



LEARNING CURVE

“A Little Mess Is Good for Guests”

ELENI N. GAGE embraces a home aesthetic that’s anything but tidy.

IT’S AN ENTERTAINING RITUAL.

“Sorry about the mess!” the host coos as they open the door to their home, even if the floors are spotless and every surface is shiny and lemon-scented. Then the guest replies, as if on cue, “What mess?!”

Only my guests don’t say that. They can’t, when confronted with *Encanto* figurines on the coffee table, drops of Wite-Out on the hardwood floor, and an apple core in a bowl my son left on the side table where they’d hoped to rest their wineglasses. To save us the embarrassment, I just skip the whole charade. Sorry, not sorry.

It’s not that I don’t see the mess. I’ve just learned my limits. I spent an entire weekend 15 years ago wiping surfaces and removing clutter to host a friend’s baby shower. Then someone brought a 5-year-old in white tights, who slithered around the living room floor and left wearing gray tights, crusted in the dirt everyone tracked in because I hadn’t asked visitors to remove their shoes. I saw those filthy tights as a mark of shame until I realized they were, in fact,

a permission slip—proof that no matter how hard I tried, my home would never be spotless, and I should stop feeling bad about it.

My aunt often repeats her favorite proverb, “You can tell a good housewife by her rug’s fringe”—the implication being that she combs out the tassels so they all face the same way. As a kid, I considered that a benchmark. As an adult, I have no desire to hang out with the kind of person who would inspect a generous host’s fringe and be judgmental about what they found.

I don’t expect people to overlook our mess. I expect them to see it and love me anyway. I’ve even come to view sharing my mess as a kindness. A former roommate always cleared away glasses to signal it was time for everyone to leave; by the reverse logic, my stacks of papers say, “Get comfortable. Add your mess to mine!” I like to think my nonpristine apartment makes visitors feel relaxed. They can just leave their plates on the table when I say, “I’ll clean up tomorrow! Let’s take our wine to the already wine-stained couch.”

Maybe you’re a better person than I am. Maybe, when you hear a 2-year-old having a tantrum in the candy aisle of a drugstore, you think, “Poor kid. Poor mom. They’re having a tough afternoon,” and there’s not a teensy part of your soul that whispers, “Thank goodness that’s not me, not today.” But I’m not so pure of heart, so I choose to believe that when people see the stuffed animals crammed under my son’s bed, they think, “At least my house isn’t as bad as Eleni’s.” And maybe they’re more likely to invite me over, and less prone to feel expected to start sterilizing once I accept.

I do envy my friends whose places look like show homes. But I’ve decided that one of my roles as a host is, instead of impressing guests with an immaculate home, making them feel better about the way *they* live. When I open the door, I don’t say, “Sorry about the chaos,” and wait for them to reply, “It’s OK.” I let them take it all in, and I think, “The place is a mess. You’re welcome.” ■

ELENI N. GAGE IS THE AUTHOR OF FOUR BOOKS, INCLUDING *LUCKY IN LOVE*.