pulse.”

He peers down at a couple of orange packets. “What do we have here? Let’s see, not one but two overdue parking tickets. How old are these? We haven’t lived on Altgeld for three years!”

I shrug. “I was busy.”

He frowns as he examines a rather important-looking letter from our accountants. “Help me understand why you wouldn’t want to, say, store these items in the proper place. Walk me through the process where you said, ‘Yes, the gun cabinet is the perfect repository for every random bit of crap we ever pass through our kitchen.’”

In my defense, it’s not like Fletch married me for my organizational skills. Hell, when we got together in college almost two decades ago, I didn’t even have a dresser, so all my stuff lived in piles along the walls, kind of like a nest. Sure, the chaos and disorder made him twitchy, but let’s be honest, I was a lot cute (and a little easy) back then. It’s not like I roped him in by pretending to be tidy first. He knew what he was getting into the first time he ever tripped over a tower of my shoes.

What’s important to note is that over the years, I’ve upped my household game considerably. Seriously, if Martha Stewart herself were to step inside my home right now, she’d give my empty counters and the pristine baseboards two thumbs up. Maybe I haven’t quite managed to shower my floors today, but it’s because I’ve been busy cleaning. Due to my efforts, the hardwood’s shiny, the windows sparkle, and the granite glows. Plus, Martha would never find a mess in my sink, because I can’t sleep in a house where the dishes are dirty, even if it means scrubbing lipstick off of champagne glasses at three thirty a.m. while half in the bag.

Because I share my home with a number of pets who have no problem besmirching a Persian rug, I own three vacuum cleaners, not counting the Shop-Vacs, which brings the total to five, half a dozen types of mops, and a professional-grade RugDoctor to address such indiscretions.

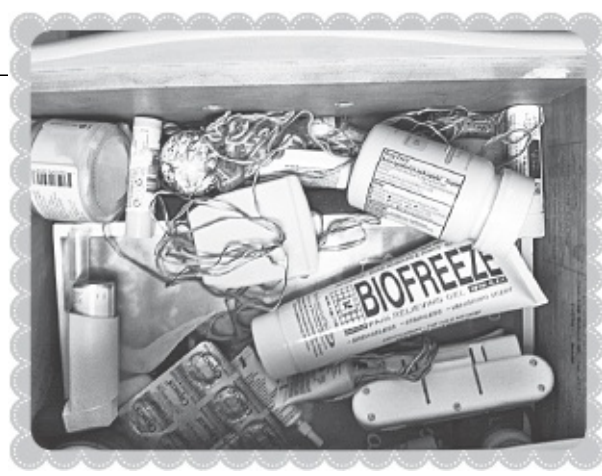
Of which there are many.

Yet my dirty little secret is that the place seems immaculate because I shove everything into cabinets, drawers, and closets to keep it looking that way. Today’s foray into gun cabinet storage?

So *not* my first rodeo.

The worst of it all is located in my nightstand, which Fletch has dubbed the Drawer of Shame. Again, because I live with fragile creatures predisposed to swallowing anything they can get their paws on, I’m insane about scuttling potentially dangerous items out of sight.

The Drawer of Shame is a big, knotty mess of choking hazards like used dental floss and old hair ties, interspersed with free-range antacids, uncapped, half-chewed lip balms, pretzel wrappers, and eight thousand tubes of whatever was the big new antioxidant eye cream six months ago. Whenever I reach for one item, the whole lot comes out, too.



The thing is, all my drawers and closets are disgraceful, much to the hyperorganized Sergea Fletcher's chagrin. Open the spice cabinet and it rains bottles of oregano, garlic powder, and artisan salts. Crack the drawer next to the kitchen desk and scores of empty plastic grocery bags will explode as though being shot from a cannon. And my closet? Let's just say it's a testament to single sneakers, solo socks, and a disproportionately high number of meatball-stained workout tops.

Yet, honestly, I'm fine with the behind-the-scenes chaos, because I've been busy with personal growth.

Okay, that's a lie.

I might be a *tiny* bit lazy when it comes to organizing. But when I consider the process of getting organized, I feel overwhelmed. I *know* that my desk is filled with antique Jolly Ranchers and dead batteries and ten-year-old business cards. I'm holding on to garbage, essentially. I definitely don't have the hoarder mentality, where I can't possibly live without my broken stapler or the gas bill I paid two addresses ago, though. If I could miracle that shit out of existence with one wrinkle of my *Bewitched* nose, I'd be on it in a second. I have zero emotional attachment to crap, and I'm not holding on to things simply because they give me All the Feels.

Rather, there's so much else I'd prefer do with my time, like drive to the city to have lunch with my girlfriends, or shop for antiques, or hang out in the TV room with Fletch and the dogs, who are perpetually draped across our laps. And are you aware of how many good books were published *this year alone*? Plus, I don't want TMZ to go out of business because no one's visiting poor Harvey Levin's site, and if I stopped paying attention to the Real Housewives, they might cease to exist. I can't have that on my conscience; hasn't poor Taylor Armstrong been through enough?

My point is that everything looks superneat and clean, largely because I'm always stashing whatever crap accumulates. Maybe what's beneath the surface is a wreck, but SFW? Having cluttered closets and disorganized drawers is like wearing a ratty bra under an awesome party dress—no one who hasn't pledged lifelong devotion to me in front of God and the Nevada Gaming Commission is ever going to see it, so it doesn't matter.

Suddenly I remember why I stowed all that junk in the bottom of this particular cabinet in the first place; back in August, my college's alumni magazine came here to take pictures of me because they wanted to showcase what an amazing, accomplished, savvy, and successful professional author I had become.

(Pretty sure I'm editorializing on Purdue's intent. What's more likely is they opted to feature me as the quintessential eleven-year-plan-only-to-finally-graduate-with-a-C-average student, because they thought that in addition to writing books, I might also write them a check.)

(They were not wrong.)

My point is, I wanted clear countertops in the pictures, so I shoved the pile of important items I had been housing on the kitchen desk and then promptly forgot any of it ever existed.

So, to answer Fletch's initial question, no, I'm sure Martha Stewart would *not* stuff her clutter in the gun safe. But that's not because I'm Martha-bashing.

Far from it, in fact.

I worship Martha Stewart.

I see her as our nation's overachieving older sister. Like, I might resent her a tiny bit, but most of the time I'm in awe of how she makes everything look so damn easy. Whenever something goes awry in my house, we seem to invoke her name, e.g.:

"I wonder if Martha Stewart has to chase her asshole cats off the appetizer buffet?"

"I wonder if Martha Stewart spends four hundred dollars and an entire summer fertilizing a garden only to end up with two anemic tomatoes and an unholy army of slugs?"

"I wonder if Martha Stewart rights the crooked mirror in her dining room with a wad of chewed gum?"

"I wonder if Martha Stewart's bourbon chocolate pecan pie is both so liquid and so boozy that it's technically a cocktail in and of itself?"

"I wonder if Martha Stewart's guests are greeted at the door with her sweating, crying, and shouting, 'Here's a recipe; get to work or we're never eating Thanksgiving dinner!'"

I live for Martha and her perfect little universe, but outside of cooking, I've yet to find a way to incorporate her processes into mine. I mean to, of course, but...

Fletch crosses his arms and leans back against the counter. Gently, he asks, "Can you at least agree that being organized might take less effort than being disorganized?"

To Fletch's credit, he's not one of those guys who'll bitch about his wife's wrongs and never try to right them himself. I see those asshat husbands on shows like *Dr. Phil* all the time. The guys will blather all, "My wife doesn't do X, Y, or Z." Then Dr. Phil will ask, "Do you do X, Y, or Z?" which of course he doesn't. That's when Dr. Phil will rain down his homespun hellfire, all, "So we're going to have a donkey barbecue and you're gonna furnish the ass." What's not to love?

Anyway, I figure the key to our eighteen years together is that we don't attack each other. Tease? Yes. Mock? With good-natured relish and love. (Mostly relish.) Criticize? Never. Instead of complaining, Fletch is perpetually coming up with systems to keep everything in line.

The problem is, Fletch is an odd variation of perfectionist, and he's never encountered a project that he can't overcomplicate. Early this year, I asked him to repaint a dresser. Easy-peasy. Just slap some of the extra robin's-egg-blue paint left over from the island cabinet and there we go.

Instead, Fletch reengineered the whole thing, taking the dresser apart stick by stick before beginning a two-month-long reconstruction project that rivaled the Big Dig in scope and complexity. And suddenly my little honey-do turned into his version of Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Man. (He had the technology; he could rebuild it.) He kept saying, "This will stand up to a hurricane now." Pretty much I just wanted it to stand up to the weight of a few perfume bottles, but I had mad respect for his enthusiasm.

At least, after the fact.

This is why when he organizes something, I can't keep it straight. His systems are too complex. I shouldn't require a country-of-origin spreadsheet to know the garlic is housed in the Mediterranean section of the spice rack.

"Absolutely, hundred percent agree," I tell him. "Yet it's the process of *becoming* organized that trips me up. Anyway, we can figure all that out later. Right now, we have a party to prep and I need a clean workspace."

"Got it. What can I do?" He gives me a little clap and rubs his hands together.

I point to the pile.

"Shove all that clutter back in the gun cabinet, please."

RESOLVED

Welcome to Holiday Central!

The candles are lit, the Christmas carols cranked, and the buffet is laden with each of my best dishes—pasta with Bolognese sauce, of course, short-rib ragout, Italian brisket with rosemary horseradish, both Caprese and kale salads, the kind of antipasto platter that would bring Mr. Frank Sinatra himself to his knees, a traditional three-meat lasagna, and a roasted-red-pepper version, because my friend Julia “doesn’t like cow.”

The desserts I’m serving require their own separate table, stacked high with apple pies from the Elegant Farmer and Blue Owl (an Oprah’s “favorite thing”), Kahlúa cake, and ten varieties of homemade Christmas cookies.

The wine’s flowing, the guests are mingling, and all the dogs are dancing around in their festive jingle-bell collars wearing perma-grins because ain’t no table scrap like a party table scrap ’cause party table scrap don’t stop.

(Ten points for you if you caught *The Office* reference.)

The house itself couldn’t be more festive. Each mantel is decked with piles of greenery and lights and the tree is so big and lush, it takes up a quarter of the living room. Outside is a veritable winter wonderland, with enough LED strings to almost, but not quite, cross the border into *Christmas Vacation* territory. I’m overcome by the miasma of Fraser fir, San Marzano tomatoes, and the spicy cinnamon tang of the rose hips in all the potpourri bowls.

In the dining room, a couple of guests are laughing so hard that the walls practically shake.

This is the perfect holiday dinner party.

And yet all I can think is, *GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT OF MY HOUSE.*

Let’s take a step back—we have wonderful friends and we love entertaining. We bought this house (gun cabinet notwithstanding) because we knew it would be the ideal place for gatherings both great and small. When we left the city, we moved away from ninety-five percent of our social circle, so every time our peeps actually RSVP yes, we’re thrilled to have the opportunity to host them. Plus tonight’s extraspecial, because our buddies Beef-free Julia and Finch are up from Atlanta.

The problem definitely isn’t the guest list.

The problem is that my ambitions are greater than my abilities, so in order to get this shindig together, I put in three eighteen-hour days in a row and now I’m freaking exhausted. As I watch dirty plates stack up and wineglasses multiply, I just feel weary. I don’t have the energy for this, and that’s so not like me.

You see, this has been a rough year. Not in a huge, job-loss, death-in-the-family kind of way. More like in a poor-little-you, *Eat, Pray, Love* fashion, except with a solid marriage and no road trips.

Starting in January, things systematically began to go wrong in a plethora of small, exasperating instances. Death by a thousand cuts.

I experienced professional setbacks and the consequences of business missteps, then a series of minor yet incredibly stupid and slightly debilitating health-related issues. (Did you know your ears are

full of tiny crystals and when they slide out of place, they will *mess you up*? Believe it.)

~~Over the course of this frustrating year, checks didn't arrive when they were supposed to, deals fell through, and this summer we lost power practically every other week, which was an added stress when I was attempting to meet a book deadline. Seemed like anytime something had the potential to go wrong, Mr. Murphy showed up. He and his damn law can kiss the fattest part of my ass right about now.~~

In February and March, we had to put down our two oldest cats, and then we lost Gus, Chue Norris, and Odin to an escape attempt. We eventually rounded up all our stray felines, thank goodness, but it was a rough few days. Gus has especially been a jerk ever since we finally captured him again and brought him back inside, registering his displeasure on the curtains in the family room. He's a "How ya gonna keep me down on the farm after I've seen Paree?" (Sorry, pal. Ranking mammas making the decisions here.)

I know, *I know*...why don't I run around Italy eating all the pizzas and gelato and then the world can feel extrasorry for me when I give myself a tummyache before I go live on the beach? (Perspective...perhaps I should get me some.)

Make no mistake: This is first-world bullshit right here. We've been through far worse, and we've weathered those events with more grace and dignity. Possibly some swearing, but with much more aplomb.

Back when times were darkest, after we'd both lost our jobs and Fletch was racked with depression, I managed to find little ways to be happy. I had to, for my own sanity. Maybe we'd go for a walk, just for fresh air as for a respite from the constant call of bill collectors. Yet while we'd stroll our slumtastic neighborhood and fret about our future, I'd still stop to smell all the just-bloomed lilacs and be instantly cheered. Now I live securely in a lovely community, but instead of rejoicing in my own lilac bushes, I'll grouse about the encroaching buckthorn. That's all wrong.

So many people, including friends, are currently dealing with *real* issues—illness and job loss and problems with their children. I watch the news and my heart aches for those who are truly suffering. I haven't earned the right to throw myself a pity party, and I need to buck the hell up.

What really aggravates me is that Fletch and I have worked so hard over the past ten years and made so many sacrifices to get to this point in our lives. I'm furious with myself for allowing ridiculous little things to have an impact on my happiness.

Is it really a big deal that the customer service agent was rude to me?

Is the world going to end over a minor disappointment?

And why on earth do I give a shit about what some stranger says about me on Facebook?

Didn't I used to have a thicker skin?

Years ago, when some guy called me a fat bitch on the bus, I laughed in his face and then turned that experience into the *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Such a Pretty Fat*. What happened to me? When did I become such a delicate flower? I should, in the words of Clark W. Griswold, be whistling "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" out of my bunghole every day, but I'm not, because I've allowed little things to throw me offtrack.

Is it because I'm just so stressed over my beautiful pit bull Maisy? After meeting Fletch, this little girl is the best thing that ever happened to me. We adopted her back when I'd lost my corporate job in 2001, and her presence in my life changed everything. I fell so deeply in love with her that I became a writer in order to have the excuse to stay home with her every day. Maisy's in no way perfect herself—she's bossy, she's officious, she's spoiled, she's lazy, she defies authority, and she pouts when she doesn't get exactly what she wants when she wants it.

Pretty much she's *me*.

A couple years ago, she was diagnosed with mast cell tumors, and the oncologist gave her s

months to live. Of course, Maisy's ridiculously stubborn, and you can't tell her a damn thing she doesn't want to hear (again, *hello*); ergo she's defied every odd thus far. Her doctor uses her as the best-case scenario to comfort other families with sick dogs. Yet I can't ignore that she's not strong like she was before she got sick. She had her second surgery earlier this month—this time for melanoma—and was so weak afterward that her doctor said we should hold off on new rounds of chemotherapy.

Yet the good news is, the mast cell tumors haven't returned. And since we adopted our other pit bull Libby last year, Maisy's spirits have never been higher.



Maisy adores having a mini-me and lives for an audience. She leaps out of bed every morning to roll around and scratch her back, thrilled at the prospect of a new day. And the fact that the biggest downside is that she can't yank so hard on the leash isn't the worst thing in the world. Back in the day she could pull me over in three seconds flat. My unskinned knees don't miss that.

Yet despite all her positive progress, every time she coughs or sneezes or lingers in bed, I envision the worst-case scenario. I run to the emergency vet like people run to the store.

Because of all of the above, I just want this year to be behind us, and I figured the easiest way to do that would be to ignore the holidays. Back when we were broke, we routinely skipped Christmas, so it's not like we'd be blazing new territory here.



Fletch was on board with me...until a couple of weeks ago, when he realized he wasn't. He decided instead of skipping Christmas, we were going to flip all of 2011 the bird by ending the year in style. And that's what we've done. Now the lights are up, the presents have been exchanged, and the house

full of food, friends, and fun. It's a hundred percent festive up in here.

I should be on my knees, thanking God for all His blessings.

Yet all I can focus on is how I'm going to be stuck doing dishes until three thirty a.m.

For everyone's sake, I need to improve my attitude in 2012.



“I miss them.”
“Me, too.”

Fletch and I are sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee, eating doughnuts, and bemoaning the departure of Julia and Finch. They had to take off at the crack of dawn to get down to Julia's parent house in St. Louis.

When they arrived earlier this week, my mood was so foul that I almost ruined my own party. But it's patently impossible to not be happy in their presence. Our fine moods last well into the evening and we're both extrachipper while watching New Year's Eve programming.

No, we didn't go out.

A word about New Year's Eve?

I would rather receive a Pap smear from Captain Hook than venture out on New Year's Eve.

I'd rather time-travel back to junior high and give a speech clad in nothing but a fez in front of the mean girls who used to hassle me on the bus.

(Quick aside? My chief tormentor now gives pedicures in a salon next to the county jail in my old hometown. Sometimes karma looks a lot like OPI's Lincoln Park after Dark.)

There's something that feels so incredibly lonely and self-defeating about all the forced gaiety on New Year's Eve, like if I'm not out there having the very best time, swilling the most champagne, tooting the loudest noisemaker, wearing the most-spangle-laden dress, then I'm somehow failing. It's not that I hate parties and frivolity—eleven years of college is proof positive of that—but I'm enough of a contrarian to balk at the notion of Mandatory Fun. I don't begrudge anyone else the merrymaking, but it's not my bag, baby, at least not on December 31. Let's see: all the amateurs who throw down only once a year, those same amateurs hitting the roads later, and hyperinflated prices for shitty service and watery drinks? Or couch time and Carson Daly?

I choose Carson. All the way.

We watch as Carson interviews people in Times Square about their resolutions. “What do you resolve for 2012?” Fletch asks. He's smirking, because he knows the only thing I loathe as much as NYE is being questioned about my resolutions, particularly by people I don't know. What do you resolve? To find a Starbucks where the baristas are less chatty.

I yell at the screen, “How about this for a resolution, Carson? I resolve to not disclose personal information about my hopes, dreams, and inadequacies on national television.”

Look at them all—they're cold and it's loud and they have to pee in Porta Pottis and weirdos are using this as an opportunity to furtively press their junk against the unsuspecting. I simply don't get it. You, right there in the giant plastic 2012 sunglasses? Some pervert just tea-bagged you and you don't even know it.

And you in the sparkly dress? You're going to wake up with a stranger tomorrow morning, having received the gift that keeps on giving. (Herpes.)

How about you there, dressed as Baby New Year? A) You're going to get frostbite, and B) there's no way your wallet's not falling out of your diaper. When you're shivering your way back to the Bronx tonight with nothing but your banner to keep you warm, you'll regret the decisions that led you there.

The square is so crowded that all these dummies can barely lift their arms every time they squeak “WOO!” at the camera.

As I mock and judge, it occurs to me that I can’t recall the last time I spontaneously lifted my arms and shouted, “WOO!”

I wonder if I’ve done it once in 2011.

Although, as much as I have to say that I hate 2011, this year wasn’t entirely worthless. In so many ways, I got my shit together. After living in a state of arrested development for most of my life, I finally buckled down, making a concerted effort to behave like an adult.

Like, I have insurance now.

So much insurance.

Everyone has auto insurance (except for anyone driving around tonight, of course), but I also invested in life insurance, homeowners insurance, a supplemental umbrella policy for which homeowners insurance doesn’t cover, flood insurance, mortgage insurance, long-term disability insurance, pet insurance....

I should be the happiest son of a bitch on the planet with all these levels of protection.

And yet here I am.

Welcome to Crankytown, population: me.

I wonder if, in trying so hard to be grown-up, I didn’t somehow overshoot my mark. By working diligently to be my most responsible me, did I quash some of my own natural propensity for joy? Is it possible that I’ve lived through years that were far worse than my current season of Sorority-Greek Problems, and that I never noticed because I was a perpetually grinning adolescent?

This bears further examination.

“It’s too bad no one sells happiness insurance,” I say.

“Hmm?” Fletch glances over at me with a puzzled expression.

“Think about it: We have every protection known to man, yet I’ve still had a miserable year. If someone sold happiness insurance, I could fill out a claim and, much like Stella, get my groove back. Otherwise, why would I have paid all those premiums to Big Insurance?”

“Wasn’t aware your groove was missing.”

Yes. This makes perfect sense.

I continue. “Here’s the thing about this year: I’ve failed at having an attitude of gratitude. I’ve not come at my life from a place of yes. I’ve not chosen *me*.”

He gives me the whale eye. “You been watching Oprah again?”

I wave him off. “No, no, she went off the air in May. I did like her, though, but I always had some trouble really connecting with her advice. She was all, ‘Live your best life!’ and ‘Chart your vision board!’ but there’s nothing actionable, you know?”

Fletch pauses Carson and his Conclave of Bad Decisions. “What is this ‘vision board’ of which you speak?”

I explain. “You’re supposed to imagine something you want—like when I wanted to be a writer. To help me visualize my dream, I was supposed to clip out images of what inspired me. Maybe I’d have pasted pictures of Jennifer Weiner and David Sedaris and swimming pools and bookstores in between pom-poms and sparkles.”

He’s dubious at best. “So it’s a craft project.”

“No. Well, okay, yes, a little bit, if you factor in the glitter and rubber cement. But I know tons of people who said doing vision boards helped them.”

“Yet even without a vision board, you became an author.”

I nod. “True dat.”

“Never say that again.” Even Maisy manages to look disgusted with me. “Let me ask you

something: How does sitting around clipping pictures from a magazine advance your goals?"

I scratch ~~Maisy's ears while I consider my answer. Apparently I have pleased her, because she curls~~ her toes and burrows in closer to me, forcing most of my right butt cheek off the couch.

Worth it.

I reply, "Can't say for sure, because I never tried to make one."

He snorts. "Yeah, you know why? Because you were busy actually *trying* to be a writer. You were writing. You were reading. You built a blog audience. You learned your way around nascent social media. You were putting in the effort and not just sticking pictures on oak tag."

"True da— *Ahem*. True enough."

Fletch slips into Professor Fletcher mode, and I suspect he's two seconds away from pulling out a whiteboard. "Okay, you want to be happy. You want 2012 to be a better year. What's your plan? What's going to change? What tangible thing can you do to alter your circumstances?"

"Whoa, slow down! I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Maybe you should."

"Oh, yeah? Your year sucked, too. Maybe *you* should think about it," I retort.

"I have and I've made a plan. Happiness guaranteed."

I can't keep the surprise out of my voice. "Really? What are *you* going to do? How are you going to manifest a better year?"

If he's got the inside track on an improved way going forward, then I'm all ears.

"I'm going to grow a beard."

"That's it? That's your home-run swing?"

"Yes. Besides, it's easier than growing a jawline. I decree 2012 to be the Year of the Beard."

I roll my eyes and click play on the DVR, getting back to Carson and the teeming, grinning masses. "Whatever."

Still, a beard's more tangible than a vision board.

So there's that.

GET IT TOGETHER ALREADY

We're but three days into the New Year/new beard and I already dislike both. Greatly. I was kind of hoping for some Carson Daly–induced epiphany on New Year's Eve, but no such luck. The ball dropped, we kissed each other (and the dogs), and that was it. The new year began inauspiciously as 2011 ended.

We're currently on our fourth visit to the Restoration Hardware outlet store in Wisconsin in pursuit of replacing the funeral drapes that used to hang in our bedroom. Before Thanksgiving, I found a great deal on some discontinued curtains and figured it was high time for a more modern update.

Not only were the old drapes fussy, but they weren't functional; they were made only to frame the window. We had decent Levolor pull-down blinds for privacy and light blocking, but Nibble-y Libby and the Boredom Chews ended what should have been a long life span. Keeping the blinds open had come to require tying a system of Gordian knots, so most often, the bedroom was dark as a tomb.



Fletch tore down the nonfunctional blinds, only to discover that the sun lights up the bedroom like the map room in the Temple of Doom every day at five forty-five a.m.

I fixed the problem by thumbtacking sheets to the window frame.

Yes, I realize that Martha would shudder at my half-assery. But it was that or rising with the roosters until we found a solution that we liked and that didn't cost as much as a used Honda.

Once we removed the old curtain hardware, I estimated that installing the new rods would take an hour, max. Which it did.

The window-covering situation became complicated only once we determined that we'd hung the rods too low and that the curtains I insisted would match the rug...didn't. This development precipitated the second trip to Wisconsin and a fair amount of cursing on both our parts. The

because we'd punched so many holes in the wall, we had to patch the paint.

~~The old owners were ridiculously organized, and when we moved in, they essentially gave us a~~ guide to living here. We received binders full of appliance manuals and warranties (what, you thought I was going to say "women"?), as well as a huge phone tree of everyone to call in any household situation, including services we'd never once considered, like exterior window cleaning.



Therefore, what happened next is not their fault.

They left us every scrap of extra material, like tile and carpet and wallpaper, all meticulously labeled and stored neatly. After the rods were finally hung and the walls patched and sanded, Fletch went downstairs to find the appropriate paint. When he came back up, he was flummoxed.

"I can only find beige paint labeled 'sitting room.' This doesn't mean bedroom, does it? Maybe this is for the TV room upstairs," he said.

We opened the paint and compared. Far as I could tell, it was an exact match.

"Seems a little darker," Fletch said.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, Fletch—who would use two almost but not quite identical shades of beige in the same house? I promise it's the same. The color will absolutely dry lighter."

Three days later, Fletch and I had to have a little discussion about promises I couldn't keep. The project continued to slide off the rails, but once we hang the last set of curtains we're buying today (because I can't count to eight, apparently), we should be finally, mercifully done.

"I bet it wouldn't take Martha Stewart two months to hang curtains in the bedroom."

Something about Fletch's invoking Martha's name causes a spark of recognition.

"Say that again," I demand.

He smooths his beard and looks apologetic. "Hey, I'm sorry. I don't mean to give you trouble in business."

But I'm not irked; rather, I'm inspired. "No, no, about Martha Stewart—say it again."

"That it wouldn't take her two months to hang curtains?"

"Exactly!"

Fletch shrugs and goes back to sorting through the bin of reject drapes while my idea takes shape.

Okay: Right now, Martha Stewart definitely wouldn't consider the way I live my life a Good Thing. Yet that doesn't stop me from adoring her and respecting her and wanting to subscribe to her newsletter, you know?

I've been obsessed with Martha since I tried her buttercream cupcake frosting recipe. "Transcendent" doesn't properly describe this concoction, and "delicious" is an insult. Her recipe creates something that feels like cashmere and tastes like it was whipped by angels and flavored by God's own vanilla beans. Seriously, it's strip-and-go-naked kind of good.

Although I wasn't a fan of the Martha back when she went to prison, she conducted herself with such grace and dignity that she eventually won me over, and that's when I started buying her magazine.

and watching her show in earnest.

~~See, instead of curling up and dying in that situation, she made the best of it.~~

She made gourmet microwave dinners.

She made friends.

She made *ponchos*, for Christ's sake.

She rose to the occasion, and I can't not get behind that.

Millions of women adore M. Diddy (what the gals in the joint called her), because she can break down even the most difficult tasks into something simple and lovely and doable. I read that she doesn't own a bathrobe, which means when she rolls out of bed, she hops straight into the shower. That boggles my mind. I live in a world where pajamas have been worn to the dinner table...on days she wasn't sick.

I realize Martha Stewart isn't everyone's icon, but she *is* mine. I love her because instead of lording her superior skills over everyone and making them feel bad about themselves, she's out there breaking it all down for even the least talented among us. Had I thought to consult her guides, the curtain project truly would have taken two hours and not two months.

This is not to discount the Magic That Is the Oprah. Millions of women are Team Oprah over Team Martha. Actually, I believe there are only two kinds of women in this world: Martha people and Oprah people. That doesn't mean one can't have an affinity for both of them, but my theory is that every chick is more firmly in one camp than the other. The typical Oprah woman is all self-actualized and best-life-y and *Eat, Pray, Love*. The Big O seems like the kind of gal who'd insist we all spend the afternoon wearing jammy pants. And how fun would that be?!

But Martha?

She's not putting up with that nonsense, and that makes me adore her all the more. She'll tell you *what* to eat, *where* to pray, and *who* to love, and I appreciate the guidance.

I mean, I *have* a best friend; I *need* a drill sergeant.

(Related note? Were Martha and Oprah to cage-fight, smart money is on M. Diddy, because you *KNOW* she's a scrapper.)

On paper, Oprah trumps Martha in terms of fortune and fame and felony convictions. But if the apocalypse my tinfoil-hat-wearing husband (bless his heart) predicts is indeed coming, I have to ask myself: Do I want to follow the lady who encourages me to make dream boards for a better tomorrow or do I want to listen to the gal who can show me how to butcher my own game hen *right now*?

I'm Team Martha, no questions asked.

After reading and loving *The Happiness Project*, I've been mulling over the idea of taking on my own project, but I don't want to be derivative. Plus, Gretchen Rubin has pursued happiness with such a systematic, analytical, scholarly approach that I could never match what she did, and then I'd be happier when I ultimately failed.

Yet if I were to, say, try to live my life like Martha for a year, I suspect I could indeed be happier. I could possibly feel more like my old self.

And maybe when something truly bad does happen, I'd be better equipped to handle it.

Although I'd never out-Martha Martha, I could definitely emulate her. I could live 2012 by adhering to her dictates from various television and radio shows, books, magazines, and Internet presences. The moniker of Omnimedia isn't an exaggeration; name me a medium and she's on it. I have so much respect for her level of saturation in our society.

I wonder exactly what would happen if I were to follow her advice from A(pple brown Betty) Z(ip-line-attached Christmas ornaments). Would my life be easier—and Fletch less twitchy—if I used her tricks to get organized?

My guess is yes.

Could my dogs be more satisfied if I fed them what she gives to her French bullies, Sharkey and Francesca, and chow chow, Genghis II?

In terms of personal relationships, might I grow closer to my girlfriends who knit and sew when they finally show some interest in their boring-ass hobbies?

Would I morph from the person who gives guests a recipe and instructs them to start cooking to the hostess who goes ballistic if someone dares wear cream to my White Party?

And would that be the worst thing in the world?

Most important, could I be happier if I were to pattern my life from her recipe?

I plan to find out.

As soon as I finish with these damn curtains.



Since I've decided to live My Year of Martha, I have to set up some parameters, like what I plan to concentrate on and how I'll measure success. My first task is to figure out what makes me happy.

So I ask Fletch.

"Can you tell when I'm happy?"

Fletch is sitting at his desk, going over bills. He swivels around in his chair all Bond-villain-style to address me. "Oh, God, yes. You're an entirely different person when you're in a good mood. You're more effusive, you're chatty, and your voice goes up. You whirl around the house like a maniac and you're just, like, delighted at everything. When you're pleased, you clap like a seal. You also spend a good deal of time congratulating yourself."

I flop onto the couch across from him. "Huh. Didn't know that. What do I do when I'm unhappy?"

He strokes his chin and looks up at the ceiling while he thinks. "Your voice is flatter and you're really quiet and withdrawn. You don't sing—badly—while you're cooking. You don't bust out your patented disco dance moves like you do when you're just overcome with joy. You're less social, and you're a lot less likely to leave the house. Also? You argue with strangers."

That doesn't sound right.

"I argue with strangers when I'm happy, too. It's kind of who I am, like with the complaining. I'm often delighted to be able to bitch about something inconsequential. Like, I *live* to grouse about our postman."

He nods. "True enough. But when you complain and you're happy, you don't take the situation personally and you're just trying to be funny. So, how about this—you ruminate more when you're not happy. You don't take a perceived slight and turn it into something positive or a call to action. You don't fixate. You stew. You have trouble moving past the most minor thing. You're a lot quicker to escalate."

Chuck Norris saunters into the room, jumping over the pile of dogs perpetually in my wake, and settles into my lap. I knead the fur at the back of his thick neck and he purrs appreciatively. "Sounds kind of awful."

"For better or for worse, you know? Last year did a number on you. But don't worry; the bear understands," he says while lovingly rubbing his chin. (I cannot be held responsible if someone shaves him in his sleep.)

As I greatly dislike the description of Unhappy Jen, I'm determined not to let 2012 get the better of me, so I need to nail down this happiness business.

Because I've been so tuned in to what made me unhappy in 2011, I'm at a definite advantage and simply need to take a look at everything that made me cranky and then do the opposite.

Chaos and disorganization made me unhappy last year. Like, I despise being late, yet I was delayed

walking out the door at least a hundred times when I couldn't find my stupid shoes. Much as I want to imagine I'm still all cute and perpetually twenty-two years old, flighty and adorably seat-of-my-pants like I was in college, I have to admit that this haphazard way of life no longer works for me. I don't have my college metabolism; nor do I have my college capacity to thrive in disorder. I need to be deep-down organized, and not just what-looks-good-on-the-surface tidy.

The idea of living a more orderly life is seriously attractive. I suspect that Julia and Finch are so happy because they're organized. They always have a plan. Julia's a pharmaceutical rep and a mom, and if she couldn't manage all those details of both jobs, she'd never have time to take care of herself. Finch is a pilot; if he weren't meticulous and systematic in his checklists, people could die. They're poster children for lives free from chaos, and I'd do well to model myself after them.

I also feel like I spent a lot of time last year being reactive, rather than proactive. Like, the first time the power went off, we were caught completely unaware. We had to run out and buy everything—ice, coolers, flashlights, etc., and I hadn't had the foresight to keep any of my electronics charged. I hated the insecure feeling of not even being able to make a call because our mobile phones were dead and our landlines required electricity to work. (In addition? Not being able to Google to settle a stupid bet on whether Paul Michael Glaser played Starsky or Hutch is torture!) (Duh, he was Starsky.) Since then, we've made sure to be prepared, and that feeling of security is a key component to happiness, at least for me.

I spent so much of 2011 trying to act like an adult, I forgot to have fun. I wasn't silly. I eschewed irreverence. I was too mature for foolishness. Like I said, I don't remember having any hands-in-the-air "WOO!" moments last year. I imagine last year would have gone differently had I simply played more.

I enjoy the process of learning, and I didn't take many opportunities to expand my horizons last year. I spent most of 2009 and part of 2010 working on *My Fair Lazy*, and in it, I tried so many new things, like going to the theater and wine tastings and cooking classes. I kept up many of the activities long after I finished writing the book. I was in perpetual motion for the longest time and loved it, but somehow I didn't keep the momentum going once we moved in 2011. Although I don't need to be in a classroom, per se, I definitely want to be a student again.

The above point dovetails into my next parameter—there's nothing I enjoy more than leisure time after having been busy. There's no greater feeling than getting to sit down and relax after having plowed through all my to-do items. I'm not sure I accomplished much in 2011; ergo, my downtime didn't feel like a reward.

Having once been broke, and having learned the importance of a cash reserve for unexpected expenses like multiple dog surgeries, I'd like to up our level of fiscal responsibility this year, too. I want to be less wasteful, more mindful. I hate being banded with late fees when I don't get around to paying something on time, even though I actually have the money in my account. That's unacceptable. Plus, I want to be thriftier so that I can afford to be more charitable, because I realize it's not all about me.

Speaking of charity, I spent a whole year volunteering, as I'd hoped to write a book about the experience. Although the memoir didn't pan out, I have such an appreciation for the value of extending myself, my time, and my effort. Being helpful makes me happy, in whatever capacity that may entail, so I definitely want to bring more of that to the party.

In terms of which of Martha's dictates I'll pursue, I need to narrow my focus on a few areas. I can't do everything she suggests, because that would be impossible. Since I've already established my desire for a less chaotic home, I'm definitely embracing the notions of organizing and cleaning, with a dash of decorating thrown in, because I swear there's nothing more soul-satisfying and therapeutic than rearranging a room.

And, of course, I want to make sure the four-legged members of this household are copacetic, and I'll also focus on ways to keep pets as happy and healthy as possible.

A few years ago, I was broiling naked pork chops within an inch of their lives and then slathering them in store-bought, MSG-laden barbecue sauce. Although my culinary skills have come a long way since then, I'd like to continue to evolve as a home chef, so cooking will definitely be a consideration.

I thrive when I'm around people I enjoy, so I'm absolutely going to concentrate on entertaining with the goal of actually spending time with my guests, rather than just functioning as a glorified caterer.

Until now, I'd forgotten that when I was unemployed, I used to make jewelry and tile mosaics. Both of those activities really took me out of my own head, so I definitely want to add crafting to the mix.

Finally, and because I love a challenge, I want to conquer an X factor, meaning a yet-unnamed category. During the course of this project, I hope to blaze my own path in some activity. I'd like to see if there's some tiny niche that Martha hasn't yet conquered, and if so, I can take that opportunity to enlighten others.

I can't say what my X factor is yet, but like Justice Potter Stewart (relation to Martha? I should find out), I'll know it when I see it.

So take note, 2012—this is how it's going to play out. I'm planning to up my game in every way possible. I'll have a clean house not only on the surface, but deep down, too. Items will no longer tumble down from the farthest recesses when I open my closets. I'll work to make my home prettier and more functional, and I'll revel in the praise when guests notice all the welcoming touches at my frequent gatherings. I'll find better ways to be prepared for whatever life presents next, and I'll cap the year off with a big, festive, handcrafted Christmas.

This is going to be great!

And maybe while I'm at this whole process, I'll discover something entirely new. Perhaps I'll figure out more about who I am, or possibly I'll have some kind of epiphany about the *Living* philosophy. What if there's some greater principle that guides the whole Martha Stewart enterprise and it's waiting for me to uncover it?

Like, a Tao of Martha, if you will.

Regardless of how it happens, ready or not, happiness, here I come.

LET US NEVER SPEAK OF THIS AGAIN

ilm.

There are rolls of film in here.

Yet I haven't owned a camera that required film since 2002, which means I've been storing rolls of film in my desk *for almost ten years*. What the hell am I going to do with film? Do anyone even develop film anymore? I may as well try to have my Betamax repaired, or attempt to get the cathode ray tubes replaced in my console television.

Shameful.

And that's only the beginning.

My inaugural Martha project is to clean out my desk drawers. I have a book due in two months, so figure the best place to start is where I work. Maybe if I can establish a better sense of order, my writing will go more gooder.

See?

See what's happening?

I'm mangling words because I'm currently sitting at a desk full of old film, among so many other patently ridiculous items, the highlights of which include:

- one flea collar, slightly used
- fourteen dead batteries, in various states of oxidation
- a banana hair clip
- nine Sharpies, five uncapped, all dry
- pistachio shells from the nuts I received in my Christmas stocking in 2008
- wineglass shards
- three empty rolls of Scotch tape
- one FURminator (for dog shedding)
- eight unmatched Barbie shoes and two Barbie hats
- the orange City of Chicago violation sticker placed on my fence when my terrible landlord didn't pay the water bill back in 2009
- 7,226 scraps of paper, each containing either random sums or single words like "Sockets!" that have long since lost any semblance of meaning
- an entire handful of petrified pieces of Bazooka gum that I should not ever attempt to put in my mouth again (note to self—call dentist re: loose filling)
- a free-range piece of Silly Putty, studded with something grainy (pistachio salt?)
- an ancient flip phone as well as a charger to the BlackBerry I haven't seen since 2006
- my wedding video as well as the VHS recording of my Supervision 101 class presentation from 1991 (I'm keeping these)
- two screwdrivers, both Phillips-head, one covered in unknown goo
- three sets of cat nail clippers

sample content of The Tao of Martha: My Year of LIVING; Or, Why I'm Never Getting All That Glitter Off of the Dog

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