

'Moving, wry and powerful...I loved it.' **Suzanne Leal**

'Heartbreaking and hilarious.' **Kathryn Heyman**



Mark Lamprell

The
Secret
Wife



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CHARLIE AND EDITH moved into their new house on the same day that Yuri Gagarin became the first human to orbit the Earth. Edith had been tracking the Russian's journey into outer space on the radio and in the newspapers, enthralled. Most days she could barely muster the courage to leave her own home. 'How brave is this man, that he is prepared to leave the planet?' she marvelled. Who knew what would happen up there? The poor fellow might suffocate, or explode, or be crushed by hitherto undiscovered cosmic forces. Edith hoped he had lived a rich and full life up till now. She wondered whether he had a wife and children, and how much he would be missed.

Normally Edith would have spent an hour or two at the library researching Yuri's personal circumstances, but the previous month had been almost entirely occupied by the daunting business of curtains, carpets and colour swatches for the new house. She was delighted to be vacating their old liver-brick place near the

city. Edith had never trusted it: she imagined the house as a glowering widow, squatting malevolently on its sandstone foundations, jealous of everybody else's happiness, especially hers. She knew, of course, that houses were inanimate objects, unable to plot against their occupants, but she was convinced that if the dark bungalow could conspire against her it would.

It was a great relief, therefore, to be moving to a lovely new timber home surrounded by other new timber homes in a brand-new suburban subdivision, a venture she had intentionally planned to coincide with the auspicious occasion that one man, on behalf of all mankind, rocketed into space. She and Yuri were launching into new frontiers. Edith knew it was a stretch to compare her enterprise to the cosmonaut's. She would certainly never tell anyone else she was doing so, not even Charlie. But that was not the point.

The point was that when she was just nine, her thirteen-year-old sister died on the same day that Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. After her sister Margaret's death, Edith began to notice significant personal milestones synchronising with major world events. She took the sacrament of confirmation on the day that King Edward abdicated to marry an American divorcee. Her father died the next year on the same day that the airship *Hindenburg* exploded into flames. Three years later her mother sold the hotel where Edith had grown up on the day that Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Edith fixed upon the idea that she was shadowboxing with history.

On the rare occasion that the great events of her life fell out of step with those of the world, Edith grew anxious. She worried

herself sick when absolutely nothing happened on the day she gave birth to her first daughter, Margaret, and it came as a strange relief to learn that as she was giving birth to Susan, her second and youngest surviving child, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated and Orville Wright died.

Edith leaned forward in the passenger seat and scanned the heavens. Yuri was only going to be whizzing around the Earth for something like a hundred minutes. It was slightly unfortunate that he was on the *wrong side*—she would have preferred to be captivated by one of President Kennedy’s astronauts—but she had decided that the epic quality of the endeavour rendered political ideology irrelevant.

Certainly the cosmonaut was a Communist and, worse, probably godless, but these things were consequences of his birth and she couldn’t hold them against him. Indeed, he had been in her prayers all week as she petitioned for his safe passage and (in the awful event of his demise) forgiveness for his sins and immediate admission into heaven.

Charlie glanced across from the driver’s seat. ‘What’s up in Edithland?’

Edith turned to her husband and experienced, as always, a moment of immense satisfaction. She liked to look at him. His lovely round head with its small symmetrical face framed by two enormous dimples, giant parentheses that descended from the laugh lines around his eyes and blossomed into valleys on either cheek. It was his eyes, however, that broadcast his story most compellingly; non-identical green kaleidoscopes, smiling even when the rest of him was not. Charlie never took anything too seriously, the perfect antidote to all her doom and gloom. He

knew how to skate across the top of life, rescuing her from the depths almost daily.

‘Nothing,’ Edith replied, ‘I’m not thinking anything.’

Charlie flipped the indicator and turned off the highway onto an arterial road still under construction. Left and left again and there it was: straight as a ruler, kerbed and guttered in gleaming concrete, two hundred yards of bright black bitumen climbing a gentle incline that perfectly divided twenty new timber homes: ten on one side, ten on the other, each on its own quarter-acre block. Built by the same developer and painted in a range of pastels—pink, lemon, grey, baby blue, mint—every house was slightly different but offered the same amenities: three bedrooms, L-shaped lounge-dining, kitchen, separate laundry, one bathroom, two toilets and a single garage. Each block was exactly sixty feet wide and each dwelling was situated exactly twenty-five feet from the front boundary, with rear yards fenced in six-foot hardwood planks.

As they drove up the street, Edith could see that most people had already taken up residence, with bed sheets temporarily hung over their large picture windows for privacy. Her stomach contracted at the thought of having to meet them all. She was terrible with new people. Terrible with them, terrified of them.

But of course Charlie would be there, charming everyone with his ease and good humour. All she had to do was hand out the cheese and Jatz.

The car swung into the driveway of their triple-fronted bungalow. It was painted in a shade not quite the same as Edith had imagined, but never mind. She had chosen the colour from a tiny square on a chart, a lovely dusty grey similar to the enamel on Charlie’s Ford. Never confident with decorating decisions, she

had asked the painter to start on the side of the house so she could check it. Unfortunately, on the morning he commenced, Edith's train from the city was delayed by track work and by the time she trudged the mile and a half from the station, most of the house was already painted a rather strident battleship grey.

When the painter, a courtly gentleman with an Eastern European accent, asked if she was happy, Edith smiled brightly and nodded. Technically this was a lie, but she could never in a million years tell him she was unhappy with the colour and ask him to start again. Edith might perhaps have mustered the courage to express her disappointment with another painter but Mr Steiner had six blue ink numbers tattooed on the inside of his left forearm. Edith knew that this meant he had been incarcerated in the war and had suffered more misery than she could begin to imagine. Expressing dissatisfaction about something as trivial as her colour choice was simply out of the question.

Perhaps the colour will fade, Edith thought with uncharacteristic optimism. She and Charlie stood at the front gate, inspecting their new home as if it were a photograph in a magazine.

'Happy?' asked Charlie, lighting a cigarette.

'I think it will be good once the garden gets going,' she said, neatly sidestepping the paint mishap. Not that Charlie would know or care what colour she had chosen. If he turned his back to the house right now and she asked what colour it was, he would just as likely answer 'blue' or 'green'.

'It's not a big deal,' he would say if she told him she wanted to kick herself every time she looked at their battleship-grey house. And there lay the gulf between them: everything was a big deal to Edith. Nothing was to Charlie. The only thing that worried

him was kindness. He was punctilious about being kind to people and Edith loved this about him. Most of the time, anyway. It was his kindness that brought him to her when her life was shattered after her sister died. He had shown up at the tradesmen's entrance of her parent's hotel and asked, out of pure kindness, if she wanted to come outside and play.

Sometimes, however, she wanted him to enjoy being unkind with her—*only sometimes*—at someone else's expense. She loved to discuss people, to pore over their behaviours and speculate on the reasons for them, but Charlie refused to engage in her vivisections. She could see that he was not blind to the peccadilloes of others and he would inevitably smile over at her when someone said something silly, but that was all: he would not come mining for interesting motives with her. In her opinion this was his especial worth and his single flaw. He was too kind.

'Roses are looking good,' he said dryly.

Edith smiled. The previous weekend they had planted roses along the front fence. Because it was autumn now her rose garden was, in truth, a row of sticks with thorns. In the middle of the brown-patched lawn a tiny pine tree offered no hint of the imposing feature it was supposed to become. Two wilting agapanthus, purloined from a friend's garden, stood sentinel either side of the front steps. Dotted randomly around the edges of the house, lovingly gathered geranium cuttings looked like dying weeds. Oh well.

They climbed the porch steps. Charlie opened the aluminium screen door and turned expectantly; Edith handed him the keys. She had purchased a brand new Saint Christopher key ring from the sacristy shop after Mass, hoping the patron saint of travellers

would bring them good luck on the journey they were starting in their new home. She also hoped Christopher might help conquer her fear of leaving the house.

Edith had begun to experience a growing unease whenever she was in public. At the shops, or church, or a school function, she often felt panic rising. The rational part of her brain understood that nothing terrible was really going to happen, but that simply didn't help. The only thing that helped was Charlie, or the girls. If they were beside her, she would be okay. Her fear had grown so intense that she had found herself fabricating excuses not to leave the house. After a great deal of prodding from Charlie, she had gone to see the family doctor.

Dr Ross said she had too much time on her hands and suggested she take up a hobby like tennis. Edith felt there might be some merit in this. She had in fact noticed that she was pleasantly distracted while dealing with the fitting and furnishing of the new house. As an afterthought, the doctor added that Edith could be experiencing early menopause. Edith fervently hoped he was wrong about that. Certainly she was thirty-eight, but she still hoped to have another child despite the five miscarriages since Susan's birth. A new baby to care for would get her over this ridiculous preoccupation with self and force her out into the world again. A tiny hand to hold; that was all she needed.

Charlie opened the front door with its lovely frosted glass window, then suddenly lunged at Edith and tried to scoop her up. She recoiled, laughing and slapped him away.

'Over the threshold you go,' he said, 'like a bride.'

'But I'm not a bride!'

He lunged again. She scuttled across the porch.

‘Stop!’ she said, ‘They’ll see.’

‘Oh no, not *them*! What will they think, Edith Devine? What on earth will they think?!’

Edith glanced up and down the street—not a soul was watching or listening—as Charlie grabbed her by the hand and tugged her inside. Pausing to close the door, she scanned the street for the big green removal truck, hoping it would appear soon. She wanted to get the girls’ room into some semblance of order before they arrived home from school.

Edith closed the door and immediately opened it again. She had brought their old rosewood radio set so she could listen to updates about Yuri but had left it in the back seat of the Ford. If her calculations were correct, the cosmonaut would be re-entering Earth’s atmosphere any time now. She hurried down to the car and wrangled the big heavy thing inside the house, then returned to the foyer to close the front door.

Something caught her eye. The ranch-style house diagonally opposite was not yet occupied but whoever was coming to live there had made a similar error to hers—the rancher was painted a vibrant buttercup yellow, out of step with the other pale pastels. Markedly different, just like Edith’s. Edith could not for the life of her fathom why she had only just noticed this. She felt such a rush of relief that she forgot all about the returning cosmonaut and hurried into the kitchen to tell Charlie.

Gagarin re-entered Earth’s atmosphere whistling the tune of the patriotic Russian song, *The Motherland Hears, the Motherland Knows*, unacknowledged by Edith and Charlie because they were standing at their picture window looking at the yellow bungalow across the road.

‘Certainly makes a statement,’ Charlie said.

‘Just like ours. Ours makes a statement too. Ours is...’ Edith paused. She didn’t want to admit to ‘strident’ so she said, ‘Darker. Ours is darker too. Much darker than all the other houses.’

‘Is it?’ said Charlie, comically tilting his head to inspect the exterior wall of their main bedroom.

‘You’re making fun of me.’

‘Am I?’ he said, grinning at her.

Edith kept her gaze fixed firmly on the yellow house. ‘I’m going to be friends with her,’ she said, as if it were a pronouncement of great import.

‘Who?’

‘Her. The lady across the road.’

Edith was as surprised to hear herself making this claim as Charlie was to be hearing it. She never professed to want more friends. She liked humanity in general, but she found people in particular a bit...well, slow. But for some reason she felt certain that the lady in the yellow house would not, *would never*, disappoint her. It was an odd thing to think, Edith conceded to herself, but it was not out of character for her to think odd things.

‘What if it’s a bachelor?’ said Charlie.

‘Who?’

‘The new neighbour.’

‘Bachelors don’t move to places like this.’

‘What if she’s a Methodist?’

‘We’ll be friends.’

‘What if she’s a Presbyterian?’

Edith swatted Charlie on the arm.

At that moment the great green removal truck groaned into

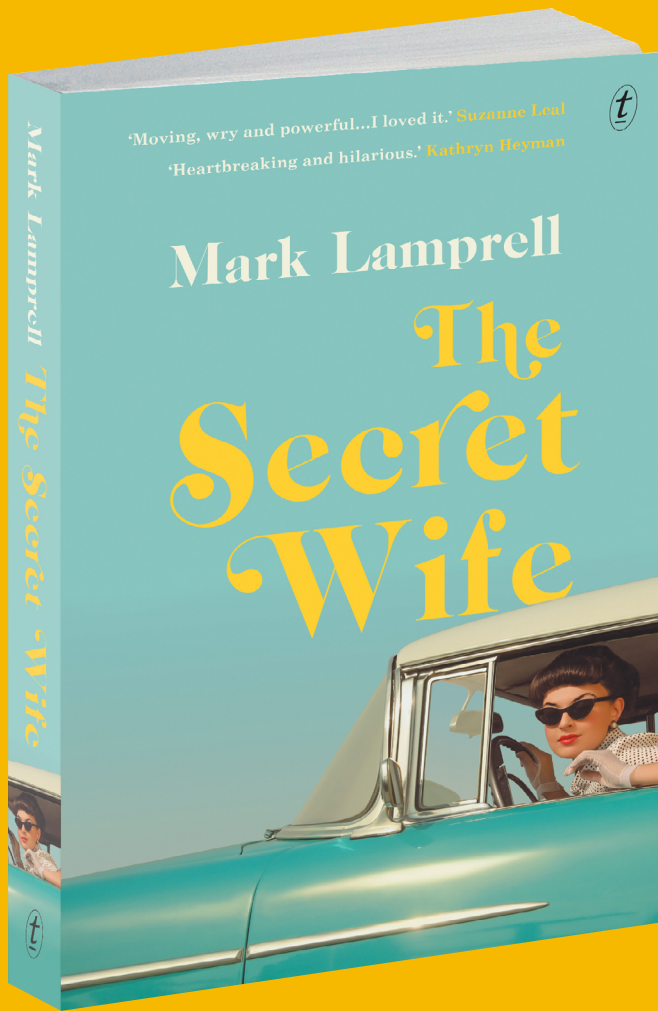
the street, crunching gears, and lumbered its way towards them.

‘It’s all on in the big tent now, Edie,’ said Charlie.

Edith rested her head on his shoulder. She knew from experience that these were precisely the moments when life was likely to pull the happiness out from underneath her. Nonetheless, she stood firm, determined to feel the full force of her joy and embrace the possibilities of this new beginning.

The old van stopped out the front and an ugly thought penetrated Edith’s idyll with a ferocious certainty: *You will not make old bones. You will die in this house.*

Edith shivered and Charlie, thinking she was cold, put his arm around her for warmth.



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