The nature of her illness, which struck without warning, confined her world to the unpainted four-story building in which her only local family, an elder cousin and his wife, rented an apartment on the second floor. Liable to fall unconscious and enter, at any moment, into a shameless delirium, Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street nor board a tram without supervision. Her daily occupation consisted of sitting in the storage room on the roof of our building, a space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine, a curtained entrance, one window without a grille, and shelves made from the panels of old doors. There, cross-legged on a square of jute, she recorded inventory for the cosmetics shop that her cousin Haldar owned and managed at the mouth of our courtyard. For her services, Bibi received no income but was given meals, provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe at an inexpensive tailor. At night she slept on a folding camp cot in the cousin’s place downstairs.

In the mornings Bibi arrived in the storage room wearing cracked plastic slippers and a housecoat whose hem stopped some inches below the knee, a length we had not worn since we were fifteen. Her shins were hairless, and sprayed with a generous number of pallid freckles. She bemoaned her fate and challenged her stars as we hung our laundry or scrubbed scales from our fish. She was not pretty. Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke. “I ask you, is it fair for a girl to sit out her years, pass neglected through her prime, listing labels and prices without promise of a future?” Her voice was louder than necessary, as if she were speaking to a deaf person. “Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?”

Each day she unloaded her countless privations upon us, until it became unendurably apparent that Bibi wanted a man. She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life. Like the rest of us, she wanted to serve uppers, and scold servants, and set aside money in her almari to have her eyebrows threaded every three weeks at the Chinese beauty parlor. She pestered us for details of our own weddings: the jewels, the invitations, the scent of tuberoses strung over the nuptial bed. When, at her insistence, we showed her our photo albums embossed with the designs of butterflies, she pored over the snapshots that chronicled the ceremony: butter poured in fires, garlands exchanged, vermilion-painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins. “An impressive number of guests,” she would observe, stroking with her finger the misplaced faces that had surrounded us. “When it happens to me, you will all be present.”
Anticipation began to plague her with such ferocity that the thought of a husband, on which all her hopes were pinned, threatened at times to send her into another attack. Amid tins of talc and boxes of bobby pins she would curl up on the floor of the storage room, speaking in non sequiturs. “I will never dip my feet in milk,” she whimpered. “My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card.”

Her soliloquies mawkish, her sentiments maudlin, malaise dripped like a fever from her pores. In her most embittered moments we wrapped her in shawls, washed her face from the cistern tap, and brought her glasses of yogurt and rosewater. In moments when she was less disconsolate, we encouraged her to accompany us to the tailor and replenish her blouses and petticoats, in part to provide her with a change of scenery, and in part because we thought it might increase whatever matrimonial prospects she had. “No man wants a woman who dresses like a dishwasher,” we told her. “Do you want all that fabric of yours to go to the moths?” She sulked, pouted, protested, and sighed. “Where do I go, who would I dress for?” she demanded. “Who takes me to the cinema, the zoo-garden, buys me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns of mine? I will never be cured, never married.”

But then a new treatment was prescribed for Bibi, the most outrageous of them all. One evening on her way to dinner, she collapsed on the third-floor landing, pounding her fists, kicking her feet, sweating buckets, lost to this world. Her moans echoed through the stairwell, and we rushed out of our apartments to calm her at once, bearing palm fans and sugar cubes, and tumblers of refrigerated water to pour on her head. Our children clung to the banisters and witnessed her paroxysm; our servants were sent to summon her cousin. It was ten minutes before Haldar emerged from his shop, impassive apart from the red in his face. He told us to stop fussing, and then with no efforts to repress his disdain he packed her into a rickshaw bound for the polyclinic. It was there, after performing a series of blood tests, that the doctor in charge of Bibi’s case, exasperated, concluded that a marriage would cure her.
News spread between our window bars, across our clotheslines, and over the pigeon droppings that plastered the parapets of our rooftops. By the next morning, three separate palmists had examined Bibi’s hand and confirmed that there was, no doubt, evidence of an imminent union etched into her skin. Unsavory sorts murmured indecencies at cutlet stands; grandmothers consulted almanacs to determine a propitious hour for the betrothal. For days afterward, as we walked our children to school, picked up our cleaning, stood in lines at the ration shop, we whispered. Apparently some activity was what the poor girl needed all along. For the first time we imagined the contours below her housecoat, and attempted to appraise the pleasures she could offer a man. For the first time we noted the clarity of her complexion, the length and languor of her eyelashes, the undeniably elegant armature of her hands. “They say it’s the only hope. A case of overexcitement. They say” — and here we paused, blushing — “relations will calm her blood.”

I have dwelt so much on the difficulties which at present obstruct any real knowledge by men of the true nature of women, because in this as in so many other things "opinio copiæ inter maximas causas inopiaæ est;" and there is little chance of reasonable thinking on the matter, while people flatter themselves that they perfectly understand a subject of which most men know absolutely nothing, and of which it is at present impossible that any man, or all men taken together, should have knowledge which can qualify them to lay down the law to women as to what is, or is not, their vocation. Happily, no such knowledge is necessary for any practical purpose connected with the position of women in relation to society and life. For, according to all the principles involved in modern society, the question rests with women themselves—to be decided by their own experience, and by the use of their own faculties. There are no means of finding what either one person or many can do, but by trying—and no means by which any one else can discover for them what it is for their happiness to do or leave undone.

One thing we may be certain of—that what is contrary to women's nature to do, they never will be made to do by simply giving their nature free play. The anxiety of mankind to interfere in behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing. What they can do, but not so well as the men who are their competitors, competition suffices to exclude them from; since nobody asks for protective duties and bounties in favour of women; it is only asked that the present bounties and protective duties in favour of men should be recalled. If women have a greater natural inclination for some things than for others, there is no need of laws or social inculcation to make the majority of them do the former in preference to the latter. Whatever women's services are most wanted for, the free play of competition will hold out the strongest inducements to them to undertake. And, as the words imply, they are most wanted for the things for which they are most fit; by the apportionment of which to them, the collective faculties of the two sexes can be applied on the whole with the greatest sum of valuable result.

The general opinion of men is supposed to be, that the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother. I say, is supposed to be, because, judging from acts—from the whole of the present constitution of society—one might infer that their opinion was the direct contrary. They might be supposed to think that the alleged natural vocation of women was of all things the most repugnant to their nature; insomuch that if they are free to do anything else—if any other means of living, or occupation of their time and faculties, is open, which has any chance of appearing desirable to them—there will not be enough of them who will be willing to accept the condition said to be natural to them. If this is the real opinion of men in general, it would be well that it should be spoken out. I should like to hear somebody openly enunciating the doctrine (it is already implied in much that is written on the subject)—"It is necessary to society that women should marry and produce children. They will not do so unless they are compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them." The merits of the case would then be clearly defined. It would be exactly that of the slaveholders of South Carolina and Louisiana. "It is necessary that cotton and
sugar should be grown. White men cannot produce them. Negroes will not, for any
wages which we choose to give. *Ergo* they must be compelled.” An illustration still
closer to the point is that of impressment. Sailors must absolutely be had to defend
the country. It often happens that they will not voluntarily enlist. Therefore there
must be the power of forcing them. How often has this logic been used! and, but for
one flaw in it, without doubt it would have been successful up to this day. But it is
open to the retort—First pay the sailors the honest value of their labour. When you
have made it as well worth their while to serve you, as to work for other employers,
you will have no more difficulty than others have in obtaining their services. To this
there is no logical answer except “I will not:” and as people are now not only
ashamed, but are not desirous, to rob the labourer of his hire, impressment is no
longer advocated. Those who attempt to force women into marriage by closing all
other doors against them, lay themselves open to a similar retort. If they mean what
they say, their opinion must evidently be, that men do not render the married
condition so desirable to women, as to induce them to accept it for its own
recommendations. It is not a sign of one’s thinking the boon one offers very
attractive, when one allows only Hobson’s choice, “that or none.” And here, I
believe, is the clue to the feelings of those men, who have a real antipathy to the
equal freedom of women. I believe they are afraid, not lest women should be
unwilling to marry, for I do not think that any one in reality has that apprehension;
but lest they should insist that marriage should be on equal conditions; lest all
women of spirit and capacity should prefer doing almost anything else, not in their
own eyes degrading, rather than marry, when marrying is giving themselves a
master, and a master too of all their earthly possessions. And truly, if this
consequence were necessarily incident to marriage, I think that the apprehension
would be very well founded. I agree in thinking it probable that few women, capable
of anything else, would, unless under an irresistible *entrainement*, rendering them for
the time insensible to anything but itself, choose such a lot, when any other means
were open to them of filling a conventionally honourable place in life: and if men are
determined that the law of marriage shall be a law of despotism, they are quite right,
in point of mere policy, in leaving to women only Hobson’s choice. But, in that case,
all that has been done in the modern world to relax the chain on the minds of women,
has been a mistake. They never should have been allowed to receive a literary
education. Women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing
constitutions of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to
bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic
servant.

Margaret Thatcher with husband Denis, son Mark and daughter Carol,
ca 1977

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/themargaretthatcheryears/1895781/Margaret-Thatcher-The-housewife-with-power.html