

Short Story Adult Winner

Light Housework

By Kathleen Wheaton

Dearest Gabriel,

On my first day in America—Aug. 17, 1978—our children were awake before dawn and making noise. Six hours earlier, a Quaker woman named Peggy had met us at the airport and then driven us along quiet, tree-lined streets to her brick house. We were in the national capital, but we could hear insects chirping in the darkness, smell fresh-cut grass and damp earth.

In Argentina, my knowledge of Quakers was limited to the picture on the oatmeal box, so I was surprised that Peggy drove a car and wore blue jeans and that her gray hair was short like a boy's. I'd confused the religion of our sponsors with the Amish, and had supposed that we were going to stay on a farm equipped with a horse and buggy. I'd told Mari that she might get to wear a long dress and a bonnet like in *Little House on the Prairie*, and Julian that he'd learn to milk a cow.

Peggy put us in a room that had been the childhood bedroom of her daughter, Lisa, and where she hoped her grandchildren would sleep when they came. Bustling to and fro with sheets and towels, Peggy talked nonstop in a low, soothing voice, as if we were frightened animals. She explained that Lisa hadn't been able to visit because she was very busy in Ellay, a city we never learned of in geography class. "She's just gotten a part in a new soap. It's not *General Hospital*, of course, but I hope it'll take off."

"I see," I said, clinging to *soap* as if it were a life raft in Peggy's sea of words. What I understood was that Lisa's job had to do with cleansing products for hospitals. I'm sure you recall, Gabo, which of the two of us got a perfect score on the English examination our final year at Buenos Aires University! So I was mortified that I had no idea what this kindhearted woman was telling me. "How interesting," I said.

I already knew that Americans were kind. All across this country, people were writing letters to the Argentine military junta on your behalf. And now here was Peggy, folding back the coverlet of her daughter's canopied bed for a stranger. She'd set up cots for the children, but Mari and Julian demanded to sleep with me, in the bed that had a roof over it.

I did not sleep. In the weeks since your arrest, I had the impression that I never slept. Every time I closed my eyes, I returned to the last moments I'd seen you, in our flat on Calle Bolivar. I was sitting on the end of our bed in my nightgown, watching you knot your necktie in the beveled mirror over the bureau. It was 2 o'clock in the morning, but you said it might be best if you wore a tie to be interviewed by the police. That was what the men who knocked on our door had said: that they'd like to interview you—as if they, too, were journalists. They were waiting in the front room for you to dress. They'd addressed me politely as Señora de Baum,

and that had seemed a good sign, though I hadn't been able to bring myself to offer them a cup of tea. "I'll be back before you're even awake, Sonia," you said, and it seemed to me that I'd been awake ever since. Sometimes at night I scribbled in the little reporter's notebook I'd taken from your desk. My plan was that when we got to a place of safety I'd write you a long letter about everything that had happened since we'd been separated.

Daylight flooded Lisa's room, intensifying the pink color of the walls, the fluffy carpet, the curtains. Mari sat up and demanded to know where her bonnet and the cows were, and soon Julian was also clamoring for a bonnet and cows. It was not yet 7 o'clock. I waved my arms and turned them into mice. This had become a regular game since your arrest, and they obediently crept over the cream-colored carpet to the kitchen.

Peggy had set out bowls and spoons and showed me the carton of milk in the refrigerator. But I could find neither chocolate powder nor matches to light the stove and boil the milk, so I poured plain cold milk into each bowl. "Mama, this will give us a stomachache," Mari said.

"It's special American milk, and it won't," I said, hoping that was true. Peggy had also set out American cornflakes, which I'd never consented to buy in Argentina because of the absurd price. I shook a small portion into their cupped hands, and the children savored them one by one, like potato chips. I told them that if they finished their milk without fussing we'd go to the park that we could see through the window over the kitchen sink.

Mari worried that we'd get lost in America, but I pointed out that if we could see the park from the window, we'd be able to see Peggy's house from the park.

Outside, the air was warm and moist. Velvety grass rolled all the way down to the sidewalk.

I took the notebook from my skirt pocket and wrote: *America is entirely carpeted, indoors and out. The trees are healthy and robust, like the citizens.*

The children ran shouting toward a set of swings—they hadn't been allowed to play outside for so long—and I felt like shouting myself, after our months in hiding. I pushed them on the swings and we sang songs until I was dizzy. I sat down on a bench and looked at my watch. It was a quarter to 8. I had not thought about you for half an hour. The children climbed to the top of a slide, and I called to them to be careful.

A plump young woman carrying a red-haired baby in a pouch sat down on the other end of the bench with a groan. She had a pretty face and blue eyes.

She's the fair, fleshy type you'd watch out of the corner of your eye, strolling along Calle Florida on a Sunday afternoon.

"You're great with those kids," the woman said.

I put the notebook away. "Thank you."

Mari waved from the top of the slide. "Hello, hello, hello!" she shouted, showing off exactly half the total English she knew.

"She's jealous of my attention," I said.

"They seem very fond of you."

"Yes, I believe they are."

"And your English is excellent."

"You are kind, but no."

"I haven't seen you at the park before."

"We are staying at the house of Peggy Coffin." I pointed to the one I hoped was hers, in a row of identical brick houses surrounding the park.

"Really! I've never met Lisa's kids, but those blond curls are exactly like hers used to be, though she must dye her hair now. She's too famous anymore for her high school friends. She's great on the soap, but so skinny I want to kill her. I gained 30 pounds with this guy." She stroked the baby's silky head.

"I see," I said. "How interesting."

"You'll be going back to Ellay soon? I suppose the kids'll be starting school."

"The kids will go to school," I said, proud that I'd picked up the slang expression for children. "But I won't go to Ellay. I will look for a job in Washington, D.C."

"Now, *that* is interesting! Because my maternity leave is up next month and I'm desperately seeking day care. I'd have to get references and all that, but why don't you come by and we can chat over coffee? I got zero sleep last night."

I'm only inventing what this plump woman said to me, Gabo—it was so long ago. What I understood then was that, like me, she was bone tired; also like me, she had an ex-friend whom she wanted to kill. When our former classmate, Pilar, told me it was too dangerous to hide me and the children in her home, I'd wished her dead.

"I would enjoy a cup of coffee," I said.

"Oh, that's fabulous. I'm just around the corner. What's your name?"

“I am Sonia.”

“Great—you can call me Beth.” I already knew that Americans didn’t kiss when introduced, and that it was important not to stand too close to the other person during a conversation.

I walked over to the slide and told the children that the lady with the baby had invited us to visit her.

“No!” they cried together.

“She’s a yanqui de mierda,” said Mari, who’d begun reading shortly after your arrest—including the graffiti she saw out the windows of the Number 60 bus.

“Yanqui de mierda,” Julian shouted.

“You mustn’t say that in America because it will hurt people’s feelings.”

“Yanqui de mierda,” Julian repeated in his tenderest, 3-year-old way.

“She’ll give you Nesquik,” I said. They hesitated, suspicious. Poor things, how many lies I’d told them since you’d been taken away. That Papi was on a trip but would be back soon. That if they stood very quiet in a closet until the pounding and shouting went away, they would get a present. That sleeping outside was fun, and a little rain never hurt anyone. That we were flying to the land of Disney World, and we would go on the rides every day.

In protest, Mari’s legs went limp as macaroni in the middle of the street. “Stand up and walk nicely,” I whispered fiercely. “In America, it’s not illegal to run over children.”

We followed Beth down the sidewalk and through a gate into her garden.

We went around to the back door and into her kitchen. Our shoes stuck to the linoleum. The cupboard doors were standing open, dirty plates were piled everywhere. “Do you guys like graham crackers?” Beth held out a box to the children.

“They look delicious,” I said. “Say thank you.”

Mari and Julian did, beautifully. They’d practiced on the plane. They could make the “th” sound. They wolfed the crackers and then got down on the filthy floor and began playing with the baby’s toys, which were scattered everywhere.

“It’s adorable how you’ve taught them Spanish. I’d want you to do the same with Jason.”

“Hola, Jason,” I said. “Hola, mi amor.”

“Would you like to hold him?” Beth lifted Jason out of the pouch and handed him to me. He was heavy and his diaper was wet, but she didn’t ask for him back. “I don’t know that I could match what Lisa’s paying you—I’m not a TV star. But I’m willing to negotiate.”

At that moment, finally, I understood. *Darling Gabo, I planned to write later, the funniest thing happened to me today, on my first morning in America.*

“Come on, I’ll show you around.”

In a daze, I followed Beth through the house, up the stairs to the bedrooms, then down, down to the laundry room. Peggy had also shown me all the rooms of her home, but they were spare, clean and orderly. In this house, there was much to be ashamed of—mounds of clothes on the rug, unmade beds, a smell of baby poo, but Beth didn’t act ashamed. We returned to the kitchen, where Mari and Julian were quarreling—in whispers, as they’d learned to do—over the baby’s toys. I was still carrying Jason. I buried my nose in his baby-shampooed hair.

Beth showed me the dishwasher. “In my country, only rich people have these devices,” I said. You’ll remember, Gabo, our argument over getting one—you said that was what we paid Aparecida for. Before going into hiding, I paid her six months’ wages, then warned her to go home to Rio Negro to avoid being interrogated.

“Oh, of course,” Beth said with a sympathetic smile for my country and its shortage of rich people. “But didn’t you learn to use Lisa’s dishwasher? I’d expect you to do light housework, since I have just the one child.”

“Light housework,” I repeated. I liked the phrase; it sounded so carefree, so American. I thought of Peggy’s light-filled house, her pale, fluffy carpets.

I realized I was smiling. In my mind I was cataloging the details of this place to put into my letter. The sticky floors, the stink, the disorder. I would describe Beth’s soft, round bottom moving before me up the stairs. *I wanted to pinch it, hard, for assuming I’m a servant because I spoke Spanish to my blond children. How she would have shrieked, this yanqui de mierda.*

Jason began to cry, and I jiggled him up and down in my arms.

But the baby’s sobs also shook me. This silly misunderstanding would never make you laugh aloud. You would never get my letter. You were in a secret prison, being tortured. Maybe dead. I might be in America for the rest of my life.

Julian tugged on my skirt. “Mama, Mama, Mama. You said we would have Nesquik here.”

Beth turned around. “Wait—did he just call you Mama?”

“He did.” I was still smiling. My mouth felt warped.

“Oh, my God. These aren’t Lisa’s kids—Peggy’s grandkids?”

“They are my children. I am Sonia Mendez de Baum. They are Mari and Julian Baum. Their father is Gabriel Baum. He is a disappeared journalist in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The American Friends Service Committee have given us refuge in Peggy’s house.”

“Oh, Lord.” Beth plopped down at the greasy table and gazed at me. Her look of anguish gave me much pleasure. “Earth, just swallow me up.”

Now, I thought, we have one more thing in common: *I, too, wish I were under the ground. Then I would be with you, Gabo.*

Beth offered to drive us to Peggy’s, but I said no, I was sure we could find her house. After a few wrong turns and frustrated tears, we did find it. We stayed there a week, until an apartment was found for us in a nearby village with the beautiful name of Silver Spring. But between getting the children registered for school and locating a suitable job for me (at that time, the cosmetics counter at Saks Fifth Avenue hired attractive young refugees from the Soviet Union and Iran as well as from various South American dictatorships, and I made lifelong friends there), we did not return to the park. I never saw Beth again.

At least once a year I visit Peggy, who is very old now. We have tea and cookies in her living room. Every year the pale carpet is more stained and the dust on the furniture is thicker. Fearing to offend, I’ve never offered to vacuum and dust the room for her, but now I see that I should have. This year she told me that after her daughter’s recent visit, it had been decided that she should be moved to an institution for elderly Quakers in Orange County, California. “It looks quite nice in the pictures,” Peggy said in her soft-voiced, optimistic way. Still talking, she went out of the room to fetch something she’d found while organizing her possessions. She came back with the reporter’s notebook. “This was wedged between the headboard and the wall in Lisa’s room,” she said. “The writing looks to be Spanish, so I wondered if it could be yours.”

When I finally managed to speak, I told her it was.

You used to buy those narrow spiral notebooks by the dozen at that stationer’s shop on Avenida de Mayo, up the street from the Presidential Palace. *Shock* was the brand name—the English word “shock”—you and I laughed and wondered how the paper company came up with that. Now, sitting on Peggy’s dusty sofa, I was shocked to be holding this object you’d touched so many years ago.

So that makes four things in America that have been touched by you, counting me and the children, of course. I apologize, Gabo, for taking so long to write this letter. I plan to mail it to our old address on Calle Bolivar, where the current residents of the flat might be curious about

what befell its former occupants. The little notebook describes only my first day here, but I think they'd be interested to know what I believe you somehow also know: that my subsequent days have been more or less a version of that one, and that Mari and Julian have grown up and—like real Americans—are more or less happy.

All my love,
Sonia