

Name: Melanie Kaczor

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My ears burst at the squealing of my home windows protesting my Mom's rough scrubbing with Windex and an old cotton t-shirt. I felt sympathy for the crumb-filled carpet when my Mom turned on the groaning vacuum, or for our stained kitchen counters that seemed to yelp in fear of being next. And there I was, in the midst of the commotion, stepping out of my room to shout and plead with her to stop cleaning so much because my head throbbed again from all the noise.

I retreat back to my room, but my Mom only responds to my pleas by moving the vacuum into my space and conquering more and more of my carpet, her muscles contracting with immense force with every movement. A small smirk appeared on her face despite the chore, making me think she found satisfaction in intruding to tidy up. The gears in my head shifted and came to the conclusion that cleaning was incredibly invasive. And boy, was it an incredibly noisy and grueling process.

I had no room to be uncomfortable though. Cleaning played a big role in my mom's life. She chased after it like it was the final dust particle in a corner, scrubbing at home and scrubbing at the Concorde Hotel as a Housekeeper. And all of my mom's rooms ended up spotless as the perfectionist she is. Sadly, I couldn't outrun my mom's cleaning any more than a poor dust particle.

"Bo jeśli ja tego nie zrobię, to nikt tego nie robi (*Because if I don't do it, then nobody will*)" my Mom huffed, exasperated as she explained, already exhausted from cleaning.

“But you don’t have to clean up after other people. It’s not your job.” I pressed back in English.

I picked up my own clothes, made my own bed, and did my own laundry. Why would I touch my brother’s *own* smelly socks or help my Dad clean up his *own* plate he made dirty? Whenever I did the laundry, I’d get angry having to dig through everyone else’s clothes and not try folding any clothing besides mine. “*You do your part, I do mine*” was the belief I held regarding cleaning.

Mrs. Zieliński came over one evening for tea. She was kind to ignore the pungent smell of lemon cleaner and the fluffed up couch pillows—works of my Mom. Our guest was a woman in her seventies with prominent crow’s feet and a radiance that my Mom and I both loved. She also could not stand for long and was a close friend of chairs and couches.

“Give me my favorite glass please! It’s the sun-one.” I say in delight. My treasured mug had been with me since seventh grade, and I could never part with the silly sun my past art teacher and I painted onto the mug with sunglasses.

Mrs. Zieliński walks over with an endearing smile, holding our three mugs full of honey black honey lemon tea, including my favorite, with her shaky hands.

But my reflexes were not fast enough. There was the black honey lemon on the previously shining floor, and porcelain sprayed across the tiles like a crime scene. I felt myself fume at the fact that my childhood mug had its life taken away by the hands of Mrs. Zieliński. *How could she?*

My Mom immediately yelps, “Jest w porządku! Jest w porządku!” *It’s okay. It’s okay.* Before I can start mourning my mug, my Mom goes to the closet hurriedly to grab a rag and plastic bag. She kneels onto the limestone-colored tiles, like I’ve seen her countless times, and

ritually starts picking up the glass piece by piece. Mrs. Zieliński bent down, wincing and trying to help, but my Mom exclaimed with a smile, “No! No! Please, go sit down. I will handle it for you. It’s not a big deal at all!” Our guest, who had previously looked embarrassed and ashamed, suddenly seemed to have something in her eyes that I hadn’t noticed before. There was a warmth and relief there. A shy, blossoming smile found a place on her face as she sat back down in our dining room watching my Mom.

It was gratitude. I felt surprised at the fact that I, myself, felt warm after watching my Mom pick up the pieces with reassurance that all would be okay. I no longer cared about my mug anymore or blaming Mrs. Zieliński. My Mom had cleaned the air in the room and my own understanding of her favorite ritual.

The cleaning wasn’t noisy this time.

My Mom finished the rest of the cleaning and slapped her thighs to signal that the job had been taken care of, as if nothing had happened, while smiling brightly at Mrs. Zieliński.

When Mrs. Zieliński leaves, I tug on my Mom’s shirt, “Why do you always clean?”

“Cóż (*Well*),” she said. She paused. It was something she couldn’t say in words, of course, but maybe she should try again. “Ponieważ zależy mi na tobie, a ty nie chcesz czuć się miło i czysto? (*Because I care about you and don’t you want to feel nice and clean?*).”

But my Mom’s message was indeed received. I now had truly heard, seen, and understood that cleaning had always been about others for my Mom. It was about making *others* feel comfortable. It was about seeing the relief in *others*’ faces at having a clean room or clean clothes that she would gladly give in exchange for her exhaustion. Cleaning wasn’t quite as intrusive as it was selfless and beautiful.

My favorite mug was broken, but I felt something inside of me was mended in its place.

Now, I come home and when I take off my shoes, I place them neatly in our line of uneven shoes sprawled out across our corridor. I take my time to re-adjust my brother's sneakers, my Mom's sandals, and my dad's work boots. Instead of unpacking to start my homework, I meet my Mom cleaning the dishes talking on the phone with her friend. I silently grab a towel to start drying the cups she had cleaned.

I've learned that cleaning is my Mom's love language, and I've found this same tongue passed into my hands. At first I wanted to reject it, but I've come to not care about the dirt that may get under my nails in the process of adopting tidying as a form of love and care for those around me. I also see cleaning as a responsibility. We must help those who don't always have the capacity to clean up after their own slip-ups. When others are struggling, you help them with a broom and a scrub. There's hope to pick up the broken pieces of a favorite mug and start anew.

My Mom smiles at me helping her dry the mugs, although I place them a bit sloppily in the drying rack. Once I get to drying my Mom's favorite cup saying "Best Mom," I give it an extra scrub down with my rag so it shines as it should.