



How Clean Is Your House

ERIN KNOWS ABOUT SERENITY BECAUSE SHE HAD A boyfriend for a while who was in AA. He collected mirror-bevelled stickers with classic slogans on them. They covered his fridge. *One Day at a Time. Lord, grant me the serenity.*

He'd been a binge drinker in his first year of university, and his aunt had dragged him to meetings, and later he got into yoga. Skinny guy. Big curly hair. Erin would let herself into his place and he'd be standing on his head against the wall, listening to what might actually have been sitar music. So she'd sit down in front of him and look at him, upright eyes into his upside down ones, until he was finished. And then he'd fold them both down onto the futon mattress in a corner where he slept. He'd kiss her all over, using his tongue in long trails. He smelled like patchouli and he was rigorously straight-edge, but he was sweet, and he taught her about letting go, without God. Just breathe out. Empty your mind.

They didn't exactly break up. Instead, he just picked up one day and left. Moved to a little town outside Portland, the Port-

land in Oregon, in the wet, pretty Pacific Northwest, and ran a daycare. Then he started a small grow-op. It turned into a big one. Not that he smokes it himself — he sends her pictures of the straight-edge tattoos he's acquired, that make him look like an eighteen-year-old militant Christian — but it's clean, organic farming, and he understands needing that softened world, the one without edges that most people find only by smoking up.

The House & Garden Channel does that for Erin. Takes the edges off of things. It's almost — utopian? Yes. It's utopian. This perfect world where the floors are clean all the time and people come over for dinner carrying red wine and admire your decorating skills.

Only later, she finds out, there are shows coming in from the UK about people who have house *problems*. Homemaking equivalents of intravenous drug problems. You can't tell, really, until they roll up their sleeves and show you, but then you can't believe anyone can live like that. There are multigenerational rats in the attic. Complex mold colonies in the potting shed. Their dead parents' furniture clogs up the front room.

That last one gets her: the messes. The people who lost it for a while, who were sick or taking care of someone or depressed, who stopped picking things up at all. And their houses — they actually do have houses, mostly, not just sad little poverty apartments — get worse and worse, until the public health authorities come in and give them a choice: clean up or they'll take you down to your foundation bricks. After that, the ladies come. These big, loud women who are nothing like social workers, they come in with bags of organic cleaning products, throw away ninety percent of the contents of the house, take bacterial swabs, and put people's lives back together for them, chewing them out all the while. No sympathy. Nothing like the over-

intense empathy of a social worker, the *I feel your pain* expression. Not the bitter, jaded look either. They sound like mothers — not Erin's, but other girls' mothers from when she'd been a kid, who showed up in the middle of playdates and made both Erin and her friend do chores. They had no time for your shit. Clean it up. Throw it away.

You can do it. See? Now it's nice in here.



Serenity helps, when you spend your day awash in children. Grade threes are forces of entropy, and they create mess on a scale that might daunt even the English cleaning ladies. Erin can deal with that. She's less sure how to address the deep, universal imbalance of an evangelical parent who wonders if Erin will please, *please* come with them to church for a few Sundays.

Their daughter, the father says, would be so happy if she'd come. It would mean so much to her. She looks up to Erin. She thinks Erin is *cool*. If Erin would just come to church, it would make her year. And she'll come to Jesus. Erin will. He's sure. She's pretty, is what he doesn't say. If she smiled more, combed her hair back, took the piercings out of her ear cartilage, she'd be marriage material for some nice, scrubbed real estate agent from the congregation.

Erin equivocates. She's booked for a yoga class this Sunday. The father frowns like he suspects yoga of making her heathen. More heathen. His daughter comes to school on Monday with a freshly knotted friendship bracelet just for Erin. Beads reading *WWJD* are tied into it.

Really, she's a sweet kid. She has the earnest, slightly bedraggled look of a kid who had to fight not to be homeschooled. She wants contact with the outside world. Not with other

kids, necessarily: her terror's palpable at recess, when she lurks behind storage trailers like the other little monsters might rip out her soul instead of just patches of her hair. But she likes adults. She draws flattering pictures of Erin, and makes a lot of craft projects, and her bean plant in a cup is definitely the best bean plant in a cup. She measures it so *earnestly*.

Erin isn't sure that, if she doesn't come to church, this poor little girl won't be pulled out of school and have to spend the rest of her childhood studying Christian curricula that lie to her about basic details like the age of the world and whether or not Jesus would ride a dinosaur.

So Erin goes along. Puts on a long-sleeved blouse and plain, non-jean pants and lets herself be picked up in front of the school building (*not* at home) at 9:05 on a Sunday morning. She rides in the middle seat of the minivan, with her little girl person. The whole car smells like artificial-cheese-based snacks and apple juice. The parents' attempts at conversation come to her muffled, like voices from some alternate dimension.

From *How are you this morning?* it's a short step to *Why don't you have kids of your own?* and *When will you start a family?* and *I know a nice man you should meet*. And then, at some point, they'll see the inside of her apartment and understand what she really is. It doesn't smell so bad, really. It's home. It's like being ugly on the inside; you keep smiling and no one will ever know.



They fucking love her at church. Maybe they love everybody, but Erin suspects she looks too much like fresh meat. Just hip enough to be appealing to the young people. Polite, or at least quiet. Reputed to be good with children.

Is she a Christian? She'd make a lovely Sunday school teacher.

It's a split-second decision.

Yes, Erin says, yes she is. She accepted Jesus as her personal saviour almost ten years ago, and while she hasn't been part of a regular congregation for a while, that's only because she hadn't found the *right* one. She thinks this might be it. Their sense of *fellowship* is so strong.

She's ready to bear witness.

The little girl hits her in the thighs like a charging puppy. Wraps both arms around her legs and weeps.

Erin leans down and hugs her. Hefts, then picks her up. Kid legs wrap around her waist, and there are tears in her hair. Erin says, "Hey, how about you go show me where the Sunday school rooms are, okay?"



Erin has been to church exactly three times in her life before this. She just likes watching pirated files of *Big Love* and reading online articles about particularly freaky fundamentalists. She liked *Jesus Camp*. And *Hell House*. Now it's learning material. She reads more. Picks up the language of witnessing and impressing messages on her heart.

Her television habit carries over. The clean, perfect house of television is where these people fucking *live*. Their houses look like that when they invite her over for Bible study. She's deeply worried about it, until she figures out that these people all have housewives. Women who take pregnancy and child care and homemaking very, very seriously. And lots of them *do* homeschool, so she wasn't wrong about that being a serious threat. The homeschooled kids look light-starved, like

they're not allowed out of the house by themselves. Erin finds her fingers seized as soon as she's through the door. Little people drag her away to show her their rooms, and she winds up being gone so long the Biblical students settle in without her. She stays upstairs with the kids all evening.

She's so tempted to bring along lessons on particle physics and the origins of the universe. The scientific organization of the universe. At least the poster of the sun rising over the Earth from orbit and Yuri Gagarin saying, *I don't see any God up here*.

It'd be hard to explain to the parents, though, so instead she brings high-powered binoculars. It's a trick she learned from freegans living in a squat in Toronto, that you don't actually need a telescope to take a look at the solar system. A decent pair of binoculars is stronger than Galileo's telescope, so now she's showing kids who've been told God lives on top of clouds how to track the moons of Jupiter. They're long blurs, but she's seen little fingers tracing long, elliptical paths on foggy windows, and that has to be a sign of something. The older ones, who are ten and twelve and fourteen, she talks to them about the anarchist tendencies of the Sermon on the Mount. She smuggles them books by Vonnegut. Missionary from the secular world.

She can't do this in church. But the Sunday school lessons Erin gives ask questions about what happened to Noah's daughters, and in the late winter they make stained-glass art out of tissue paper and she helps her kids inscribe passages from the Song of Solomon around the edges. We are *all* the roses of Sharon and the lilies of the valley. Little girls skipping down the linoleum hallway sing the King James Version in a New International building. They make a skipping rhyme out of it in the gym.

As is the lily in the thorns
So is my love amongst the daughters!
Lily lily lily lily
 Turn around the corner! Jump in!
Behold, thou art fair!
Thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks!
Thy hair is as a flock of goats
That appear from mount Gilead!
How many goats are there? Count!

One of the boys shyly brings her a stuffed sheep in the middle of Lent. She's not sure whether it's a pre-Easter gift or a vague proposition that he won't fully understand for another ten years.



If she'd given nail polish to the girls, everyone would have traced the mess back to her, but Erin doesn't bother. The girls have soft-pink nail polishes, or clear-coats to keep them from biting their nails.

Erin usually means to paint her nails during lunch hour, so she throws bottles of glittering OPI polish into her purse and forgets them there. Three Lise Watier eye pencils break in the tangled mess before she finally pours it out in the Sunday schoolroom to figure out what left waterproof smears all over her wallet. Bottles tumble onto the floor, mostly (miraculously, because Jesus loves those who enjoy looking like painted whores from time to time) not breaking. Kids scramble to help her pick them up.

Little boy — little? Not really little. Maybe he's eleven. Anyway, she finds him afterwards cradling bottles of Bling Dynasty (gold) and Leaf Him (green), and hiding in the church kitchen.

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They're awesome colours. He has good taste. Except, he's scrubbing himself so hard. He tried the colours on, painted individual nails, and it dried fast and hard. She can recognize Thanks So Muchness! (glitter-slut red) and Lucerne-tainly Look Marvellous (grey-green, mysteriously named) on his left hand. He didn't realize, maybe, that it wouldn't wash off. She has to take both his hands to make him stop tearing at his fingers. He's shaking. He's so scared. Though not scared enough not to stuff the bottles in his pockets for later.

She has this moment where she's not sure it's worth fifty dollars in nail polish to help one baby-queer kid play out his fantasies. Not that she remembers to actually *do* her nails, most of the time. And she has tattoos to fall back on. So she shows him those, rolling her sleeves back so he can touch the cherry tree and the climbing dragon and the pin-up girl on her right bicep.

She says, "Don't tell anybody, okay?" And she gives him a mini bottle of nail polish remover. Takes back Bling Dynasty because it's her favourite and gives him a hug.

She has to stop doing this. She should go home and watch TV and maybe convince the English ladies to come help her clean up. Her sink smells unholy. Maybe she should move. It would make her harder to find when the church comes looking.

What turns her in, though, is the Buddha on her thigh. She takes the kids swimming at the Travelodge indoor waterslides, and suddenly her tats are visible to all and sundry, and kids are such fucking tattletales. They don't really have anybody except their parents to talk to. At least public school kids can pass rumours amongst themselves.

Even then, the pastor's only concerned about the example she's setting for the children. He understands that we all strug-

gle, but if she's going to work with the children, she'll need to bring a full testimony. Explain the moment at which she decided to step back from the ways of the flesh, articulate how she came to understand the importance of the purity of her vessel. After that, she can work with the teenagers. She'd make a good youth pastor.

They want her tiny minions back. The kids ratted on her, but really, what else were they going to do? She let them trace the tribal patterns on her back with their fingers.

She can't bring herself to give the parents hell. They're nice people, most of them. Or, at least, they're not actively dangerous. She just doesn't come in, the next Sunday. Sets her junk mail filter to include church bulletins. She screens her calls and shuts down her voicemail. They really do try to get in touch.

At parent-teacher night, she slips around Marcus and Helen, and helps set up science posters that are maybe just a bit too specific about the existence of evolution. They might even assert the legitimacy of the theory. And she puts in for a transfer to the scariest high school in the district. Give her gangling anarchists, please.

She wasn't expecting the kids to take action. Her nail-polish boy needs all the self-protection he can muster. The kid with the binoculars barely talks anyway. They're all "that kid." This is why she needs to teach high school: she can't remember the tiny people's names. All she can see is the tops of their heads anyway.

That kid, the one with the *WWJD* bracelet, she's the one who names Erin as her emergency contact at the hospital. Most of the kids are in hysterics. They can't all be in on the conspiracy. They're God-fearing, Jesus-loving, commandment-reciting Sunday school children. Probably only two or three decided to pour nail polish remover into the communion

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wine. Erin hadn't even realized that the church did communion. It seems too Catholic for them. And in fact they only do celebrate communion during Lent. The kids must have had to use bottles and bottles of it. Maybe some food colouring to keep the wine from losing its colour.

Erin stands in the waiting room of Emergency, holding one crying kid and patting another, while the infant doctor explains that the parents are going to be fine in a few days. They need emergency contacts to take the kids for the time being, or else they'll have to go with Child Protection.

She can fit seven small kids into her Honda. They share seat belts.

She doesn't ask which one of them did it.

They don't say anything about the state of her apartment. Not even about the smell. Two boys carefully clean off places to sit in her living room. And she does have real food in the fridge. She makes them peanut butter crackers.

When she comes back, the kids have started cleaning. Like they really believe they're going to find the floor. They don't scold her. They do look at her, though, like they're really, deeply *disappointed* that she couldn't tell them about this. Then they file it next to the tattoos and go back to wiping the grunge with vinegar and soft rags. They sing while they work.