

What I learned at Maid School

By Cynthia Kling
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A few weeks ago, my housecleaner disappeared. I was secretly relieved: I'd always been somewhat dubious of her methods (paper-towel dusting?) and the bleachy chemicals she squirted everywhere. We'd never discussed any of this because, even though I have very high standards, I had no clue how to communicate them and no real idea about the right way to shine up my house.

It was time to act on a fantasy I'd had for a while - maid school, specifically, the Starkey International Institute for Household Management in Denver, where Mary Louise Starkey and other professors teach students the uber-Jeeves skills necessary to run the estates of the super-rich. Starkey's eight-week household-management course includes everything from detailing a Rolls Royce to orchestrating a formal dinner. At the school's Georgian mansion, students attend lectures in lower-level classrooms, then practice their technique in the grand room upstairs. I wrangled an invite to drop in on a course in progress and packed my rubber gloves.

School Days

I arrived at 8 a.m. and was greeted by Ms. Tyng, a fortyish blonde student who was the household manager for the week. She stopped to straighten a painting that didn't look crooked to me, while other students, clad as she and I were in the school's sharp uniform of blue blazer and khakis, buzzed by with feather chandeliers - like a life-size Clue game, I thought, as we pulled into the butler's pantry. "We keep the Task Sheets here," Ms. Tyng explained, pulling a large binder off the shelf. The 13,000-square-foot home was organized into zones - the living room / dining room, the kitchen / pantry, etc. Instructions had

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been drawn up for exactly what to clean weekly and monthly in each zone - from polishing silver to vacuuming heat vents. It was the if-I'm-hit-by-a-bus-they'll-know-what-to-do method of housecleaning.

"Ms. Kling, lecture time," Ms. Tyng said. (Everyone at Starkey, whether you're a garage attendant or the head of the school, is addressed formally.) We went downstairs, where I met the other students and our household-management instructor, Mr. Bertnick, who had a long, aristocratic face and a soft voice. The '92 Starkey graduate started off by discussing how cleaning standards vary and asked what we thought freshly cleaned actually meant. A tinge of lemon scent? Vacuum marks on the carpet? Everyone had different fantasies. To know how to clean, you had to know what someone expected.

Everybody agreed that a clean bathroom was the ultimate neat-freak fantasy.

"Any questions there?" Mr. Bertnick asked.

"How about Fantastik?" I inquired. Mr. Bertnick looked like I'd squirted him with it. "It doesn't disinfect, and the chemicals can erode your surfaces." A damp cloth and mild soap would get most dirt, Mr. Bertnick advised. He used words like surfactant and in his spare time tested new products in his constant search for better ways to clean (see below for his suggestions). I'd just met my first cleaning genius, whose credo is that if you love your stuff, you'll clean it with the gentlest products that do the job.

We went off to lunch, then Bed-Making 101, upstairs in one of the chintz-happy guest suites. The mattress was vacuumed twice a year, said Mr. Bertnick, and can be triple-sheeted for summer: bottom sheet, top sheet, then a summer blanket, and finally a sheet on top of the blanket to keep it from scrunching to the bottom. Smart. Next task: awakening the mistress. He went outside, knocked and glided in sideways, eyes averted from the imaginary, rumpled tycoon's wife.

Good home care, apparently, is equal parts compulsion, chemistry and theater. How would I communicate all this to my housecleaner, especially if I felt guilty about even having one? (Isn't hiring a cleaner like taking diet pills - you really should be doing the work yourself?)

The gospel according to Starkey

The next day I met Mrs. Starkey, a Jackie O brunette in silk who'd started the school in '89. My guilt, she told me, was ridiculous. And she knew. Eight years earlier at age 32, divorced and supporting two kids, she began a housecleaning business and realized the job took skills, passion and knowledge. (The Starkey textbook is 621 pages long.) Had I ever considered discussing the details of what I required from my housecleaner - or had I just assumed it was all really simple? I felt a little ashamed to admit it, but I wasn't the Task Sheet type. "You need to put on your coveralls and clean your house top to bottom so that you know what it is all about," Mrs. Starkey working alongside her, so you can tell her - down to the smells - what you like." The first thing we would discuss would be the foolishness of paper-towel dusting.

Cleaning secrets from the Mansion

Mr. Bertnick, household-management instructor at the Starkey Institute, divulges the correct way to clean tricky things.

Hardwood floors

Add 1/4 cup of vinegar to a bucket of water, and use a damp mop (too much water may cause wood to swell). For scuff marks, *white scrubby sponges* (the kind with the textured backing: "63 Light Duty" \$22.41/nine, amazon.com) won't leave dye marks.

Sills, baseboards and other painted wood surfaces

Warm water, a rag and gentle dish soap will pick up surface dirt and fingerprints. Use the *Mr. Clean Magic Eraser* (\$29.98/12, acehardware.com) for tough marks, but wipe with water after to get rid of the residue.

Linens

A neutral, pH-balanced detergent, such as *Linen Wash* (\$9.50/eight ounces, linenwash.com), is safe for high-thread-count and vintage linens. Wash in warm water and dry on the delicate or permanent-press cycles. High heat can break those expensive fibers.

Lucite and Plexiglas

Never use strong cleaners on acrylic pieces because they can cause them to turn cloudy. Dust with *microfiber cloths* (\$20/eight, gaiam.com) to trap the dirt without soap. Try warm water and a lint-free terry rag for a more thorough scrub.

Paintings

A *badger-hair brush* (\$10.65 constantines.com), which is usually used for painting, is also great for cleaning. It's good for lifting dirt out of the tiny grooves of dried paint and from delicate, fragile frames - like gold-leaf or hand-painted.

