

CLEAN

By Susan Hodara

The scuffs on our white walls call out to me, first one, then another a few yards away. A splotch of dried juice on the kitchen floor, smudges on the bathroom mirror draw my eyes to them like magnets, shrieking for attention. I see them, and I see more: the frenzy of newspapers on our coffee table, the fuzzy lint accumulated along the top edges of our cabinets, the never-ending cat hair attached to all our cloth surfaces like hatch marks gone awry.

I am possessed by this disarray. It has slithered inside me and tightened my forehead, pushed down the edges of my eyes. I feel it clutching me below the ribs. My reality is wrinkles and bedlam. I am gripped by the need to clean.

Clean, as in scour, disinfect, as in behind and inside and underneath. Need, as in driven from within, beyond choice. I stack and align, sweep and wipe. I kneel with a scouring pad to rub at something imbedded in the grout between the pantry tiles. I unload the refrigerator shelves, unhook them from their brackets, bring them one by one to the sink. I push appliances away from the wall and remove dust balls that cling to their sides.

A sparkling home, however, is not my goal. I have always been tidy; I take pleasure in order and keep my house clean. I learned from my father, who lived by the credo that everything has its place. I knew early that anything left in the wrong spot would provoke his ire, and so became adept at scanning a room before I left it to ensure nothing was amiss.

I have, however, failed to impart my standards to any member of my family. In our home, lights are left on, drawers left open, and possessions left where they are deposited rather than where they were found. Neither my husband nor my two daughters are troubled by dirty dishes or counter crumbs. It is I who straightens up, because it is only I who cares.

But days like this are different. I am both oppressed and exhilarated. I dress for the job — sweat pants, a stained t-shirt, and hot pink, extra durable rubber gloves. I spray geranium-scented cleanser over every surface, wipe it

away with a sponge. I wash not only the dishes, but the dish drainer where they dry. I wash salt and pepper shakers, the telephone receiver, the small glass plate that holds the oil and vinegar cruet. I wash the prisms that catch the sunlight on the kitchen windowsill, and then I wash the windowsill, too. I open the door below the sink to toss out some garbage, and moments later I am squatting, surrounded by household cleaners and dry rags, scrubbing the floor and rearranging bottles.

I am taut, alert, a robot programmed to find and obliterate filth, to create straight lines from piles and carelessness. My senses guide me: my eyes rove, my nose catches odors, my fingers, even gloved, feel the roughness of crusty matter that doesn't belong. I have become a slave.

And I have become a master. My slavery empowers me. It is, today, my means out of the mire. In my cleaning, I control my world.

I am pleased by the results of my efforts, but this is not why I work. Unlike the demands of the aftermath of a dinner party or the departure of overnight guests, my spells are not necessarily connected to actual mess. If I think to wonder later, I might find the bridge: a squabble with my husband, an unexpectedly large bill, my aging mother's growing fatigue. But until then, I am simply overtaken by a force that pushes me. I work for relief, for release; I clean until my eyes can breathe and I can once again feel quiet in my own surroundings. Only then can I walk blithely past a used tea mug left on the table, or wipe away my husband's shaven whiskers with a sweep of the bathroom sink and go about the rest of my day.

Susan Hodara is a journalist, memoirist, editor and teacher. Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harvard Magazine*, *Communication Arts*, and others. Her memoirs are published in a variety of anthologies and literary journals. She is the co-author with three other women of a memoir, *Still Here Thinking of You*, about mothers and daughters.

© Susan Hodara 2011