

Lucia Berlin, A Manual for Cleaning Women
(2015)

Silence

I started out quiet, living in mountain mining towns, moving too often to make a friend. I'd find me a tree or a room in an old deserted mill, to sit in silence.

My mother was usually reading or sleeping so I spoke mostly with my father. As soon as he got in the door or when he took me up into the mountains or down dark into the mines, I was talking nonstop.

Then he went overseas and we were in El Paso, Texas, where I went to Vilas school. In third grade I read well but I didn't even know addition. Heavy brace on my crooked back. I was tall but still childlike. A changeling in this city, as if I'd been reared in the woods by mountain goats. I kept peeing in my pants, splashing until I refused to go to school or even speak to the principal.

My mother's old high school teacher got me in as a scholarship student at the exclusive Radford School for Girls, two bus rides across El Paso. I still had all of the above problems but now I was also dressed like a ragamuffin. I lived in the slums and there was something particularly unacceptable about my hair.

I haven't talked much about this school. I don't mind telling people awful things if I can make them funny. It was never funny. Once at recess I took a drink from a garden hose and the teacher grabbed it from me, told me I was common.

But the library. Every day we got to spend an hour in it, free to look at any book, at every book, to sit down and read, or go through the card catalogue. When there were fifteen minutes left the librarian let us know, so we could check out a book. The librarian was so, don't laugh, soft-spoken. Not just quiet but nice. She'd tell you, "This is where biographies are," and then explain what a biography was.

"Here are reference books. If there is ever anything you want to know, you just ask me and we'll find the answer in a book."

This was a wonderful thing to hear and I believed her.

Then Miss Brick's purse got stolen from beneath her desk. She said that it must have been me who took it. I was sent to Lucinda de Leftwitch Templin's office. Lucinda de said she knew I didn't come from a privileged home like most of her girls, and that this might be difficult for me sometimes. She understood, she said, but really she was saying, "Where's the purse?"

I left. Didn't even go back to get the bus money or lunch in my cubby. Took off across town, all the long way, all the long day. My mother met me on the porch with a switch. They had called to say I had stolen the purse and then run away. She didn't even ask me if I stole it. "Little thief, humiliating me," whack, "brat, ungrateful," whack. Lucinda de called her the next day to tell her a janitor had stolen the purse but my mother didn't even apologize to me. She just said, "Bitch," after she hung up.

That's how I ended up in St. Joseph's, which I loved. But those kids hated me too, for all of the above reasons but now worse for new reasons, one being that Sister Cecilia always called on me and I got stars and Saint pictures and was the pet! pet! until I stopped raising my hand.

Uncle John took off for Nacogdoches, which left me alone with my mother and Grandpa. Uncle John always used to eat with me, or drink while I ate. He talked to me while I helped him repair furniture, took me to movies and let me hold his slimy glass

eye. It was terrible when he was gone. Grandpa and Mamie (my grandma) were at his dentist office all day and then when they got home Mamie kept my little sister safe away in the kitchen or in Mamie's room. My mother was out, being a gray lady at the army hospital or playing bridge. Grandpa was out at the Elks or who knows. The house was scary and empty without John and I'd have to hide from Grandpa and Mama when either of them was drunk. Home was bad and school was bad.

I decided not to talk. I just sort of gave it up. It lasted so long Sister Cecilia tried to pray with me in the cloakroom. She meant well and was just touching me in sympathy, praying. I got scared and pushed her and she fell down and I got expelled.

That's when I met Hope.

School was almost over so I would stay home and go back to Vilas in the fall. I still wasn't talking, even when my mother poured a whole pitcher of iced tea over my head or twisted as she pinched me so the pinches looked like stars, the Big Dipper, Little Dipper, the Lyre up and down my arms.

I played jacks on the concrete above the steps, wishing that the Syrian kid next door would ask me over. She played on their concrete porch. She was small and thin but seemed old. Not grown-up or mature but like an old woman-child. Long shiny black hair with bangs hanging down over her eyes. In order to see she had to tip her head back. She looked like a baby baboon. In a nice way, I mean. A little face and huge black eyes. All of the six Haddad kids looked emaciated but the adults were huge, two or three hundred pounds.

I knew she noticed me too because if I was doing cherries in the basket so was she. Or shooting stars, except she didn't ever drop a jack, even with twelves. For weeks our balls and jacks made a nice bop bop crash bop bop crash rhythm until finally she did come over to the fence. She must have heard my mother yelling at me because she said,

"You talk yet?"

I shook my head.

"Good. Talking to me won't count."

I hopped the fence. That night I was so happy I had a friend that when I went to bed I called out, "Good night!"

We had played jacks for hours that day and then she taught me mumblety-peg. Dangerous games with a knife. Triple flips into the grass, and the scariest was one hand flat on the ground, stabbing between each finger. Faster faster faster blood. I don't think we spoke at all. We rarely did, all summer long. All I remember are her first and last words.

I have never had a friend again like Hope, my onliest true friend. I gradually became a part of the Haddad family. I believe that if this had not happened I would have grown up to be not just neurotic, alcoholic, and insecure, but seriously disturbed. Wacko.

The six children and the father spoke English. The mother, grandma, and five or six other old women spoke only Arabic. Looking back, it seems like I went through sort of an orientation. The children watched as I learned to run, really run, to vault the fence, not climb it. I became expert with the knife, tops, and marbles. I learned cusswords and gestures in English, Spanish, and Arabic. For the grandma I washed dishes, watered, raked the sand in the backyard, beat rugs with a woven-cane beater, helped the old women roll out bread on the Ping-Pong tables in the basement. Lazy afternoons washing bloody menstrual rags in a tub in the backyard with Hope and Shahala, her older sister. This seemed not disgusting but magic, like a mysterious rite. In the mornings I stood in line with the other girls to get my ears washed and my hair braided, to get kibbe on fresh hot bread. The women hollered at me, "*Hjadda-dinah!*" Kissed me and slapped me as if I belonged there. Mr. Haddad let me and Hope sit on couches and drive around town in the bed of his Haddad's Beautiful Furniture truck.

I learned to steal. Pomegranates and figs from blind old Guca's yard, Blue Waltz perfume, Tangee lipstick from Kress's, licorice and sodas from the Sunshine Grocery. Stores delivered then, and

one day the Sunshine delivery boy was bringing groceries to both our houses just as Hope and I were getting home, eating banana Popsicles. Our mothers were both outside.

"Your kids stole them Popsicles!" he said.

My mother slapped me whack whack. "Get inside, you criminal lying cheating brat!" But Mrs. Haddad said, "You lousy liar! *Hjaddadinah! Tlajhama!* Don't you talk bad about my kids! I'm not going to your store no more!"

And she never did, taking a bus all the way to Mesa to shop, knowing full well that Hope had stolen the Popsicle. This made sense to me. I didn't just want my mother to believe me when I was innocent, which she never did, but to stand up for me when I was guilty.

When we got skates Hope and I covered El Paso, skated over the whole town. We went to movies, letting the other in by the fire exit door. *The Spanish Main, Till the End of Time*. Chopin bleeding all over the piano keys. We saw *Mildred Pierce* six times and *The Beast with Five Fingers* ten.

The best time we had was the cards. Anytime we could, we hung out around her brother Sammy, who was seventeen. He and his friends were handsome and tough and wild. I have told you about Sammy and the cards. We sold chances for musical vanity boxes. We brought him the money and he gave us a cut. That's how we got the skates.

We sold chances everywhere. Hotels and the train station, the USO, Juárez. But even neighborhoods were magic. You walk down a street, past houses and yards, and sometimes in the evening you can see people eating or sitting around and it's a lovely glimpse of how people live. Hope and I went inside hundreds of houses. Seven years old, both funny-looking in different ways, people liked us and were kind to us. "Come in. Have some lemonade." We saw four Siamese cats who used the real toilet and even flushed it. We saw parrots and one five-hundred-pound person who had not been out of the house for twenty years. But even more we liked all the pretty

things: paintings and china shepherdesses, mirrors, cuckoo clocks and grandfather clocks, quilts and rugs of many colors. We liked sitting in Mexican kitchens full of canaries, drinking real orange juice and eating pan dulce. Hope was so smart, she learned Spanish just from listening around the neighborhood, so she could talk to the old women.

We glowed when Sammy praised us, hugged us. He made us bologna sandwiches and let us sit near them on the grass. We told them all about the people we met. Rich ones, poor ones, Chinese ones, black ones until the conductor made us leave the colored waiting room at the station. Only one bad person, the man with the dogs. He didn't do anything or say anything bad, just scared us to death with his pale smirky face.

When Sammy bought the old car, Hope figured it out right away. That nobody was going to get any vanity box.

She leaped in a fury over the fence into my yard, howling, hair flying like an Indian warrior in the movies. She opened her knife and made big gashes in our index fingers, held them dripping together.

"I will never ever speak to Sammy again," she said. "Say it!"

"I will never ever speak to Sammy again," I said.

I exaggerate a lot and I get fiction and reality mixed up, but I don't actually ever lie. I wasn't lying when I made that vow. I knew he had used us, lied to us, and cheated all those people. I was never going to speak to him.

A few weeks later I was climbing the hill up Upson, near the hospital. Hot. (See, I'm trying to justify what happened. It was always hot.) Sammy pulled up in the old blue open car, the car Hope and I had worked to pay for. It is true too that coming from mountain towns and except for some taxis I had rarely been in a car.

"Come for a ride."

Some words drive me crazy. Lately every newspaper article has a benchmark or a watershed or an icon in it. At least one of these applies to that moment in my life.

I was a little girl; I don't believe it was an actual sexual attraction. But I was awed by his physical beauty, his magnetism. Whatever the excuse . . . Well, so okay, there is no excuse for what I did. I spoke to him. I got into the car.

It was wonderful, riding in the open car. The wind cooled us off as we sped around the Plaza, past the Wigwam theater, the Del Norte, the Popular Dry Goods Company, then up Mesa toward Upson. I was going to ask him to let me out a few blocks before home just as I saw Hope in a fig tree on the vacant lot where Upson and Randolph came together.

Hope screamed. Sat up in the tree shaking her fist at me, cursing in Syrian. Maybe everything that has happened to me since was a result of this curse. Makes sense.

I got out of the car, sick at heart, shaking, climbed the stairs to our house like an old person, fell onto the porch swing.

I knew that it was the end of my friendship and I knew I was wrong.

Each day was endless. Hope walked past me as if I were invisible, played on the other side of the fence as if our yard did not exist. She and her sisters spoke only Syrian now. Loud if they were outside. I understood a lot of the bad things they said. Hope played jacks alone on the porch for hours, wailing Arabic songs, beautiful; her harsh plaintive voice made me weep for missing her.

Except for Sammy, none of the Haddads would speak to me. Her mother spat at me and shook her fist. Sammy would call to me from the car, away from our house. Tell me he was sorry. He tried to be nice, saying he knew that she was really still my friend and please don't be sad. That he understood why I couldn't talk to him, to please forgive him. I turned away so I couldn't see him when he spoke.

I have never been so lonely in my life. Benchmark lonely. The days were endless, the sound of her ball relentless hour after hour on the concrete, the swish of her knife into the grass, glint of the blade.

There weren't any other children in our neighborhood. For weeks we played alone. She perfected knife tricks on their grass. I colored and read, lying on the porch swing.

She left for good just before school started. Sammy and her father carried her bed and bed table and a chair down to the huge furniture truck. Hope climbed in back, sat up in the bed so she could see out. She didn't look at me. She looked tiny in the huge truck. I watched until she disappeared. Sammy called to me from the fence, told me that she had gone to Odessa, Texas, to live with some relatives. I say Odessa, Texas, because once someone said, "This is Olga; she's from Odessa." And I thought, so? Turned out it was in the Ukraine. I thought the only Odessa was where Hope went.

School started and it wasn't so bad. I didn't care about being always alone or laughed at. My back brace was getting too small and my back hurt. Good, I thought, it's what I deserve.

Uncle John came back. Five minutes in the door he said to my mother, "Her brace is too small!"

I was so glad to see him. He fixed me a bowl of puffed wheat with milk, about six spoons of sugar, and at least three tablespoons of vanilla. He sat across from me at the kitchen table, drinking bourbon while I ate. I told him about my friend Hope, about everything. I even told him about the school troubles. I had almost forgotten them. He grunted or said, "Hot damn!" while I talked and he understood everything, especially about Hope.

He never said things like "Don't worry, it will all work out." In fact, once Mamie said, "Things could be worse."

"Worse?" he said. "Things could be a heckuva lot better!" He was an alcoholic too, but drink just made him sweeter, not like them. Or he'd take off, to Mexico or Nacogdoches or Carlsbad, to jail sometimes, I realize now.

He was handsome, dark like Grandpa, with only one blue eye since Grandpa shot out the other one. His glass eye was green. I know that it is true that Grandpa shot him, but how it happened has about ten different versions. When Uncle John was home he slept in the shed out back, near where he had made my room on the back porch.

Uncle John wore a cowboy hat and boots and was like a brave movie cowboy part of the time, at others just a pitiful crying bum.

"Sick again," Mamie would sigh about them.

"Drunk, Mamie," I'd say.

I tried to hide when Grandpa was drunk because he would catch me and rock me. He was doing it once in the big rocker, holding me tight, the chair bouncing off the ground inches from the red-hot stove, his thing jabbing jabbing my behind. He was singing, "Old Tin Pan with a Hole in the Bottom." Loud. Panting and grunting. Only a few feet away Mamie sat, reading the Bible while I screamed, "Mamie! Help me!" Uncle John showed up, drunk and dusty. He grabbed me away from Grandpa, pulled the old man up by his shirt. He said he'd kill him with his bare hands next time. Then he slammed shut Mamie's Bible.

"Read it over, Ma. You got it wrong, the part about turning the other cheek. That don't mean when somebody hurts a child."

She was crying, said he'd like to break her heart.

While I was finishing the cereal he asked me if Grandpa had been bothering me. I said no. I told him that he had done it to Sally, once, that I saw.

"Little Sally? What did you do?"

"Nothing." I had done nothing. I had watched with a mixture of feelings: fear, sex, jealousy, anger. John came around, pulled up a chair and shook me, hard. He was furious.

"That was rotten! You hear me? Where was Mamie?"

"Watering. Sally had been asleep, but she woke up."

"When I'm gone you're the only one here with any sense. You have to protect her. Do you hear me?"

I nodded, ashamed. But I was more ashamed of how I had felt when it happened. He figured it out somehow. He always understood all the things you didn't even get straight in your head, much less say.

"You think Sally has it pretty good. You're jealous of her because Mamie pays her so much attention. So even if this was a bad thing he was doing at least it used to be your bad thing, right? Honey, sure you're jealous of her. She's treated swell. But remember how mad you got at Mamie? How you begged her to help you? Answer me!"

"I remember."

"Well, you were as bad as Mamie. Worse! Silence can be wicked, plumb wicked. Anything else you done wrong, 'sides from betraying your sister and a friend?"

"I stole. Candy and . . ."

"I mean hurting people."

"No."

He said he was going to stick around awhile, get me straightened out, get his Antique Repair Shop going before winter.

I worked for him weekends and after school in the shed and the backyard. Sanding, sanding or rubbing wood with a rag soaked in linseed oil and turpentine. His friends Tino and Sam came sometimes to help him with caning, reupholstering, refinishing. If my mother or Grandpa came home they left the back way, because Tino was Mexican and Sam was colored. Mamie liked them, though, and always brought out brownies or oatmeal cookies if she was there.

Once Tino brought a Mexican woman, Mecha, almost a girl, really pretty, with rings and earrings, painted eyelids and long nails, a shiny green dress. She didn't speak English but pantomimed could she help me paint a kitchen stool. I nodded, sure. Uncle John told me to hurry up, paint fast before the paint ran out, and I guess Tino told Mecha the same thing in Spanish. We were furiously slapping the brushes around the rungs and up the legs, fast as we could while the three men held their sides, laughing at us. The two

of us figured it out at about the same time, and we both began laughing too. Mamie came out to see what the fuss was. She called Uncle John over to her. She was really mad about the woman, said it was wicked to have her here. John nodded and scratched his head. When Mamie went in, he came over and after a while said, "Well, let's call it a day."

While we cleaned the brushes, he explained that the woman was a whore, that Mamie figured that out by the way she was dressed and painted. He ended up explaining a lot of things that had bothered me. I understood more about my parents and Grandpa and movies and dogs. He forgot to tell me that whores charged money, so I was still confused about whores.

"Mecha was nice. I hate Mamie," I said.

"Don't say that word! Anyhow you don't hate her. You're mad because she doesn't like you. She sees you out wandering the streets, hanging out with Syrians and Uncle John. She figures you're a lost cause, a born Moynihan. You want her to love you, that's all. Anytime you think you hate somebody, what you do is pray for them. Try it, you'll see. And while you're busy praying for her, you might try helping her once in a while. Give her some kinda reason to like a surly brat like you."

On weekends sometimes he'd take me to the dog track in Juárez, or to gambling games around town. I loved the races and was good at picking winners. The only time I liked going to card games was when he played with railroad men, in a caboose at the train yards. I climbed the ladder to the roof and watched all the trains coming in and going out, switching, coupling. It got to be that most of the card games were in the back of Chinese laundries. I'd sit in the front reading for hours while somewhere in back he played poker. The heat and the smell of cleaning solvent mixed with singed wool and sweat was nauseating. A few times he left out the back way and forgot me, so that only when the laundryman came to close up did he find me asleep in the chair. I'd have to go home, far, in the dark, and most of the time nobody

would be there. Mamie took Sally to choir practice and to the Eastern Star and to make bandages for servicemen.

About once a month we'd go to a barbershop. A different one each time. He'd ask for a shave and a haircut. I'd sit on a chair reading *Argosy* while the barber cut his hair, just waiting for the shave part. Uncle John would be tilted way back in the chair and just as the barber was finishing the shave he'd ask, "Say, do you happen to have any eyedrops?" which they always did. The barber would stand over him and put drops in his eyes. The green glass eye would start spinning around and the barber would scream bloody murder. Then everybody'd laugh.

If only I had understood him half as much as he always understood me, I could have found out how he hurt, why he worked so hard to get laughs. He did make everybody laugh. We ate in cafés all over Juárez and El Paso that were like people's houses. Just a lot of tables in one room of a regular house, with good food. Everybody knew him and the waitresses always laughed when he asked if it was warmed-over coffee.

"Oh, no!"

"Well, how'd you get it so hot?"

I could usually tell just how drunk he was, and if it was a lot I'd make some excuse and walk or ride the trolley home. One day though, I had been sleeping in the cab of the truck, woke after he got in and started off. We were on Rim Road going faster faster. He had a bottle between his thighs, was driving with his elbows as he counted the money he held in a fan over the steering wheel.

"Slow down!"

"I'm in the money, honey!"

"Slow down! Hold on to the wheel!"

The truck thumped, shuddered high up and then thumped down. Money flew all over the cab. I looked out the back window. A little boy was standing in the street, his arm bleeding. A collie was lying next to him, really bloody, trying to get up.

"Stop. Stop the truck. We have to go back. Uncle John!"

"I can't!"

"Slow down. You have to turn around!" I was sobbing hysterically.

At home he reached across and opened my door. "You go on in."

I don't know if I stopped speaking to him. He never came home. Not that night, not for days, weeks, months. I prayed for him.

The war ended and my father came home. We moved to South America.

Uncle John ended up on skid row in Los Angeles, a really hopeless wino. Then he met Dora, who played trumpet in the Salvation Army band. She had him go into the shelter and have some soup and she talked to him. She said later that he made her laugh. They fell in love and were married and he never drank again. When I was older I went to visit them in Los Angeles. She was working as a riveter at Lockheed and he had an antique repair shop in his garage. They were maybe the sweetest two people I ever knew, sweet together, I mean. We went to Forest Lawn and the La Brea tar pits and the Grotto restaurant. Mostly I helped Uncle John in the shop, sanding furniture, polishing with the turpentine and linseed oil rag. We talked about life, told jokes. Neither of us ever mentioned El Paso. Of course by this time I had realized all the reasons why he couldn't stop the truck, because by this time I was an alcoholic.