

welcome

A Clean Enough Kitchen

We have come to a nasty pass when we are afraid to wash dishes because the sink is a bacteria breeding ground. That sponge you thought was cleaning your dirty counters? You are swabbing them with a live germ culture.

We have become obsessed. I have visited grand homes and been greeted at the door by high-strung butlers in white coats, bearing surgical bootees to slip on over my street shoes, lest germs be brought in and deposited on sparkling floors. (I would like to be able to write “hospital-clean floors,” but, alas, we now know too much about the real conditions of those so-called sterilized zones.) I listened, during lunch one day, to a friend who advised me to throw away my pillows every six months.

“You know how they start light and fluffy,” she said, “and then they get wadded and feel sort of heavy?” I nodded in agreement. I had noticed that, generally, the older things got, the more weighty they seemed to be, but I thought that had more to do with the sogginess of tears, or the heaviness of memory. “All that weight is from dust mites. Bugs. Billions and billions of them. They come off your skin; they colonize in your pillows. They’re invisible, they are so small. You can imagine how many there have to be to add so much weight. Generation after generation reproducing—and feeding, and defecating—in there.”

I paid the check queasily and went home. Ignoring the loud protests of my children, who liked their old pillows and felt they had achieved the optimum condition for comfort, I threw everything away, shuddering as I picked each pillow up by the corner and delicately placed it into a heavy black plastic bag, fearing that I would inadvertently release a few generations of mites into the air to start new colonies under my bed. I stopped at the stuffed animals, though I don’t know why I should have—out of sentiment, I surround my children with adorable, bacteria-laden things. The pillows made me think about vacuuming, and that, in turn, made me think about what gets blown out the back of the vacuum cleaner, and that, in turn, made me wonder why we bother at all. But I did not despair, as

I could see, suddenly, a new reason to get out of bed in the morning—as fast as possible. Better yet not to even get *into* bed.

I went to that temple of fine living, Gracious Home, to see what they had to say about keeping things clean. A lot. Remember Mr. Clean, Parsons’ Ammonia, and Spic and Span? Those were the days. Simple, and filthy. These days the cleaning aisle is burgeoning with nuclear-powered products with names like Kaboom, that promise to make a killing ground of your tub and shower. Cleaning supplies now come packaged in tissue-sized packets containing wipes impregnated with product—use and toss—giving the illusion that sanitizing the house is as easy and effective as blowing your nose.

It has been a troubling winter—contemplating the inescapable nature of pathogens, meditating on the eternal return of housekeeping, shedding the delusion that anything is ever under control, accepting the inevitability of bacteria. You thought your house was a safe haven, but in fact it is a breeding ground, and not for good manners.

I can’t wait for the warm, sunny days of summer, when I can open the doors and windows, and let everything crawl out. I plan to start a new housekeeping movement: A Clean Enough House. It will derive its basic tenets from my favorite theory of maternity: A Good Enough Mother. I will not be afraid. I will let life in. I will accept that joy can be messy; that fun comes with a few dust mites. I will wash my hands often, and I may pop my sponges into the microwave, but otherwise I plan to track dirt in from the garden, and hang the bed linens on clotheslines in the sun. I plan to

etch into my beloved butcher block the knife marks from the preparation of countless more chicken sandwiches (now that I know that the cellulose in the wood absorbs bacteria but does not release it—wood is much cleaner than plastic, I might add). I plan to sit on the ground and eat off of plates (remember picnics?). I plan to spit into my goggles to keep them clear while I swim. You know what I love best about summer? It’s *so* unsanitary.



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