

Erin Ergenbright  
erinergerbright@yahoo.com

### *The Closet*

A friend once told me that being around money makes even the air seem crisper, cleaner. And though my discarded Baptist upbringing meant I could still call to mind many verses about the incompatibilities of riches and heaven, standing in Edward's enormous, beautiful closet, where I'd pulled aside the velvet, aubergine curtains to see the snow-dusted hump of Mount St. Helens, I knew my friend was absolutely right.

Edward, my employer, had a closet bigger and better-designed than my bedroom, with floor to ceiling built-ins—drawers and dressers and shelves—and leaded glass windows, thick wool carpeting, and a telephone. Just being *in* the closet, surrounded by the textures of expensive, tailored suit jackets and the lingering smell of the dry cleaner calmed me. In the closet, it didn't matter that I was over thirty thousand dollars in debt, had stopped answering my phone to avoid the angry voices of creditors and was messily falling in love with someone methodically not falling in love with me. But I'd been saved--I had a *job*.

I folded a stack of Edward's navy and black polo shirts and put them in the drawer specifically for navy and black polo shirts, then gazed over the blue-green bowl of the city to the elegant, pristine peaks of the mountains. I was calm and happy, sure I finally had a foothold on that ladder leading out of the hand to mouth pit I'd been in, and a reprieve from the feeling that accompanies the delivery of those thin, immediately recognizable envelopes containing overdraft notices.

As I have a M.F.A. in creative writing and few other practical skills, being hired as a personal assistant was a leap of faith, or maybe desperation, for all involved. My therapist, who'd let me run a tab for months, had finally referred me to his temp-agency owning ex-wife, and she told me that I seemed like exactly what Lance and Edward were looking for: an intelligent, educated and creative person who didn't mind cleaning the occasional toilet.

I would have offered to clean the occasional toilet sixteen times a day if it meant I wouldn't have to borrow money from my parents. I been unemployed for five months, since returning from a three-week book tour—my first, and not the lucrative venture I'd imagined—to find myself permanently off the schedule at my restaurant job. The owner, Sheena, wouldn't return my calls. A bit of sleuthing revealed that Sheena's much younger husband thought I was pretty. In fact, he thought I looked kind of like Sheena had, when she was younger, and he'd told her so.

And as I grew more desperate for work I applied for an assortment of positions for which I was unsuited: School bus driver, water filter system cold caller, chiropractic assistant, and used car saleswoman. I recently found the letter of application for the used car sales position on my computer. I'd written, "Though I've never sold cars before, as a writer and teacher I possess great powers of persuasion and intuition. If I believe in a product, my enthusiasm has no bounds and I will sell it."

I didn't even get an interview, and sheepishly remembered how, only months before, on my book tour, I'd been so high on the perceived importance of being on

national TV that I'd forgotten to call my dad on his birthday. How young I was then, I thought.

I drove to Lance and Edward's enormous house in the hills on a crisp November morning and parked my battered hand-me-down Subaru down the street, far out of view. What I'd been told was that they were successful, intelligent, wealthy, politically active and articulate partners of nearly thirty years with a nine-year-old son, Jeremy, who they'd adopted at birth. Lance, now retired, had been a therapist for twenty-seven years. Edward was an author and motivational speaker who traveled the world giving team-building seminars for Fortune 500 corporations.

They greeted me warmly, and then Jeremy went outside to practice ramps on his skateboard while Edward and Lance and I sat in a sun-drenched brocade sitting room drinking coffee from heavy, hand-thrown mugs and talking about art, books and international travel. Edward was a striking, broad-shouldered man with a mane of thick dark hair, Lance was slim and blond and soft-spoken. It was clear they were good partners; each listened and didn't interrupt while the other spoke. They were glad I was a writer; they loved literature, they said.

Then Lance took me on a tour of the house while Edward went upstairs to pack for a business trip to Tokyo.

The house was simply beautiful. Built at the turn of the century for Margaret and Nancy Ardenwald, daughters of the shipping magnate and prominent businessman Captain Elton Ardenwald, it had four stories, nine bedrooms, a giant, light-flooded landing with a grand piano, a homework room, three offices and two sunrooms—

gorgeous, octagonal, many-windowed spaces. It also had an opium couch, which now passed for a comfortable window seat with a view to the mountains. Lance showed me the tracks where a velvet curtain had hung, and the glass-cased shelves where paraphernalia was once kept. The user could pull the drapes, partake in his or her afternoon delight, and then snooze on the couch, undisturbed.

My job description was to include cleaning and laundry, shopping and food preparation, and would eventually involve party-planning and true involvement in the family members' important, busy lives. Lance and Edward wanted at least a year commitment from me, but hopefully more like two. I'd never had a job for longer than six months, but I kept quiet.

"We don't want Jeremy to view women as people who leave," Edward said.

A wisp of a boy with pale skin, cowlicked dark hair, and a tiny, elegant turned-up nose, Jeremy used phrases like, "Hence the name," and "I kid you not," and liked goat cheese and beet greens. During my second interview, which consisted of shopping for, cooking for, and serving dinner to the family, he was shy and polite and wiggly, as he had been when I first met him. But after I'd done the dishes, he and I went to the sprawling, furnished basement, where, despite my long skirt and high-heeled boots, we played wall-ball for an hour. We laughed and teased each other and dueled with red foam bats until he got a little too excited and had to be put to bed.

"He really likes you," Lance said, as he showed me out.

*I could love this kid,* I thought.

I'd never considered making a bed to be skilled labor. Like tying shoes or toasting bread, it's something most people do without thinking. But the first time I stripped Lance and Edward's bed for the wash, and then tried to make it up again, I realized I didn't know whose pillow was whose, or what order they'd been set in.

King-sized with creamy, smooth, cotton sheets, the bed was a home magazine dream of fluffy white down and a wealth of pillows. But now I couldn't seem to get the comforter to sit right—it looked awkward and ruffled instead of casual and chic. Quickly, I was sweating, thinking, *what's wrong with me? I've made my bed my whole life. Why can't I do this?*

I spent nearly two hours trying to achieve that casual, thrown-together look they liked. When Lance came home that afternoon I told him, with some embarrassment, that I'd had a hard time making their bed. I didn't mention how strangely intimate it was, too, as the living, lingering smells made it impossible not to wonder about the details of their very long partnership.

"I'll show you," Lance said, laughing. "We're kind of particular."

Upstairs, he demonstrated how the largest bulk of feathers in the comforter should be near the head of the bed, so they drifted down. The pillows, set with the heaviest, oldest one on Edward's side, and the larger, fluffier ones on Lance's, got fluffed and the centers punched down so the corners would turn up like rabbit ears. When he did it, it looked right; when I did it, it didn't. I told him it was an odd thing to be doing, really, making a stranger's bed. I didn't add what I was thinking, which was, "Especially when you have a graduate degree that you'd planned to use."

Not that I wasn't grateful to be there. I *was*.

But I also figured Lance would know what I was thinking, even if I hadn't said it, since he'd been a therapist for twenty-seven years and had probably dealt with a lot of people who were frustrated at their unfulfilled potential. Then again, those people were paying him for a service, and not the other way around, but he had the kind, wise, calm, listening face that good therapists have, and he was clearly very sensitive: He fielded dozens of phone calls every day and always asked, "How are *you*?" in a way conveying that the caller was very special and much loved. He listened more than he talked. "I really hear that," he'd say. "I really get what you're saying."

When I tried out the phrases on my soon to be ex-boyfriend, Harold, he looked at me as if I were very young, or very slow, and said, "I guess I was right in assuming English was your native language."

Harold didn't like his job either, and didn't yet understand that both what you say and *the way* you say it can upset people.

But Lance clearly understood. Even when he examined Edward's shirts that I'd painstakingly ironed and then literally laughed out loud, he did it with a measure of kindness. He thought it was funny. He understood that I hadn't been taught to iron, at least not well, or using starch. Still, I felt sheepish, as I'd been proud of my work. And I really liked being in the laundry room, with its soft carpet, big, east-facing windows, the heat of the dryer and the soothing voices of NPR. The rest of the house was silent—Lance wanted it that way even though he was rarely there—and that silence sometimes rendered my thoughts far too loud. "You're lucky to be here," I told myself. "Don't blow it."

A Baptist upbringing doesn't ever just *go away*, so it was inevitable that Bible verses I learned twenty years before would pester me while working in such ornate settings. *Verily I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven...*

I'd worked for Lance and Edward for nearly a month when I was asked to clean and organize a few of the many storage rooms in the furnished basement. I spent a week cleaning, filing, organizing, and wrestling with towers of dusty boxes, disposing of the many skis, boots and poles of seasons past, unearthing old camera equipment, and taking inventory of over a dozen leather briefcases, a mountain of decorative tins, faded Easter grass, old pet carriers, and cracked aquariums. I found a tin of change weighing at least twenty pounds, and brought it upstairs, excited, as there were likely hundreds of dollars waiting to be counted.

Lance was on the phone, nodding and agreeing, and seemed nonplussed by my discovery. I fought the urge to sit down on the floor and dump out the tin's contents, to spread out that glittering carpet of history, to arrange them in stacks of quarters, nickels and dimes by dates the way my grandfather and I used to with his old pennies. Jeremy would love this, I thought, but he wasn't home from school, because it was Tuesday, and he had band practice, and then soccer. Jeremy was a sore loser, so I hoped his game was going well. I left the tin on the counter and went up to the third floor to hang new mothballs near the African tapestries I'd unpacked for airing.

Jeremy won his game, and we celebrated with pizza.

Three weeks later the tin of coins was still on the kitchen counter, unopened and unmentioned.

What Lance did mention, though, was that I definitely needed to *ask* what the correct way of doing something was *before* I did it. Specifically, when I'd cleaned out the basement I'd filled the garbage can too full, and thus the garbage men had refused to empty it. And what I would have, and should have, done, *had I asked* was keep some of the excess filled trash bags in the cold storage rooms. That way, I could in add one to the regular trash load each week and eventually dispose of all them without throwing off the *entire* garbage cycle.

I told Harold this story and he looked at me, speechless. He'd been reading the newspaper, and he just held up the front page, as if to say, "Oh my god, the world is falling apart and they're freaked out about the way you take out the trash?"

"I know, I know," I said, feeling my mouth starting to tremble with tears.

I took to calling Lance and Edward's house, "The Big House," and both in and out of my place of employment, thought about Margaret Ardenwald—the artistic daughter of Captain Ardenwald who'd lived and died there. Lance told me everything he knew about her, and I went downtown to the historical society to see what else I could find. I couldn't find much. But I knew she'd studied art at the Sorbonne after high school, and it was for her that the banks of sloping, skylight-like windows had been installed on the third floor. The third floor main room was twice the size of most convenience stores, and was only used for Jeremy's sleepover parties or birthdays. It was the repository of furniture styles past—nubby couches and beanbag chairs—and also a king-sized bed situated beneath those large, lovely windows—in the exact place Margaret had painted. I sometimes stretched out on the bed, watching the clouds race past the glass, imagining

what life was like for her—a privileged, yet free-thinking bohemian artist in a stuffy town, who, at twenty, must have felt strongly what many of us feel at twenty: All avenues are open.

I was no longer twenty, and knew some avenues had definitely closed, but I took strange comfort in the room where I could feel Margaret most vividly. Actually, I felt her whenever I consciously noticed how gorgeous the light in the house was, as she would have been always aware of it.

Though I didn't know what her furniture had been like, today even the fancy rugs and art and carefully chosen drapes and furniture simply paled against the blooms of light that mellowed the white enameled banisters of the winding stairway, the burnt orange carpet of the music room, or the giant, fancy kitchen. The beauty of the light in that house, and the still, calm peace that settles in the afternoon felt at once safe and tenuous—a bubble of safety and hope floating above a sharp and dangerous world.

Jeremy had spent his entire life in this sort of safety and beauty. He didn't necessarily know he was wealthy, and this was both touching and ridiculous. He'd been taught to be frugal, so despite the fact that his piggy bank was far richer than my savings account, he didn't demand expensive things. He got them, but didn't demand them. He obviously knew he had more than some people, but he also received birthday presents from people who owned jets and islands, and thus his measuring stick listed different numbers than mine.

“My dads said when you got here you didn't even know how to make a bed,” Jeremy said, one day, teasing. We were in the basement, hitting tennis balls against the wall with badminton rackets. He tackled me and we wrestled and laughed until he got

totally out of control—his eyes blazed as he took a running start and hurled himself at me. I tried to fend him off with a huge stuffed gorilla. He was laughing, wildly.

“Okay, Jeremy, it’s time to calm down,” I said, over and over, trying to be firm. Edward was on business and Lance was at a symphony benefit. It took at least ten minutes until he snapped out of it, and then we read Harry Potter aloud, but I was still thinking about the bed-making comment. What else had they told him about me?

The next day, I decided to show him my car. If he wanted a story I’d give it to him. My car—an old red Subaru with white racing stripes along the top and back—had been given to me by an ex-boyfriend’s bandmate. It had been given to my ex-boyfriend’s bandmate when he’d needed a car, and given to the guy who gave it to *him* in similar circumstances. It had no passenger side rear view, no dome light, no radio, and weekly leaked two quarts of oil in large Rorschachs on the street. As I had been since the first day I met the family, I parked it far from the house, certain they’d be bothered by such an eyesore. Lance and Edward thought I was still taking the bus into the hills with the other cleaning ladies. But now I let Jeremy sit in the front seat, and even let him put on the red and white striped motorcycle helmet that had, inexplicably, come with the car. “It’s a karma car,” I said, and explained my understanding of cause and effect.

Lance said, “How wonderful!” when Jeremy told him about the karma car.

“Can I ride in it?” Jeremy asked, hopping up and down.

“We’ll see,” Lance said, but it was the kind of *we’ll see* that means *not on your life*.

A few days later black smoke suddenly erupted from the backside of the karma car and it died within minutes. The next day I took the #15 bus into the hills, and quickly realized that most of us were cleaning ladies.

I spent a lot of time in Edward's closet, spent a lot of time washing and folding his clothes and taking them to and from the dry cleaners. He was often away on business, but I felt as if I knew him because I knew the smell of his sweat, knew which shirts he loved and which shirts he repeatedly attempted to wear, then changed his mind about and threw on the floor. I did the same thing with several of my shirts, except I was also the one who picked them up. And though he was clearly a high-powered businessman, he had a soft side, too: On his bedside table were *Feeding the Hungry Heart*; *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*; *The Power of Now* and *Flesh and the Word 4*.

Edward had thirty-two suits, with the accompanying trousers hanging upside-down on smooth wooden hangers that held the cuffs together without causing wrinkles. His thirty-five shiny pairs of dress shoes sat in careful rows beneath the suits. Some had tassels, some were wingtips, some were loafers. On either side of the suit closet were smaller inset closets, just as tall, but narrow, and shelved. One held eleven pairs of running shoes, six pairs of identical blue terry cloth slippers in varying states of decline, nine pairs of boat shoes, twenty-seven pairs of leather casual shoes and six pairs of Teva sandals. The other tall, narrow, shelved closet was for his casual pants, (thirty-two pairs of jeans and twenty-one pairs of khakis), and I wondered, often, why in god's name a single person needed that many pairs of pants. Was each pair noticeably different from

the other twenty? True, I had five black cardigan sweaters, and my mother has never met a navy shirt she didn't like, but it was a question of scale.

In the master bedroom was an armoire containing eighty-four wool sweaters. In their respective closets Lance and Edward had many, many thin sweaters in navy, charcoal and black, so I guessed the sweaters in the armoire were for ski trips. Just like in high school, when I'd worked at the ill-fated Benetton in the Bend River Mall, dividing clothing by color and creating even, expertly folded stacks made me pretend there was order in the world, though the fact that two people living in a temperate climate owned eighty-four heavy wool sweaters made clear that no such order existed.

Some afternoons I walked down to the elementary school to get Jeremy and stood with the other mothers on the rain-misted asphalt, watching the kids play wall-ball. Fiercely competitive, and impressively clever, Jeremy changed rules and flung exacting insults in order to stay "in" a few minutes longer. Embarrassed, I'd study my unkempt fingernails, or the variations of fur fringe on the other mother's coats.

"Did you see me? Did you see how good I am?" Jeremy would ask, excitedly, tugging on my sleeve.

At a recent dinner party I asked friends to bring pictures of themselves as children. When I taped them up on the wall, we all laughed at how clearly visible our adult selves were, just biding time beneath the baby fat. And sometimes, watching Jeremy, I saw clearly the powerful, entitled man he would become, and caught myself thinking, *I know who you are, and it isn't pretty.*

But sometimes he'd fall asleep as I read to him, and he seemed so fragile and perfect that I was filled with tenderness, just watching him, not wanting to move. Sometimes he hugged me when he left for school, and his head warmed the space just below my breast, the space where a child seemed to go. For three days during my employment, I thought I was pregnant and I moved as if through warm, silky water, imagining, foolishly, that my forthcoming child might have all the things I saw, touched, and felt in this house, this world, so high above the grit of the city.

I wasn't pregnant. I was relieved and disappointed.

One morning I woke to find five messages on my voicemail. The ringer was off, but on each message was a loud alarm bell, then an automated voice listing a telephone number. When I called this number to complain of a mistake, the woman at the answering service said, briskly, "Perhaps you're on someone's emergency list and their alarm is going off."

I quickly called Lance and Edward, fearful of what might have happened. Lance laughed and said, "Oh, *you* aren't on our emergency list!"

A few weeks later, at six a.m. on a Sunday morning, my phone's repeated ringing woke me up. I'd stayed at my soon to be ex-boyfriend's messy, work-in-progress house, and I stumbled over his tool box as I went to the living room to listen to Lance's frantic message: "The bus to the mountain is leaving any second, and I need to know what you did with Jeremy's snowsuit. Call me when you get this."

This was a snowsuit I'd never laid eyes on, but I called back. "Oh, never mind!" Lance laughed. He had remembered, after leaving the message, that the snowsuit was at the cleaners, being waterproofed.

Harold, my soon to be ex-boyfriend, was angry. This was sort of touching but also ridiculous, given the dynamics of our relationship, and I didn't want to get into it, so I just snuggled against him until he finally stopped talking and fell asleep. I lay wide-awake, thinking. Through the rain-spattered window I watched robins landing on the broken toilet lying upended in the unkempt yard and I realized that in the movie version of my life, this was the moment to get up, get dressed, and get out. But I didn't.

Margaret Ardenwald had many lovers but never married. A few photographs she took of picnics at the old turbine near the White River are on permanent display in the basement gallery of the city's historical society, and standing before them, I tried to imagine that black and white scene as vibrantly as it was viewed through her lens. When Margaret looked out the windows of the closet that is now Edward's, pressed her nose against the cold panes and watched her fanning breath momentarily obscure the view, she saw what I saw.

She knew many colorful and intelligent people, and I imagine she thought and did many imaginative and slightly subversive things that no one remembers. Her sister Nancy died in the winter of 1948, and Margaret slowly began to lose her mind.

When I inspected the warren-like closet on the third floor I found strands of dark hair wrapped around a nail, bent and stuck into a wall. I imagined the hair was hers, and holding it, I thought of everything we do that finally matters not at all. I lay down on the

bed I thought of as hers, and remembered how safe and warm I'd once felt in Edward's closet. And now I wanted out. I was tired of being a housekeeper, especially a bad one. I suppose I could have been better, but it seemed ridiculous to spend one's life this way.

On a typical morning, after I'd put the dishes left for me on *top* of the dishwasher *into* the dishwasher, made the beds, and thrown the clothes left strewn on the floor down the laundry chute, I had hours to kill. Sometimes I tested the hair products standing like a small army massed for battle on the marble counters. Even in salons there wasn't such variety of product, and I tested most of these products, each time making my finger marks in the little tubs of goo resemble Edward's, and made a list of all forty-four and rated them for hold, smell, and whether or not their performance matched their overwrought copy. My favorite was John Frieda Shaping Glossing Balm, and its claim to provide "an immediate explosion of shine, highlights and body."

I'd also examined myself, at least once, in every mirror in the house. And this made clear how often I'd been rewarded for being pretty—here, mostly alone, or with a little boy and two gay men, I didn't have the foothold I'd always used without realizing it. I regarded myself coldly as I went from floor to floor, repeating the lonely tasks that were never finished. I was, unwittingly, a fifties housewife, without the occasional sex or satisfaction that I was doing what society expected and my reflection reminded me that I was here, *now*, for better or worse.

Taped on Jeremy's bathroom mirror was a computer-generated note from his dads, reminding him that he was bright and funny and cherished and would surely do amazing things with his life. He was involved in everything a privileged nine-year-old would be—soccer and piano and baseball and saxophone and lacrosse and talent shows

and science fairs, and in each thing he did, each new skateboarding trick learned, I saw his clear sense that he could choose his path and follow it toward success. I saw his hope, his expectation, and had to swallow the ugly urge to say, “I did all those things, too. Don’t get carried away.”

Though admittedly disgusted with the excess of Edward’s closet, I honestly loved being in it. I felt proud of the caretaking I did for this man who didn’t even have time to know his own family, let alone pick up after himself. I loved the way the yellow light filtered through the leaves and warmed the windowpanes. I liked being responsible for the fact that every item of clothing he owned—save for what he was wearing at the moment or had packed neatly in his suitcase—was clean, pressed, folded, and organized by pattern or weight or material. These were things Edward didn’t have to worry about, leaving him to worry about other things—important things.

So I was surprised when one morning after Edward had left for Japan on business, Lance said, “Edward told me to mention his closet—he said you must not be spending enough time in there.”

I asked for specifics.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Lance said. “You’ll have to ask him.”

Edward wasn’t due back for nearly two weeks, but I went upstairs and stood in his silent, immaculate closet, wondering what I’d been missing. I stayed there for half an hour, opening and closing drawers, looking for clues. “What am I not seeing?” I asked myself, wishing for my own computer-generated note. I felt so small in that clean,

beautiful space, so confused and reprimanded, that I finally sank down on the orange carpet I'd spot cleaned the week before with a rag and hot soapy water.

When I'd stopped crying I went up to Margaret's room and lay on her bed, thinking. That night I applied for adjunct teaching positions at two local community colleges, and soon was offered two night classes.

I was once again going to be paid to think! And to inspire and talk about literature and writing! And this allowed me to more openly resent the fact that while Lance and Edward traveled the world, trusting me with their house, their clothing and their child, they didn't pay me enough to make ends meet.

I was also newly frustrated by my opposing roles: I was supposed to act like part of the family while being treated as the hired help, disposable. When Lance and Edward were out of town, I was Jeremy's source for love and food and attention and transportation. But when I organized their holiday party, I answered the door, took coats, fetched drinks and wasn't even introduced to their friends. I was the *help*, after all. But during my time on this planet I'd sort of grown accustomed to being seen, being spoken to.

I knew I should be grateful. But being recognized as a person doesn't seem like something for which one should really have to be grateful, no matter how bad things get.

Part of the reason I stayed at The Big House is that upon taking the job I'd been promised a raise after three months. Not by Lance and Edward, admittedly, but by my

therapist's ex-wife, who'd sold me the job on their behalf. And I'd been waiting, literally marking the calendar.

So on the fateful day, while heating tomato soup for Lance and Jeremy, I took a deep breath and brought up the question of more money. Lance waited until Jeremy had finished his lunch, and then asked him to go upstairs and practice his piano, and then he kindly but clearly informed me of my lack of proficiency. "Your skills *aren't* excellent," Lance said. "You aren't focused here, on us."

He and Edward had wanted me to take more initiative in running their house, and to do much more than the day-to-day work I'd been doing, but as I hadn't quite been able to master the more menial tasks, such as the garbage, they'd been unable to give me more responsibility.

Lance had really been bothered by the trash incident, as it illustrated the depth of my distraction.

It was true. I *was* distracted. I often thought much more about *not* wanting to be about there than I did about what I was actually doing. And I was preoccupied with teaching, and Harold, and the many more important things I could be doing in the world than keeping house for a wealthy couple with too many sweaters and too many demands.

But suddenly the raise was not at issue, but my continuing employment. Most of me wanted to shout, "Praise God!" and sprint out the door, but I also understood that I couldn't support myself teaching part-time at a community college.

"Why don't you take a week and think about whether or not you really want to be here," Lance said, looking at me kindly, with his therapist's double gaze. "*We* want you here, but only if *you* really want to be here."

He was truly shocked when, three days later, I admitted that, in fact, I did *not* want to be there. With wonderful timing, one of my friends in food service had called: His fellow server had failed to card an undercover Oregon Liquor Control Commission agent and was quickly fined and fired. And my friend wanted to know if I might be available four nights a week starting right now. “Yes, I definitely might,” I said.

My last day at Lance and Edward’s I went through every room, taking in the lovely light and artifacts and rich colors I’d looked at so many times. I made Jeremy’s bed and then tidied his stuffed animals heaped in the corner, then folded the ugly fleece blanket he loved to drag through the house. In Edward’s big, windowed closet I pressed my nose against the cold windowpane, looking over the turreted roofs of the neighborhood, down through the treetops to Wordsworth School, and over the city to the smooth-flanked mountains. In Edward’s closet I straightened some of the hanging shirts, lined up the dress- and semi-dress shoes, then inspected the ridiculous pile of identical terry cloth slippers just to remind myself that leaving was absolutely the right thing.

In the third floor closet I touched the bit of dark hair wrapped around a bent nail in the wall and told Margaret Ardenwald I would miss her.

I never said goodbye to Jeremy. It was Thursday, and he had band, and then piano lessons. I composed several different goodbye notes on yellow Post-its, but none of them seemed right. He would understand, whatever I said, that I didn’t care enough about him to stay; I was one of the women who had left. Lance had told me I was always welcome, and that perhaps I should come to one of Jeremy’s soccer games to ease the transition, I

knew I'd never see him again. They'd close ranks, they'd tell stories: *When she came, she didn't even know how to make a bed!*

It was the last time I'd ride the #15. And surrounded by the other cleaning ladies who were also clearly relieved to be heading home, I was overjoyed by absolutely everything around me—the bright, rolling laughter, shiny braids and chipping brown barrettes, the warm, powdery smell of deodorant mixed with newspaper ink. White blossoms had bloomed on the trees overnight, and before us the twilight city was starting to twinkle. I saw a pair of teenage girls trying to sync their steps, and watched a man stop abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk to kiss his fat black lab on the top of the head. “God, I love this place,” I said aloud.

And suddenly the world felt like mine again.