

# welcome

## Bad House Days

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, Senator Hillary Clinton delivered a speech to a graduating class of Yale College. She remarked, “Hair matters . . . Your hair will send significant messages to those around you . . . what hopes and dreams you have for the world.” I’m sure she was just kidding—sort of. It turns out that, according to a study done by a psychologist at Yale, hair does matter. When you are having a Bad Hair Day (and who doesn’t?), you are having a bad self-esteem day. (This, by the way, is even more of a problem for men than it is for women; they just don’t talk about it.) The study notes that people who are unhappy about their hair tend to be unhappy about their lives; they don’t feel they are as morally good as they could be.

Let’s leave matters of hair to the hirsute; there are enough places to turn for helping a problem of such miniature proportions. I’m interested in sharing my unique psychological research into a far worse, but curiously related, matter: Bad House Days.

First of all, there is no such thing as a single Bad House Day; houses, being large and stubborn, have serial bad days. These are hard on everyone. They tend to creep up, when no one is paying attention, and settle in, until you are forced to pay attention, and then they are intractable. A feeling of gloom settles over your rooms (and yes, Bad House Days have some link to bad mood). Everything looks shabby and sad; worse, everything looks like a mistake.

What causes Bad House Days? You could say they are no one’s fault, they’re just one of those things that happen in life—but you’d be fooling yourself. Let’s face facts, such as bad styling decisions, as well as issues of character: the inability to face a mistake, and fix it. We all do it: we bring things home that should never have been there in the first place, but having done so, we keep the relationship going. What most of us do with this sort of problem is pile more problems onto it. Get in deeper. Don’t like that sofa? Re-cover it. You’ll never get over the fact that underneath that new fabric is the same old nasty pile of problematic lumps—but you don’t know that yet.

Bad House Days are often caused by underlying conditions, like humidity. The damp. The cold that settles into the walls and cannot be chased out. Leaks, whose source no one—not the roofer, not the plumber, not the feng shui expert, and most certainly not your psychiatrist—can trace. Water is snaking its way in, through

a brick, a shingle, a hidden crack or a crevice; leeching into the walls; bubbling up under the paint. This is the sort of condition about which nothing can be done, so it is best ignored, until—wham! You are hit with Bad House Days. You will worry that you are a procrastinator—and you are. You will wander from room to room muttering, “I am a bad homeowner. My house is a reflection of the way my life is going. This is what happens when you put difficult things off. I don’t deserve to have a good house. I deserve to suffer. I am not paying enough attention . . . I am not paying enough . . . Enough! I’ve had it.”

Bad House Days can leave you in a rage. When your house lets you down, it is a profound betrayal. There is nothing worse than something going wrong with your house; you can’t really break up unless you have somewhere else to go. If you do, you still bear complete responsibility for making sure your house comes through the breakup okay. The house has to be delivered into someone else’s grateful hands so that you can walk away from it. (Imagine if we had to do that with husbands. “I’m leaving you, honey. But don’t worry. I’ll be right here until some other person comes along and believes that you are warm, generous, strong, straightforward, supportive, and everlasting.”) The beauty of real estate is that at least you get money for having problems taken off your hands. But all you really do is end up with another house, and, ultimately, all houses lead down the same path, straight to trouble.

You can try blowing things out: lose the furniture, lose the bibelots, lose *all* the stuff. You can try the blond thing: you know, go for that light, airy, color of no color look that is so modern. Or at least a few highlights? You can try reshaping, cutting things off. Put on a new roof; an addition to the kitchen might do the trick! And then enjoy the serenity of thinking you have made the right choices. Enjoy the feeling of showing the world that your house says that you are a capable, pulled together, confident, smart person of good taste and breeding.

Enjoy it, because it won’t last. Who are you kidding? You know that sometime soon you are going to wake from your dreams, and look around, and feel that cold, damp weight around your head, and you’ll be in for another round of Bad House Days.



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