

[LUCIA BERLIN](#) | FROM: ENGLISH

A MANUAL FOR CLEANING WOMEN



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INTRODUCTION BY [MAYA FELDMAN](#)



Lucia Berlin passed away in 2004 without having enjoyed true recognition during her lifetime. The new collection of her stories, published in 2015, from which this story has been taken, revived the works of this marvelous writer and gave her her rightful place among Flannery

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4 2-PIEDMONT. Slow bus to Jack London Square. Maids and old ladies. I sat next to an old blind woman who was reading Braille, her finger gliding across the page, slow and quiet, line after line. It was soothing to watch, reading over her shoulder. The woman got off at 29th, where all the letters have fallen from the sign NATIONAL PRODUCTS BY THE BLIND except for BLIND.

29th is my stop too, but I have to go all the way downtown to cash Mrs. Jessel's check. If she pays me with a check one more time I'll quit. Besides she never has any change for carfare. Last week I went all the way to the bank with my own quarter and she had forgotten to sign the check.

She forgets everything, even her ailments. As I dust I collect them and put them on her desk. 10 AM. NAUSEEA (sp) on a piece of paper on the mantle. DIARREEA on the drainboard. DIZZY POOR MEMORY on the kitchen stove. Mostly she forgets if she took her phenobarbital or not, or that she has already called me twice at home to ask if she did, where her ruby ring is, etc.

She follows me from room to room, saying the same things over and over. I'm going as cuckoo as she is. I keep saying I'll quit but I feel sorry for her. I'm the only person she has to talk to. Her husband is a lawyer, plays golf and has a mistress. I don't think Mrs. Jessel knows this, or remembers. Cleaning women know everything.

Cleaning women do steal. Not the things the people we work for are so nervous about. It is the superfluity that finally gets to you. We don't want the change in the little ashtrays.

Some lady at a bridge party somewhere started the rumor that to test the honesty of a cleaning woman you leave little rosebud ashtrays around with loose change in them, here and there. My solution to this is to always add a few pennies, even a dime.

The minute I get to work I first check out where the watches are, the rings, the gold lamé evening purses. Later when they come running in all puffy and red-faced I just coolly say "Under your pillow, behind the avocado toilet." All I really steal is sleeping pills, saving up for a rainy day.

Today I stole a bottle of Spice Islands sesame seeds. Mrs. Jessel rarely cooks. When she does she makes Sesame Chicken. The recipe is pasted inside the spice cupboard. Another copy is in the stamp and string drawer and another in her address book. Whenever she orders chicken, soy sauce and sherry she orders another bottle of sesame seeds. She has fifteen bottles of sesame seeds. Fourteen now.

At the bus stop I sat on the curb. Three other maids, black in white uniforms, stood above me. They are old friends, have worked on Country Club Road for years. At first we were all mad... the bus was two minutes early and we missed it. Damn. He knows the maids are always there, that the 42-PIEDMONT only runs once an hour.

I smoked while they compared booty. Things they took... nail polish, perfume, toilet paper. Things they were given... one-earrings, 20 hangers, torn bras.

(Advice to cleaning women: Take everything that your lady gives you and say Thank You. You can leave it on the bus, in the crack.)

To get into the conversation I showed them my bottle of sesame seeds. They roared with laughter. "Oh, child! Sesame seeds?" They asked me how come I've worked for Mrs. Jessel so long. Most women can't handle her for more than three times. They asked if it is true she has one hundred and forty pairs of shoes. Yes, but the bad part is that most of them are identical.

The hour passed pleasantly. We talked about all the ladies we each work for. We laughed, not without bitterness.

I'm not easily accepted by most old-time cleaning women. Hard to get cleaning jobs too, because I'm "educated." Sure as hell can't find any other jobs right now. Learned to tell the ladies right away that my alcoholic husband just died, leaving me and the four kids. I had never worked before, raising the children and all.

43-SHATTUCK-BERKELEY. The benches that say SATURATION ADVERTISING are soaking wet every morning. I asked a man for a match and he gave me the pack. SUICIDE PREVENTION. They were the dumb kind with the striker on the back. Better safe than sorry.

Across the street the woman at SPOTLESS CLEANERS was sweeping her sidewalk. The sidewalks on either side of her fluttered with litter and leaves. It is autumn now, in Oakland.

Later that afternoon, back from cleaning at Horwitz's, the SPOTLESS sidewalk was covered with leaves and garbage again. I dropped my transfer on it. I always get a transfer. Sometimes I give them away, usually I just hold them.

Ter used to tease me about how I was always holding things all the time.

"Say, Maggie May, ain't nothing in this world you can hang on to. 'Cept me, maybe."

One night on Telegraph I woke up to feel him closing a Coor's flitop into my palm. He was smiling down at me. Terry was a young cowboy, from Nebraska. He wouldn't go to foreign movies. I just realized it's because he couldn't read fast enough.

Whenever Ter read a book, rarely—he would rip each page off and throw it away. I would come home, to where the windows were always open or broken and the whole room would be swirling with pages, like Safeway lot pigeons.

33-BERKELEY EXPRESS. The 33 got lost! The driver overshot the turn at SEARS for the freeway. Everybody was ringing the bell as, blushing, he made a left on 27th. We ended up stuck in a dead end. People came to their windows to see the bus. Four men got out to help him back out between the parked cars on the narrow street. Once on the freeway he drove about eighty. It was scary. We all talked together, pleased by the event.

Linda's today.

(Cleaning women: As a rule, never work for friends. Sooner or later they resent you because you know so much about them. Or else you'll no longer like them, because you do.)

But Linda and Bob are good, old friends. I feel their warmth even though they aren't there. Come and blueberry jelly on the sheets. Racing forms and cigarette butts in the bathroom. Notes from Bob to Linda: "Buy some smokes and take the car... dooh-dah dooh-dah." Drawings by Andrea with Love to Mom. Pizza crusts. I clean their coke mirror with Windex.

It is the only place I work that isn't spotless to begin with. It's filthy in fact. Every Wednesday I climb the stairs like Sisyphus into their living room where it always looks like they are in the middle of moving.

I don't make much money with them because I don't charge by the hour, no car-fare. No lunch for sure. I really work hard. But I sit around a lot, stay very late. I smoke and read the New York Times, porno books, How to Build a Patio Roof. Mostly I just look out the window at the house next door where we used to live. 2129-1/2 Russell Street. I look at the tree that grows wooden pears Ter used to shoot at. The wooden fence glistens with BBs. The BEKINS sign that lit our bed at night. I miss Ter and I smoke. You can't hear the trains during the day.

40-TELEGRAPH. MILLHAVEN CONVALESCENT HOME. Four old women in wheel chairs staring filmily out into the street. Behind them, at the nurses' station, a beautiful black girl dances to "I Shot the Sheriff." The music is loud, even to me, but the old women can't hear it at all. Beneath them, on the sidewalk, is a crude sign: "TUMOR INSTITUTE 1:30."

The bus is late. Cars drive by. Rich people in cars never look at people on the street, at all. Poor ones always do... in fact it sometimes seems they're just driving around, looking at people on the street. I've done that. Poor people wait a lot. Welfare, unemployment lines, laundromats, phone booths, emergency rooms, jails, etc.

As everyone waited for the 40 we looked into the window of MILL AND ADDIE'S LAUNDRY. Mill was born in a mill in Georgia. He was lying down across five washing machines, installing a huge TV set above them. Addie made silly pantomimes for us, how the TV would never hold up. Passers-by stopped to join us watching Mill. All of us were reflected in the television, like a Man on the Street show.

Down the street is a big black funeral at "Fouché's." I used to think the neon sign said "Touché," and would always imagine death in a mask, his point at my heart.

I have thirty pills now, from Jessel, Burns, McIntyre, Horwitz and Blum. These people I work for each have enough uppers or downers to put a Hell's Angel away for twenty years.

18-PARK-MONTCLAIR. Downtown Oakland. A drunken Indian knows me by now, always says, "That's the way the ball bounces, sugar."

At Park Avenue a blue County Sheriff's bus with the windows boarded up. Inside are about twenty prisoners on their way to arraignment. The men, chained together, move sort of like a crew team in their orange jump suits. With the same camaraderie, actually. It is dark inside the bus. Reflected in the window is the traffic light. Yellow WAIT WAIT. Red STOP STOP.

A long sleepy hour up into the affluent foggy Montclair hills. Just maids on the bus. Beneath Zion

Lutheran church is a big black and white sign that says WATCH OUT FOR FALLING ROCKS. Everytime I see it I laugh out loud. The other maids and the driver turn around and stare at me. It is a ritual by now. There was a time when I used to automatically cross myself when I passed a Catholic church. Maybe I stopped because people in buses always turned around and stared. I still automatically say a Hail Mary, silently, whenever I hear a siren. This is a nuisance because I live on Pill Hill in Oakland, next to three hospitals.

At the foot of the Montclair hills women in Toyotas wait for their maids to get off the bus. I always get a ride up Snake Road with Mamie and her lady who says, "My don't we look pretty in that frosted wig, Mamie, and me in my tacky paint clothes." Mamie and I smoke.

Women's voices always rise two octaves when they talk to cleaning women or cats.

(Cleaning women: As for cats... never make friends with cats, don't let them play with the mop, the rags. The ladies will get jealous. Never, however, knock cats off of chairs. On the other hand always make friends with dogs, spend five or ten minutes scratching Cherokee or Smiley when you first arrive. Remember to close the toilet seats.) Furry, jowly drips.

The Blums. This is the weirdest place I work, the only beautiful house. They are both psychiatrists. They are marriage counselors with two adopted "pre-schoolers."

(Never work in a house with "pre-schoolers." Babies are great. You can spend hours looking at them, holding them. But the older ones... you get shrieks, dried Cheerios, accidents hardened and walked on in the Snoopy pajama foot.)

(Never work for psychiatrists, either. You'll go crazy. I could tell them a thing or two... Elevator shoes?)

Dr. Blum, the male one, is home sick again. He has asthma, for crissake. He stands around in his bathrobe, scratching a pale hairy leg with his slipper.

Oh ho ho ho Mrs. Robinson. He has over \$2000 worth of stereo equipment and five records. Simon and Garfunkel, Joni Mitchell and three Beatles.

He stands in the doorway to the kitchen, scratching the other leg now. I make sultry Mr. Clean mop-swirls away from him into the breakfast nook while he asks me why I chose this particular line of work.

"I figure it's either guilt or anger," I drawl.

"When the floor dries may I make myself a cup of tea?"

"Oh, look, just go sit down. I'll bring you some tea. Sugar or honey?"

"Honey. If it isn't too much trouble. And lemon if it..."

"Go sit down." I take him tea.

Once I brought Natasha, four years old, a black sequined blouse. For dress-up. Ms. Dr. Blum got furious and hollered that it was sexist. For a minute I thought she was accusing me of trying to seduce Natasha. She threw the blouse into the garbage. I retrieved it later and wear it now, sometimes, for dress-up.

(Cleaning Women: You will get a lot of liberated women. First stage is a CR group; second stage is a cleaning woman; third, divorce.)

The Blums have a lot of pills, a plethora of pills. She has uppers, he has downers. Mr. Dr. Blum has Belladonna pills. I don't know what they do but I wish it was my name.

One morning I heard him say to her, in the breakfast nook, "Let's do something spontaneous today, take the kids to go fly a kite!"

My heart went out to him. Part of me wanted to rush in like the maid in the back of Saturday Evening Post. I make great kites, know good places in Tilden for wind. There is no wind in Montclair. The other part of me turned on the vacuum so I couldn't hear her reply. It was pouring rain outside.

The play room was a wreck. I asked Natasha if she and Todd actually played with all those toys. She told me when it was Monday she and Todd got up and dumped them, because I was coming. "Go get your brother," I said.

I had them working away when Ms. Dr. Blum came in. She lectured me about interference and how she refused to "lay any guilt or duty trips" on her children. I listened, sullen. As an afterthought she told me to defrost the refrigerator and clean it with ammonia and vanilla.

Ammonia and vanilla? It made me stop hating her. Such a simple thing. I could see she really did want a homey home, didn't want guilt or duty trips laid on her children. Later on that day I had a glass of milk and it tasted like ammonia and vanilla.

40-TELEGRAPH-BERKELEY. MILL AND ADDIE'S LAUNDRY. Addie is alone in the laundromat, washing the huge plate glass window. Behind her, on top of a washer is an enormous fish head in a plastic bag. Lazy blind eyes. A friend, Mr. Walker, brings them fish heads for soup. Addie makes immense circles of flurry white on the glass. Across the street, at Saint Luke's nursery, a child thinks she is waving at him. He waves back, making the same swooping circles. Addie stops, smiles, waves back for real. My bus comes. Up Telegraph toward Berkeley. In the window of the MAGIC WAND BEAUTY PARLOR there is an aluminum foil star connected to a fly swatter. Next door is an orthopedic shop with two supplicating hands and a leg.

Ter refused to ride buses. The people depressed him, sitting there. He liked Greyhound Stations though. We used to go to the ones in San Francisco and Oakland. Mostly Oakland, on San Pablo Avenue. Once he told me he loved me because I was like San Pablo Avenue.

He was like the Berkeley dump. I wish there was a bus to the dump. We went there when we got homesick for New Mexico. It is stark and windy and gulls soar like night hawks in the desert. You can see the sky all around you and above you. Garbage trucks thunder through dust-billowing roads. Gray dinosaurs.

I can't handle you being dead, Ter. But you know that.

It's like the time at the airport, when you were about to get on the caterpillar ramp for Albuquerque.

"Oh, shit. I can't go. You'll never find the car."

"Watcha gonna do when I'm gone, Maggie?" you kept asking over and over, the other time, when you were going to London.

"I'll do macramé, punk."

"Whatcha gonna do when I'm gone, Maggie?"

"You really think I need you that bad?"

"Yes," you said. A simple Nebraska statement.

My friends say I am wallowing in self-pity and remorse. Said, I don't see anybody anymore. When I smile, my hand goes involuntarily to my mouth.

I collect sleeping pills. Once we made a pact... if things weren't okay by 1976 we were going to have a shoot-out at the end of the Marina. You didn't trust me, said I would shoot you first and run, or shoot myself first, whatever. I'm tired of the bargain, Ter.

58-COLLEGE-ALAMEDA. Old Oakland ladies all go to Hink's department store in Berkeley. Old Berkeley ladies go to Capwell's department store in Oakland. Everyone on this bus is young and black or old and white, including the drivers. The old white drivers are mean and nervous, especially around Oakland Tech High School. They're always jolting the bus to a stop hollering about smoking and radios. They lurch and stop with a bang, knocking the old white ladies into posts. The old ladies' arms bruise, instantly.

The young black drivers go fast, sailing through yellow lights at Pleasant Valley Road. Their buses are loud and smokey but they don't lurch.

Mrs. Burke's house today. Have to quit her, too. Nothing ever changes. Nothing is ever dirty. I can't understand why I am there at all. Today I felt better. At least I understood about the 30 Lancer's Rosé Wine bottles. There were 31. Apparently yesterday was their anniversary. There were two cigarette butts in his ashtray (not just his one), one wine glass (she doesn't drink) and my new rosé bottle. The bowling trophies had been moved, slightly. Our life together.

She taught me a lot about housekeeping. Put the toilet paper in so it comes out from under. Only open the Comet tab to three holes instead of six. Waste not, want not. Once, in a fit of rebellion, I ripped the tab completely off and accidentally spilled Comet all down the inside of the stove. A mess.

(Cleaning Women: Let them know you are thorough. The first day put all the furniture back wrong... five to ten inches off, or facing the wrong way. When you dust reverse the Siamese cats, put the creamer to the left of the sugar. Change the toothbrushes all around.)

My masterpiece in this area was when I cleaned the top of Mrs. Burke's refrigerator. She sees everything, but if I hadn't left the flashlight on she would have missed the fact that I scoured and re-oiled the waffle iron, mended the geisha girl and washed the flashlight as well.

Doing everything wrong not only reassures them you are thorough, it gives them a chance to be assertive and a "boss." Most American women are very uncomfortable about having servants. They don't know what to do while you are there. Mrs. Burke does things like re-check her Christmas card list and iron last year's wrapping paper. In August.

Try to work for Jews or Blacks. You get lunch. But mostly Jewish and Black women respect work, the work you do and also they are not at all ashamed of spending the entire day doing absolutely nothing. They are paying you, right?

The Christian Eastern Stars are another story. So they won't feel guilty always try to be doing something they never would do. Stand on the stove to clean an exploded Coca-Cola off the ceiling. Shut yourself inside the glass shower. Shove all the furniture, including the piano, against the door. They would never do that, besides, they can't get in.

Thank God they always have at least one TV show that they are addicted to. I flip the vacuum on for half an hour (a soothing sound), lie down under the piano with an Enddust rag clutched in my hand, just in case. I just lie there and hum and think. I refused to identify your body, Ter, which caused a lot of hassle. I was afraid I would hit you for what you did. Died.

Burke's piano is what I do last before I leave. Bad part about that is the only music on it is "The Marine Hymn." I always end up marching to the bus stop "From the Halls of Monte-zu-u-ma..."

58-COLLEGE-BERKELEY. A mean old white driver. It's raining, late, crowded, cold. Christmas is a bad time for buses. A stoned hippy girl shouted, "Let me off this fuckin bus!" "Wait for the designated stop!" the driver shouted back. A fat woman, a cleaning woman, vomited down the front seat onto people's galoshes and my boot. The smell was foul and several people got off at the next stop, when she did. The driver stopped at Arco station on Alcatraz, got a hose to clean it up but of course just ran it all into the back and made things wetter. He was red-faced and furious, ran the next light, endangering us all the man next to me said.

At Oakland Tech about twenty students with radios waited behind a badly crippled man. Welfare is next door to Tech. As the man got on the bus, with much difficulty, the driver said OH JESUS CHRIST and the man looked surprised.

Burke's again. No changes. They have 10 digital clocks and they all have the same right time. The day I quit I'll pull all the plugs.

I finally did quit Mrs. Jessel. She kept on paying me with a check and once she called me four times in one night. I called her husband and told him I had mononucleosis. She forgot I quit, called me last night to ask if she had looked a little paler to me. I miss her.

A new lady today. A real lady.

(I never think of myself as a cleaning lady, although that's what they call you, their lady or their girl.)

Mrs. Johansen. She is Swedish and speaks English with a great deal of slang, like Filipinos.

The first thing she said to me, when she opened the door, was "HOLY MOSES!"

"Oh. Am I too early?"

"Not at all, my dear."

She took the stage. An eighty-year-old Glenda Jackson. I was bowled over. (See, I'm talking like her already.) Bowled over in the foyer.

In the foyer, before I even took off my coat, Ter's coat, she explained to me the event of her life.

Her husband, John, died six months ago. She had found it hard, most of all, to sleep. She started putting together picture puzzles. (She gestured toward the card table in the living room, where Jefferson's Monticello was almost finished, a gaping protozoa hole, top right.)

One night she got so stuck with her puzzle she didn't go to sleep at all. She forgot, actually forgot to sleep! Or eat to boot, matter of fact. She had supper at eight in the morning. She took a nap then, woke up at two, had breakfast at two in the afternoon and went out and bought another puzzle.

When John was alive it was Breakfast 6, Lunch 12, Dinner 6. I'll tell the cockeyed world times have changed.

"No, dear, you're not too early," she said. "I might just pop off to bed at any moment."

I was still standing there, hot, gazing into my new lady's radiant sleepy eyes, waiting for talk of ravens.

All I had to do was wash windows and vacuum the carpet. But, before vacuuming the carpet, to find a puzzle piece. Sky with a little bit of maple. I know it is missing.

It was nice on the balcony, washing windows. Cold, but the sun was on my back. Inside she sat at her puzzle. Enraptured, but striking a pose nevertheless. She must have been very lovely.

After the windows came the task of looking for the puzzle piece. Inch by inch in the green shag carpet, cracker crumbs, rubber bands from the Chronicle. I was delighted, this was the best job I ever had. She didn't "give a hoot" if I smoked or not so I just crawled around on the floor and smoked, sliding my ashtray with me.

I found the piece, way across the room from the puzzle table. It was sky, with a little bit of maple.

"I found it!" she cried. "I knew it was missing!"

"I found it!" I cried.

Then I could vacuum, which I did as she finished the puzzle with a sigh. As I was leaving I asked her when she thought she might need me again.

"Who knows?" she said.

"Well... anything goes," I said, and we both laughed.

Ter, I don't want to die at all, actually.

40-TELEGRAPH. Bus stop outside the laundry. MILL AND ADDIE'S is crowded with people waiting for machines, but festive, like waiting for a table. They stand, chatting at the window drinking green cans of SPRITE. Mill and Addie mingle like genial hosts, making change. On the TV the Ohio State band plays the national anthem. Snow flurries in Michigan.

It is a cold, clear January day. Four sideburned cyclists turn up at the corner at 29th like a kite string. A Harley idles at the bus stop and some kids wave at the rasty rider from the bed of a '50 Dodge pickup truck. I finally weep.

"A Manual for Cleaning Women" from A MANUAL FOR CLEANING WOMEN: SELECTED STORIES by Lucia Berlin.

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