

Cleaning the Kitchen Is Saving My Soul

How one writer finds her salvation and zen in making her place spotless.

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It's 11 a.m. on a Tuesday, and my apartment is bizarrely quiet. I look around, not sure what to do with myself. And then a giddy grin takes over my face. I'm going to clean the kitchen.

See, all people in the world fall into one of two categories: mess makers or mess cleaners. I have always firmly fallen into the former group. In fact, my entire life, my superpower has been making messes. As a child, my school cubby was a clown car of

crumpled papers. As a teenager, my bedroom looked like a Limited Too truck overturned on the highway. In my 20s, when I had my first post-college apartment, scrambled eggs became a three-bowl project that left the counters covered in goop. And like most people who excel at accelerated entropy, I was never very skillful at (or, let's be honest, motivated by) cleaning up my messes.

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Until I had a toddler and a baby.

Now that I have two kids, cleaning the kitchen is my nirvana. I pop in my AirPods, hit play on the *My Favorite Murder* podcast, and revel in transforming havoc into calm. So often, I feel like I'm drowning in it all — my baby is chortling as she tears off her poop-filled diaper, our toddler is sobbing because his string beans are touching his rice, and I just want to remember what it feels like to sleep more than two hours uninterrupted. Cleaning the kitchen makes me briefly feel like I've got this. I can temporarily step into a fantasy world where I'm actually Someone Who Has It Together, the kind of person who always manages to brush her teeth in the morning and never wears the same shirt three days in a row.

I start with the sink, which is an archaeological dig containing the artifacts of the previous day's (or, um, two days') meals. As I scrub at the crimson red of 14-hour-old ketchup smears, I revel in my good fortune at this vacation from the rest of my life as a working parent. Cleaning the kitchen means that no one is home with RSV or their third case of hand, foot, and mouth disease since February. It means that my baby is miraculously napping without my boob in her mouth, or that my husband had a break from Zoom calls and took her out to the park.

Once the sink is finally cleared, I turn my attention to the stove, where I perform an intrepid act: I remove the grates and then gawk at the collection of formerly edible foodstuffs that has gathered beneath. This is the part I'm usually most proud of, the part I brag about to my husband later when I'm recounting my heroic feat of kitchen cleaning ("And then I even moved the stove grates!"). I'll immediately worry if he wonders about the exact moment the woman he married, the one who used to read entire books (that weren't *Peppa Pig*) and could form fully coherent sentences, became excited about crumb removal.



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Usually at some point during all this, if I'm not home alone (the highest echelon of kitchen cleaning joy), I hear the shriek of miniature vocal cords coming from somewhere inside the apartment. Even though my husband is with the baby, and he's a perfectly loving, competent parent, I can't help but pause my podcast for a second, sponge midair, to evaluate the sounds for signs of imminent bodily jeopardy. In my dreams, cleaning the kitchen means I can escape for an hour from the stresses of keeping tiny creatures alive. But even with three rooms between us, I still can't manage to break free from my mom brain, which feels like it's been in a constant state of alert since it materialized (along with my first child), three and a half years ago.

Using my highly sensitive Is-My-Child-About-to-Die-ometer, I determine that the screaming baby is merely pissed and not in physical danger. I turn my murder podcast back on and turn the volume up to drown out the sound of my offspring with the entertaining tale of a hiker (tied to a tree and stabbed!) in Adirondack Park (mental note: reconsider summer camping plans). I revel in it, for once, not being my problem. My husband can deal with it. I'm cleaning the kitchen.

And so, as the bellowing continues (how do such little people make such large sounds?), I attack the counters. This part is the most satisfying because with just a few enthusiastic swipes from a sponge, a clean surface reveals itself under the plethora of garlic skins and smushed organic raspberries. I savor the quick burst of dopamine I'm rewarded for my handiwork.

As the happy hormone fades, though, I again wonder how I became the kind of person who gets her emotional highs from cleaning. I used to travel the planet. I used to have sex with strangers. Now I wipe counters. I hit the 15-second rewind button on my podcast to force my mind on to less depressing topics (like death by strangling).

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Then in my final act in my (very) temporary role of Kitchen Cleaner, I move on to the floors. We own a vacuum cleaner, but I prefer the broom. How else can I pat myself on the back for the quantity of crumbs I've expelled from the kitchen floor if I don't first gather all the cheddar bunny limbs and Cheerios dust in a towering mountain before sweeping them all up and depositing them in the garbage?

And then I'm finished.

And this state of "finished" is the best part because there are few things in my life that ever feel done. My job is an ongoing list of demands, my kids are never "raised," but after an hour or two plodding along in my flip-flops, washing dishes and wiping down counters, I have a space that, unlike everything else in my life, is orderly and complete.

And with calm restored in my kitchen for just a moment, I am reminded that it's not always going to be like this. When parenting two young kids, it's easy to feel trapped in the seeming endlessness of it all — the desperate daily coaxing of children to go to sleep, the meltdowns over who gets the lavender alpaca bib, the beautiful but exhausting holding of small humans — and it can feel like the chaos in my life is forever.

But it's not. The kids will one day learn to sleep (and clean their own messes!). They'll stop needing bibs altogether, and they, sadly, won't want so many cuddles. And I know that under that layer of grimy kitchen mayhem, there's a clean room just waiting for me to reclaim it. And maybe with it, myself.

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