

# Cleaning Up New York

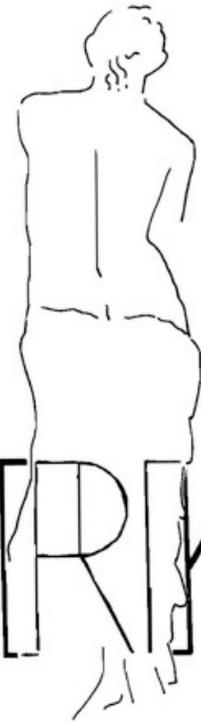
**Bob Rosenthal**

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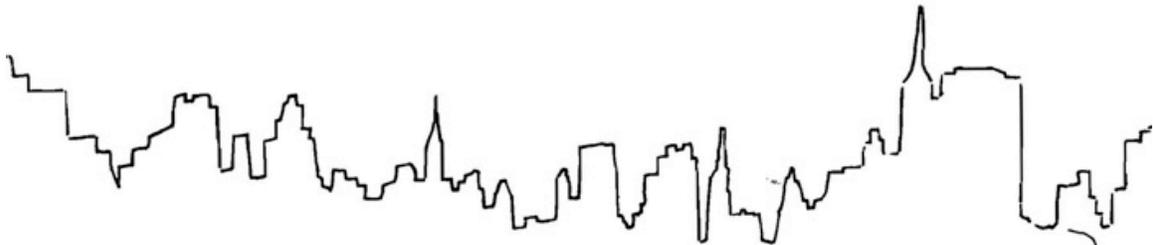
*The editors would like to thank Bob Rosenthal and Lewis Warsh for permission to reprint this 1976 Angel Hair book.*

CLEANING

UP



NEW YORK



Bob Rosenthal





# CLEANING UP NEW YORK

**Bob Rosenthal**

**ANGEL HAIR BOOKS**

Covers by Rochelle Kraut.

Photograph by Maryann Gerarduzzi.

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## CLEANING UP NEW YORK

\$60. I needed sixty dollars in three weeks time. I was out of a job so the idea of doing temporary work just popped into my head. I called a friend who had once done cleaning jobs and he told me to call up Everything for Living Space. He said I'd have to lay out fifteen dollars in order to register with the agency. Shelley and I have only been eating rice and beans; I felt I held our future in my hands as I grabbed the checkbook and took the subway up to Broadway and 72nd Street. My trepidation doubled as I stepped into the noisy, broad vacuum created by the large grey buildings that outline Needle Park. My mind thumbed back over pages of *Naked Lunch* that settled on this location with a green fog. My ears picked up the soundtrack to the movie *Panic in Needle Park* which must have been just a microphone hung outside one of these dirty windows. I found the address on 72nd Street and entered the lobby sure that I was about to be jumped as I punched the big, black, knobby button on the elevator. Released into a thin, filthy green, corridor, I pumped my feet up to a frosted glass door lettered EVERYTHING FOR LIVING SPACE.

Barbara, a flamboyant redhead with a brassy, theatrical voice, became the focus of my attention as the door shut behind me. Her evocative manner of speaking put me at ease and I began to see cleaning as a possible and perhaps glamorous thing to do. Barbara would get me cleaning jobs at \$3.50 an hour with a four hour minimum, after I provided her with two references and the \$15 deposit. I gave my former boss and the poet Ron Padgett as references and put down the money. Barbara said she would call me as soon as I was cleared. I walked out, back into the grey fumes of that day. Out of work, nowhere special to go, I shuffled over to Central Park West and started ambling up past noble apartment buildings, awnings, and yawning doormen. I spotted a gold trinket on the sidewalk, picked it up, and held before my eyes a small brass button. I asked a nearby doorman dressed in a green uniform if the button belonged to him. He couldn't speak English, but he understood the question and answered it with a negative. I told him I must have been promoted and he gave me a congratulatory smile. Walking up Central Park West, my stride gained and I straightened up. Passing soldiers of courtesy, imperious apartments overlooking the green domains of the park, I felt my bootstraps pulling; I knew I was on the road to success. I walked into the Museum of Natural History and proffered a quarter for which I received another button. A dinosaur was drawn on it and the word *contributor* was written below the extinct animal.

Success came the next day in the form of a command from Barbara via the telephone: go to Interior Design showroom on Lexington Avenue, 59th Street. The first hours passed easily, working with a cheerful, middle-aged, Jewish wife. I had to move a few objects around the showroom and rehang pottery and macrame junk wall-hangings. Later in the afternoon, her husband, the boss, came in. He was the kind of *guy* who talks fast, is pushy, and can't ever give a direct order. I found myself doing the endless bits and pieces of his undone chores. Each task was a little more tedious and back-breaking than the last. My coordination lessened as the difficulties mounted. I uncrated furniture, changed lightbulbs, and tacked up little metal tiles using

thumbtacks that would not stick in the wall, and I cleaned out a closet left over from *the Phibber McGee And Molly* radio show. I consoled myself with the fact that I was getting in plenty of hours. I worked into the evening with no food or rest. I was just about to faint when the miracle occurred. I got paid and set free. I worked and the result was over twenty dollars, green and needed, in my pocket. I bought hamburger and ale and brought it home. Shelley lifted her tired head off the kitchen table as I came in the door. How bizarre the sizzle of the meat seemed and how delicious seemed the perspiring, green Ballantine Ale! Shelley and I ate the hamburger and drank the ale and said, "Pretty good!"

The next time I met Ron Padgett, the poet I had used for a reference, he told me of a phone call from a strange lady asking if I was a good housecleaner. At first, Ron thought it was a joke but when he realized I needed a character reference, he informed Barbara that I was an exceedingly clean person and always brushed my teeth. I made the sixty dollars I needed that month plus enough to register again with the agency. Without thinking twice, I became a fresh recruit in the ranks of the cleaningmen.

## Chapter 1 The Nature Of Cleaning

“Clean” is an Anglo-Saxon word which comes into modern pronunciation with little alteration; it means to wash and to make bright. Dirt collects at the intersection between a solid surface and air. Some of the dirt is sitting on top of dirt and is really more in the air than on the counter or floor. This dirt is cleared away and air fills the space just vacated. However, there still remains the dirt that is in direct interaction with the solid surface. This surface must be worked on in such a way as to make it bright. The duality of surface and air is paralleled by a similar duality in cleaning, that of clearing and shining.

In regard to the human body, cleaning is movement or the expenditure of energy. The basic duality of cleaning extends to the mind and the body of the person cleaning. The body does the clearing and the mind does the shining. The mind conceives of cleaning and of cleanliness as a virtue. Cleaning is its own reward for those who don't resent a collaboration with bodily efforts. And for people who like to hire me, a clean house is their reward. The mind must be really shining in order to put the body through what is a vigorous routine.

Cleaning involves the body from its extremities to its center. One is often standing on tiptoes or crouching on them. Fingers are subjected to the almost constant exercise of rubbing. The legs are stretched in deep knee bends and the muscles of the wrist and forearm start to bulge from hard use. The extending of arms works the shoulder muscles and bending over at the waist stretches the dorsal muscles of the legs. The stomach and lower back muscles stretch and contract to buoy up the torso as it leans over, straightens up, and leans over again. Between all of these exercises there is a coordination that turns cleaning into a slow ballet. When the body has learned how to work the cleaning process without conscious instructions, the mind can go slightly blank, just giving off a little shine. The body will go on with grace and unconscious artistry.

The mind should be organized to know the proper order in which to proceed through a series of tasks. Discovering that you are throwing dirt onto a surface you had cleaned the minute before creates mental fatigue and your motions become directionless. Direction is a natural pursuant to coordination; when you know the number of steps it takes to get someplace, you know where you are at any given point, you know what comes next, you know you will reach your destination. When you clean a space regularly, you learn the number of steps needed to clean it and when you are done, you straighten up and admire the path of hard work that brought you here.

Cleaning is slow and ritualistic; it is about everything getting washed and purified, about seeing each thing in its natural spirit. When you clean, you mingle with the released spirits of objects, such as sinks, chairs, windows, and floors. When you are done cleaning each object within a certain space, then the room is clean. To the body at work the idea of a “clean room” is abstract reality. It is something larger than what you can actually touch, yet it is also contained within you. Your own sense of yourself is larger than what your

motions define at the moment of cleaning. The ritual of cleaning puts you in touch with yourself as the essence of each thing you clean is revealed to you. By soaring along with the free spirit of things, you meet parts of yourself on the frontier between your own spirit and all nonworldly spirits. The slowness and evenness of cleaning prevents you from being startled or blinded in your thoughts. The spirit of cleaning is a state of trance and fascination.

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In my first month with the agency, jobs fall into my lap at unexpected times. The strange hours and locations of these jobs make each one singular in my mind except for the number of them. The mystery and fear of "When will the phone ring?" and "Where do I go?" makes going to work like going on a caper. The phone is ringing. Barbara's obstreperous voice is like a backstage knock, "Are you ready?" and soon I'm gone.

I wash windows and wax the floors in a West End apartment newly occupied by two civil liberty lawyers soon to be married. I fatigue myself buffing a paste-waxed floor by hand and I take enough dope for a couple of joints from their modest supply of marijuana. I get called out to Bayside, Queens. An hour and a half on subways and a bus leads me to fresh air, grass and trees, and incredibly long rows of bungalows with six-digit house numbers. In my appointed house, I learn the use of acrylic floor wax. I have to clean and wax the floor in the large recreation-basement room. Some of the brown-and-white asphalt tiles are bent to right angles with the floor. The atmosphere is dark and dank; the plastic woodpanelled walls hold large oil canvases, each picturing a particular fat naked man. He is the man who let me in the door; his wife must be the artist. The acrylic fluid splashes over my hands and dries into thin sheets of shine. I have to learn how to distance myself from this cosmetic cleaning product because it is dangerous to the user. Inhaling acrylic floor wax fumes clogs the lungs and prevents breathing for a few moments. Upstairs the artist gives me a tuna fish sandwich, I tell her that her paintings remind me of Alex Katz, because of their big flat colors. She hates Alex Katz, wowie! I go to the medicine chest and take some valium. It keeps me from worrying about if I will ever get done. I still have the downstairs and the upstairs left to do. As I vacuum the livingroom, she drinks a beer and watches a soap opera on TV. She lifts her feet and I vacuum under them, then she offers me a beer. A long day's pay plus tip and carfare convinces me it was a good performance. "I pulled this caper off!"

A businessman rents and sublets a studio in the East Fifties. The last person had left the place totally disheveled. The businessman tells me to throw out all the junk lying around or take it for myself. He thinks it is going to be a near impossible job and promises me a ten dollar tip. He goes on to work and I start to reconstitute the apartment. In about four hours, I have everything clean and straight and I have a BOAC bag filled with select items for me to take home. I have a new plant sprayer, new plant food, new earth, new bandaids, new shampoo, new blue jeans, new tools, and a little new grass. I meet my

boss in the lobby of his office building and hide my bag of goods behind a desk in case he should reconsider that tip. He does think hard about the tip because I am faster than he thought possible, of course, he can't see the finished product. I give him a look full of expectation; he shoots back a pained expression and hands me the tip. I tell him that he will love it and jump down into the subway rich with expensive household items plus hard cash.

These capers teach me quick perceptions as to where dirt is and isn't and how to organize a cleaning plan. When I go into a strange apartment, the standard procedure is for the employer to explain what is to be done and where the materials are kept. I learn how to begin. Beginning promptly builds trust in employers and relaxes them. Once I have begun, I find that the plan formulates itself from common sense and natural body movements. These perceptions coupled with insights into people develop in me a talent for cleaning a place the way the employer wants it cleaned. I find that I become a slave to my own intuition of another person's will. The talent for knowing how to clean differently for different people makes me feel skilled. Most people are frank with their appreciation for my work except those people who consider themselves among the wealthy. I discover for myself that the one way rich people stay rich is by not appreciating true skill in common workmen. I do a good job in an East Sixties penthouse and the lady asks me if I know how to make a bed. I say, "I guess I know, sure I can make your bed." Her bed has a complicated system of undersheets and oversheets and a bedspread all which have to be turned in precise ways. I do a passable job though not a lady's maid's job with the bedding and she complains about it just before she pays me. I realized later that she complained just so she wouldn't have to tip me.

One day Barbara calls me up with what she calls a "goody." A Mrs. Cunningham in the Village needs a cleaner plus a little care in the home for her husband who had recently suffered a stroke. "A real sweet gal," Barbara describes her. On a bright, sunny morning, I walk through Washington Sq. Park with five frisbees buzzing around my ears. Mrs. Cunningham lives just off Sixth Ave. below the Waverly Theater. The door to the building has brass plates shining my golden complexion before my eyes. I buzz up and my reflection swings away into the most organized apartment that I've ever seen. The floors are natural wood stained dark brown with a few hand crafted throw rugs carefully placed. There is built-in wood cabinetry that cleverly holds books, a Hi Fi, liquor closet, and desk. A folding table sits squarely at attention flanked by two matching wood chairs along the side wall. Next to the table is a small working fireplace with a marble slab for a hearth. Across from the fireplace is a soft brown upholstered couch with a round wooden coffee table in front of it. Near the front windows is a dull gold upholstered chair with three endtables that fit under each other. On the walls are large canvases of geometric forms precisely colored. The paintings are so subtle that it is hard to see how they are good. The kitchen is in the front with a window over the street. It is small with built-in cabinets, a big sink, and a tile floor with a design of dark brown tiles that smacks of the paintings. The bathroom is brown with a brown carpet. The bedroom is in the back, brown wood bookcases built around the windows and a cork floor. The big king-size bed has two built-in lights on the wall above the headboard, one over each pillow, and separate

switches. Here is my dream of a perfect marriage realized!

Mrs. Cunningham is midaged, wears red lipstick and a short haircut. She is slim and petite and gracious with a strong sense of justice that animates all her qualities. She introduces me to her husband, Ben. Ben has had a couple of major strokes leaving him able to take care of himself in simple matters but unable to paint anymore. Ben is the painter of the canvases on the walls. He is in his middle sixties, white haired with a big white moustache. He is tall and gaunt with a confused look in his eyes that sometimes focus into a clear sparkle. Mrs. Cunningham has been housebound since Ben's illness and plans to use me in order to allow herself to step out for a few hours. She leaves me a detailed list of everything to be cleaned in each room and the proper product to use for each task. I make Mrs. Cunningham comfortable in her mind that I am not uptight about keeping an eye on Ben. I am more worried about the cleaning. When I can see a room as well as I can see the livingroom, I know that it is already clean. For me, learning to clean the clean will be the challenge.

The Cunninghams own the building and one of my duties is to sweep the staircase and polish up those brass plates. Above the apartment, separate only as a separate reality, is Ben's studio. Here laxity of order and individual quirks rule; here is the TV. Giant paintings are stored in racks and all around are tools, artist's supplies, toys, and a bugle. The attic walls slant up into a skylight and the light comes down around me, putting my roots into Greenwich Village. I feel the sense of times before me and the dignity of an older way.

Mrs. Cunningham's first name is Patsy—I find out when Ben calls me Patsy—Patsy likes the way I clean and eagerly engages me again and with handsome terms. I am to receive four hours at the cleaning rate of \$3.50/hr. and \$3.00/hr. for any time over four hours when I would sit with Ben. During my second day's work for the Cunninghams, someone rings the doorbell and I buzz the person into the building. A frumpy man is walking up the stairs. I open the door and the man just walks in. Ben seems to recognize him. They both sit down on the couch in very similar distracted manners and I sit in the other chair intent on what would ensue. After the visitor utters a few words, it is apparent that he is crazy and in fact his conversation is primarily concerned with his last five years in a mental hospital. I gather that the man had once been Ben's student. Both he and Ben speak their own way for a while, neither one comprehending the changes in the other. I suggest to Ben that he may be tired; he assents with a clear look, knowing it is an excuse. I usher the fellow out and get his name in order to report the story to Patsy. She is pleased with the way I handled the situation and her confidence in me is boosted. Soon I am working at the Cunningham's four times a week.

With this much work, I no longer need the agency. I tell Barbara of my good luck and she heartily congratulates me. Patsy always leaves the house when I am working, so soon I feel in control as cleaner and sitter. I could give Ben a tranquilizer if I want though I don't unless he gets terribly frustrated and irritated. Ben sits all afternoon smoking BETWEEN THE ACTS little cigars. He has a problem striking the match; lighting his cigars becomes a gracious part of

my cleaning movements. Swinging by with the vacuum, throwing a courteous arm and hand with lit match, pulling the vacuum back with the other hand as Ben lights up. Ben and I never converse but he is up to pulling a good trick on me. I am vacuuming the living room and the machine is plugged into a socket located in the washroom. Suddenly the machine goes dead and I turn to see Ben with the plug holding it under the open faucet. My first thought is, "Aw my God, he's gonna plug it back in—wet!" I run up to Ben and calmly ask him what he is going to do. "I mean, Ben, it's great and everything but I'm just curious to know why you did it." He looks deep into me and his eyes become clear as pinpoints and he says, "To confuse you." That's the right answer and I fall in love.

Being the housekeeper at the Cunninghams' allows me to play around with the cleaning a bit. There are certain things I do every week but there are other things that only need doing every so often at my discretion. Occasionally I shampoo the rugs, or wax the floor, or concentrate on all enamel surfaces. My initial trepidations about the cleaning soon dissolved in this freer state of cleanliness. This is the model house to learn housekeeping in because it is so well organized that there is no clutter or interference from human frivolities. I learn how to arrange little surprises for Patsy to find a few days after I've cleaned. I clean out-of-the-way areas such as a shelf behind the shower curtain or a row of books. Sometimes I imagine the things I clean may not be discovered for weeks or months. I work steadily at the Cunningham's until Shelley and I plan to leave town for the summer. I am saddened to leave such a gracious home, especially one where there are people I love; Patsy and I arrange to contact each other about work in the fall.

## Chapter 2 How Things Get Dirty

In New York City, we really live like worms. There is dirt above, below, and on all sides of us. The air is a constant fine mist of dust and soot. Filth is creeping up from every basement. Cockroaches and insects are constantly chewing things into little piles of dirt. Pigeons! Dogs! Dirt is puffing between floorboards and under walls and down from ceiling cracks. Corrosive chemicals in the air eat away the faces of statues and crumble the bricks about us. The subway blasts subterranean filth up through air grates. People throw their dirt everywhere. There is garbage, and cigarette and cigar ash in the streets, rooftops are often junk heaps. Now back into our wormhole: the apartment. We tread dirt inside on the soles of our shoes. Our clothes literally shake with dust. Our hair is a broom that sweeps in the city atmosphere. We come in like bombshells.

Dirt distributes itself by the motion of rise and fall. Dirt enters an area with some impetus. Air coming under windows sends dust floating around the ceiling which slowly sifts its way to the floor. This dust will settle on any crevice no matter the size. This means bumps in the paint on your walls have tiny motes of dust just hanging around. (Let me toss an aside into the duststorm. This all sounds neurotic but it isn't. It is just the heightened perception created by the direct contact of my labors. I don't dislike dirt. Far from it, I feel very comfortable working with dirt.) Dirt is heavier than air so it settles down on every surface from the ceiling to the floor. The rim of your lampshade is doing a good business right now. As you shuffle across the floor, you are kicking up particles that jump up and fall down a few feet away. Cooking often sends a film of grease through the air that sticks to anything it can touch. As you soak in the bathtub, dirt floats along the surface of the water and spreads over the walls of the tub as it is drained. The toilet bowl is the scene of miscalculations that send dirt down the wrong side of the bowl. Your ablutions spatter the walls and get the tiles dirty. Water is one of nature's best solvents; if you splash the floor while doing the dishes, then the water will strip the dirt off the bottoms of your feet.

Pets are as bad as city environment or people when it comes to getting things dirty. Dogs and cats shed their coats everywhere they go. They shred up pieces of paper, knock over flower pots. Cats kick and scratch at their cat litter until it is littered all over the floor. No dog is above having accidents. Dogs run along the walls blackening them and furiously beat dust up into the air current with their tails. Birds throw shelled birdseed out of their cages and if you let them fly free—well! All pets use their unnaturally confining space to its utmost.

Getting dirty is a process of natural inertia. Dirt moves by force and then rests. Cleaning has no natural inertia unless you telescope your thinking into geologic time and everything gets washed into the sea. The washing we do is toward a more limited end. Dirt will always win in the end.

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Shelley and I come home to New York City and the reoccurring need to make money prompts me to send Barbara fifteen dollars. Within seventy-four hours, Barbara thanks me with Cherry Malard. Cherry sounds sweet as she tells me that repairs have been made in the washroom and the kitchen needs to be mopped. The building stands nicely in the sun in the East 80's, only a door and a half off First Avenue. The apartment doesn't answer the bell so I sit on a red bench in front of the building. Brightly around the corner comes a pretty black-haired girl walking a large dog. She walks up to Cherry's door and we recognize each other. Cherry leads me into the hallway of her first-floor apartment. It is a tall, cramped space with white hexagonal floor tiles as often found in washrooms. I follow Cherry down the aisle and glance into the bathroom before we empty into the kitchen. Cherry shows me the work and the equipment and I tackle the clean-up. The bathtub is covered with plaster chunks and plaster-dust thickly lies over everything. I put the place completely right and it shines a dull, worn shine. The kitchen floor is hard work because there is so much stuff piled along the walls. One corner holds a couple sets of skis and ski-boots. Another corner has a drafting table turned horizontal with kitchen items on it. It rocks back and forth when I shift the weight on the table by moving a few of the items around. It never fails to startle me and I reach out to steady it as if it were about to topple. Everywhere there are things to move and piles of dog hair. The green linoleum floor is black. I must pick up and move everything in order to sweep up the dog hair and loose dirt. Then I have to move everything again to mop. Woe, that wobbly table. While I am working, Cherry is in the bedroom continually talking on two phones; she talks about the other party's astrology and romance problems. It takes me three hours to finish and I expect another hour of work because of the agency's four-hour minimum but instead Cherry starts to pay me off. After she tells me how really clean everything looks, I ask with some hesitation if she knows about the four-hour minimum. Cherry informs me that the agency quoted a three-hour minimum. "And so the recession has finally hit the cleaning market!" I think to myself. There must be more people cleaning now so the agency must reduce the minimum in order to attract more jobs. Cherry takes my phone number and I leave feeling somewhat flat.

Cherry calls me up soon and this time I clean the entire apartment. There are four rooms counting the hallway and the bathroom as one. The front room has tall windows that open onto the street, a fireplace, and wood parquet floors that run back into the bedroom. The windows are landscaped with plants that hang down or that sit on trunks before each windowsill. There are two bright blue movie-theater seats tottering, detached from the sturdy look of rows. The bedroom can be shut off from the front room by sliding wooden doors; a large bed, a small easy chair and a lamp with a framed Roman engraving hanging above it on the wall, and various suitcases fill the dark room. I work hard for five hours and the place never really gets clean but my impact alone makes a world of difference. Cherry goes out and asks me to answer the phone. When the phone rings, I need a pen to write down the

message. I open a drawer and find a pen and next to the pen is some grass. I pocket a little for myself. From the variety of clothes and underwear lying about I begin to gather that a man seems to be living here besides Cherry and her dog and cat, Orchards and Turtles, respectively. Cherry sometimes mentions a Jack. I feel exhausted down to my cells and Cherry gives me a generous tip. The grass turns out to be excellent.

Cherry says, "It is hard to get someone who really cleans." I am asked to become a regular on Thursdays. I meet Jack Gleason who lives with Cherry and I become an official member of the household. I have a question like, "Any bags for garbage?" and I walk up the hallway to the front room to find Cherry. The door is open and Cherry is doing a yoga exercise on a mat in the middle of the floor. She is wearing blue trunks and is holding a position in which she rests on her shoulder blades with one foot down in back of her head and the other sticking straight up in the air. I'm looking straight under her trunks at her black full crotch. Surprised out of my question, I turn quickly and resolve to ask later.

Cherry teaches yoga classes and does her own routine everyday. Most often she shuts the doors and/or wears leotards or tights. Both Cherry and Jack are phone people. Cherry spends a whole morning relaying all of her friends' and Jack's business friends' astrological highs and lows for the upcoming weeks. Cherry is the oldest of nine children which she says explains her abhorrence of housework. She grew up in the Sonora Desert and pronounces *Malard* in a French manner. She is vegetarian and so too are Orchards and Turtles. Cherry tells me about disasters to befall New York City. In 1980, there will be a great food and water shortage which will be ended by an earthquake that will split Manhattan in two and leave most of it under water.

Every week Cherry's apartment is equally and totally dirty. Cherry comes more and more to rely on my coming and there comes to be more and more for me to do. The first thing to do is an hour's worth of dishes. Cherry leaves the entire week's dishes piled in the sink. She doesn't even scrape the food off. There are at least four dirty pots sitting on the stove. Before I can wash the dishes, I must take all the dishes out of the sink in order to clear the drain. Cherry uses the kitchen sink as if it were a garbage can. The bottom of the sink holds three large handfuls of old, gloppy food. After the dishes are done, I wash down the stove and refrigerator. Next I clean the fixtures in the washroom. The bathtub once had been painted so now every time I wipe it out, paint chips fall off. Paint chips are a nuisance to pick up when your hands are wet; often they will jam up under the fingernails. I sweep out the bathroom, hallway, and kitchen. There is always a lot of dog hair and kitty litter strewn about. I mop the floors with a string mop which I wring out by hand. The water in the bucket turns jet black after each room. I dust the front room and bedroom. I sweep those two rooms out, moving about the arrangement of heavy, awkward furniture. Then I do likewise but this time with a mop and bucket. I run upstairs and knock on the door, "Hello, can I borrow the vacuum cleaner?" then I bring the vacuum down on the rug in the front room. Done! Thursday is a heavy day's work but Cherry and Jack are not cheap in paying or tipping. Cherry gives me food to take home and

expensive, unwanted clothes and shoes. Sometimes I snatch a little grass or household items like trashbags or saddlesoap. I really feel shame at Christmas; Cherry gives me a generous amount of dope as a present and I have already a present pocketed.

Jack is an affable, slender young man with a moustache. He is from a very wealthy family in Trenton. He is used to having servants around and relates to me with the perfect candor of somehow having grown up with me. Jack makes money by being a food broker. Occasionally he and Cherry fly to South America to raise the price of sugar. Jack confides to me that in a single afternoon he may easily make as much as \$40,000. He and Orchards play around the house or go out running together. Jack's real love is playing backgammon.

Cherry knows that I know my job and lets me do it all around her. I meet her girlfriends, hear her gossip, we talk about romance, I meet her backdoor friend. I put the cap back on her toothpaste. I confide bits of my heart to Cherry. We just talk about it. The household is run on a steady flow of hard cash. All the food is the most expensive health brands and there are five-gallon water bottles for drinking in case of drought. What is really needed is a live-in maid with her own budget. If I were she, I would buy a big garbage pail with big trash bags and I would buy a vacuum cleaner to really get all the hair and dust off the floors. Cherry once refers to me as the "maid" as she talks over the phone. Being described as the maid at first hurts my feelings because I see my job as more independent and more of a service than maid's work. But the work is like maid's work. I finally realize that there is no definition of the word *maid* that does not include the word *woman* or *girl*. I don't feel like a woman while I'm working. I do feel like yelling, "Cleaning Man!" at Cherry. But she is only talking into the telephone and *maid* is meant to mean something to the other party, not to me. Jack tells me that when the place is really filthy, he dreams of me. Jack with his aristocratic leniency has no need to call me anything other than my name.

I am cleaning in the washroom. I am about to wipe down a white ledge that I always wipe down. I'm moving off the items always found on that ledge. Here is something strange. A piece of a nylon stocking is wrapped tightly around something the size of a golfball. I pick it up and notice that it is slightly mushy. I sniff it. My head almost recoils into the bathroom mirror as I flip the thing back onto the shelf. I have never smelt anything like that before! What can it be? My first thought is that it is an occult little bag filled with human excretions and fingernails. I don't touch it again. Later as I'm putting on my shirt to go home, I overhear Cherry and Jack talking in the front room.

"I think Bob found my (*unintelligible*) in the washroom today!" Cherry says.

"Wow!" Jack exclaims, "Girl, you really have no class!" They both break into hysterical laughter. I step into the room and they dummy up. The next week while I'm cleaning the washroom, I notice something hanging from the shower nozzle high up the wall. It must be the same thing but it has grown! This time it appears to be a child's foot dangling in a stocking. I let it be. Explanations are offered by my friends. It's shit. It's witchcraft. It's menstua-

tion flow. It's cheese. I don't know. I'll never know.

One day I come to work stoned. There is quite a pile of dishes as usual. What is unusual is that Cherry is not doing her yoga. Instead, she is lounging on her bed in her bathrobe. As is my custom, I centralize all the items to be washed by placing them on the tottering drafting table which is directly behind me as I stand at the sink. Next to me, on my right, is the door to the bedroom. Everytime I turn around to get a few more dishes to wash, I peek over to Cherry who is lying on her bed absorbed in a magazine. About the third time I glance at her, I start to feel a nervous excitation. Her blue bathrobe seems to be riding up her legs. I start taking fewer dishes at a time in order to secure more looks. I'm so stoned that I'm starting to feel dizzy. Each time I look, Cherry is in a new position. One time, she is lying on her back and her thighs are spread open on the bed. The next time, she is on her stomach lying across the bed so I could see the back of her legs up to the rise of her ass under the bathrobe. I am the slave in the kitchen, chained to the dishes as my mistress excites me. I flashback on the story of Spartacus and Clodia I read as a kid in the *Olympia Reader*. The slave turns around and looks over. The mistress' head is carefully bent away. She sits over the side of the bed. Her bathrobe is loose and open in front. One beautiful breast hangs out. It gracefully slopes down and comes to a point. She is a statue of milk and marble. I reel around, the blood pounding vertically through my body in single giant spurts. The kitchen walls start to spin around me and go dark. I grab the kitchen sink and hold fast as I almost faint. The next time I have the strength to look, she is no longer there.

I, the good slave, never approach Cherry. There is so much potential but as long as I stay a slave, nothing will really happen. Perhaps that is what both of our fantasies are about. I slave for Cherry but when I am done, I am free and independent. Cherry depends on me to clean up and make things liveable. Our unspoken relationship works on work and then works itself out. In early spring, Jack and Cherry move out of the city to breathe the country air. I've lost my best customers but a good customer will always have reason to come back to New York City.

### Chapter 3 Organization Of Tasks

Tasks must get done. Knowing the most efficient order in which to do them is as important as knowing how to execute each individual task. You can't do everything at once so common sense tells you to choose one task and to begin.

Apartments and houses are usually cleaned by rooms. I choose which room to start in according to its difficulty. I like to do the hardest work first and then proceed through a series of tasks that become progressively easier. If there is anything extra hard to do, such as cleaning up after repairs or washing windows, do it first. If not, start with the kitchen or the washroom because they contain pockets of concentrated hard work.

If there is a ton of dirty dishes in the kitchen, go in and do them. This not only gives you necessary space around the sink but it also allows time for you to reflect on what your tasks are and how to order them. Next, how about cleaning the stove? After the stove comes the refrigerator. Counters and shelves and cabinet surfaces may need washing and you might as well throw in the kitchen sink about here. Sweep or vacuum the floors and then mop.

That was hard work, so take a short break. Try a drink of fruit juice. Wipe down the high places in the bathroom. Wipe down tiles. Clean the sink then the toilet. Everything goes top to bottom. Now the bathtub. Actually the "Big Three" bathroom fixtures are done in whatever is the easiest order. People often think that one should not go from the toilet to the sink with the same water. The bathtub has its own water and so its inside remains outside possible controversy. Sweep/vacuum the floor and mop it up.

In most New York City apartments, the rest of the house is one kind of area. Namely, the living room, bedroom, and dining areas. Always clean from top to bottom. Dust the high places first. Clean windowsills and mouldings. Then clean the furniture and finally clean the floor. Much of the work here is moving the furniture about. (CAUTION: if there is a lot of loose dust on the floor, sweep/vacuum the floor first and then dust the surfaces.)

I hope you are done; not as fatigued as you were a little while ago, and starting to perk up again. This organization to make work efficient is based on common sense. If I felt there was enough common sense in people's work then I wouldn't have to write these illustrations.

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I cleaned for Sylvia Smith two or three times last year. She lived on East End Avenue in a studio apartment that was falling apart from being recently built. She edited a trade magazine. She would only have me every so often when things got really out of hand. Her kitchen included defrosting the refrigerator and cleaning the oven each time. First I had to get the dishes out of

the way. She used cheap tin silverware that was once gold-painted but the paint had chipped away enough to leave it mottled tin. The advantage of this silverware was that she had enough pieces to supply a munitions factory and could eat for weeks without needing to wash a spoon. Although the apartment was always very dirty, Sylvia always wanted a fastidious job from me. This is really impossible to do the first time around on a dirty apartment. It would take at least two cleanings to really bring every surface to clean clean status. Sylvia would always detain me at the end of my day with short imperatives like, "Clean this shelf please." "I think you missed something here." I performed my duty by being patient and thankfully escaped after much courteous bowing. Sylvia was a person with a need for sleeping pills. Next to her bed was a prescription bottle which I sampled.

When I steal pills, I try not to be greedy and I try harder to be smart. What I count on to avoid detection is that people don't count their pills. I don't like to steal. Stealing makes me feel low and treacherous for breaking my own trust in myself but that is outweighed by several factors. One is that I cannot afford to get my own prescriptions or to really be ill either. I take drugs every so often to have some fun or get a medicinal night's sleep. When I steal, it is one of the few times I ever justify my actions by saying, "I'm an artist." I am an artist and I need this pill just because I am an artist. Gulp.

Sylvia calls me up after the summer is over. She has moved to the East 50's and needs some work done. The new place is much larger and not in the least recent or falling apart. A first glance says easy to clean. A second glance reveals Sylvia's untrained puppy who shits everywhere. Once again every inch of every thing needs a cleaning. I can not work meticulously for her because she is not set up to be meticulous. The strain of course is that she wants a perfect job. I can't relax at her apartment for it is all miserable to me. Sylvia is a mess. She is depressed. She has physical illnesses. She has no love in her life. She doesn't even like her job. I just can't bring a feeling into her apartment that she can't supply from within herself. It is her home and her life; my slave instincts about work can not make me do much better than her best feelings. Nevertheless Sylvia is sharp and observant. She finds a few crusty bits of red food fastened to the inside of her refrigerator door. She points them out. I try harder than my first attempt to get them up. Sylvia leans against the counter and asks me, "Did you go to school to learn to clean? Did they teach you?" I laugh and keep scratching at those food bits. My mind flashes to The Cleaning Man's Institute. "Become a Cleaning Man. Good pay and terrific benefits. We will train you on real refrigerators, stoves, and toilets. There is an ever increasing demand for ecologically sound cleanliness! Approved for veterans..." Those red food bits will not come up so they stay and I never come back.

Barbara calls me up with a job in Brooklyn. The name is Evelyn Berkson. I call her up and she jumps into a long story about her apartment having had a fire and the painter is finally done and she has never had a fire before! I reassure her in some way and make the date to work.

Shelley and I go to dinner at the apartment of some friends, Pat and Sanford. Pat works in a bookstore and Sanford is a house painter who oper-

ates through the same agency as I. We are talking about the similarities of our work. Sanford and I are both into it in our total ways. Sanford and Pat talk about a painting job he had just finished. The job took him a long time and the lady of the house was very curious. I say that I would recommend Sanford anytime I could and he says he would do the same for me. As a matter of fact, that curious lady had asked Sanford if he knew a cleaner but he had forgotten that he knew me. I mention that I just got a clean-up job following a painting in Brooklyn. Sanford lights up and asks for the name. Berkson is the same person he just finished painting for. Pat and Sanford start building Evelyn up. How crazy, how weird, everything she does is interesting.

I take the F train to Brooklyn. When I reach the small Park Slope building, an unexpectedly old woman lets me in. The apartment is large and beautifully painted. The elderly lady is Evelyn's mother and she sets me to work hauling out the bags of garbage and extraneous pieces of lumber. Evelyn soon comes home and tries to tell me in distracted terms what there is to be done. She repeats the vague tasks a few times and walks away. Her mother on the other hand is a burning lamp of clarity. She points out little ledges to clean in the kitchen. Evelyn comes back and pulls her mother out of the kitchen and in equally clear tones of the daughter to the mother, she tells her mother to be quiet. Evelyn says to me, "It is hard to have two bosses." It really makes no difference to me. Soon the mother is leaving to return to Baltimore. "You wouldn't be hurt if I called you tomorrow?" says the mother to the daughter.

Everything not recently painted is covered with dust. It is a very full day's work which includes taking books out of boxes, dusting them, and then putting them back into the boxes. I can tell a lot of the dirt I am cleaning is pre-fire dirt. After I clean the living room and make things look straight, Evelyn walks in and screams. "AAAAHHH! It looks like a hospital waiting room!" She orders me to pull some magazines out of the closet and to throw them around. I do this with the certain sense of perversion that is Fun. Evelyn says, "If you can't see it [dirt], it isn't there."

Evelyn has black hair and a nice figure. She has a little Jewish girl's face that must be in its late thirties. She is very friendly and talks all the time. She has an older brother who is becoming very well known. He is a sculptor. Evelyn is going to school in a branch of psychoanalysis that doesn't involve medicine or therapy training. I tell her that my father is a psychoanalyst and we talk it up a mite. She brings chinese food home for our lunch. When I get home, I call up Sanford to compare notes. He asks many pertinent questions and says the best food he got was pizza.

A month later Evelyn calls me up. She hardly knows what she wants me to do. "Things are still so clean from the first time." She complains and compliments at the same time. She says that Sanford told her about a way to wash records. Just put them in a sink of soapy water and wash 'em. I start to wash her records. Evelyn has more records than I can wash at one time so I devise a system. First fill the sink with warm water and add some mild liquid dish washing soap. This soap is plastic-like and seems to be gentle on vinyl records. So many records are taken off the pile and placed in order into the

bath. They are carefully kept in order so that they can be reunited with their jackets, which also are kept in order. The batch of records is rinsed and placed single file into the dish rack. A dish rack stacked with gleaming records is a sight not appreciated until attempted. I think it is really one of my finest moments as a cleaner! A new bunch of records are dipped into the soapy water. The records in the rack are lightly towel dried and placed back into their jackets. This takes a long time because the records were not in the correct jackets in the first place.

Evelyn makes her money by giving I.Q. tests. She judges me to be about 130 I.Q. points. She asks me a simple question to back up her judgment. "What do a fly and a tree have in common?" I stop to think. Later I ask my friends the same question. They both have wings. They both have branches. Shelley answers, "God." I think a minute. My first impression is that they are both brown. I think longer; I remember S.A.T. exams and how interesting answers show up badly. "They are both alive." I say. "Right!"

A few months pass and Evelyn calls me up. She needs her stove top and oven cleaned and the refrigerator defrosted and cleaned out. I arrive about noon on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Evelyn has to get out of the shower to let me in. She is loosely dressed. Her stomach and navel seem relaxed as they peer through her robe. Evelyn is walking into the walls and mumbling. I think she is hungover on sleeping pills. I say something and she misunderstands it; answers, "I'm not that old yet!" As I work in the kitchen, she talks to me from the washroom. If I can't understand what is being said, I just throw back affirmative or negative grunts depending on her tone. I always talk around Evelyn because she is talking too. It is what is supposed to be done; part of the clean-up. Evelyn yells that there is some open champagne in the ice box from the night before and I might as well have some since it certainly can't last much longer. I do pour myself a glass. By the time Evelyn comes into the kitchen sobered up and clearheaded, I feel a bit bubbly.

I work and we talk. She says there is a poltergeist in the house. He is a mischievous spirit that usually plays tricks on young girls such as hiding things or making noises. Over the stove we talk about her brother's rising fame and fortune. In fact, she has to go to Manhattan later in the day to attend a reception for him. She hates these affairs but has to go to oblige her mother. Then Evelyn reads the Sunday Times to me. Evelyn says that I should be making about \$40 an hour and she could get a new shrink any day but I couldn't be replaced. The funny thing is that I feel the same way about Evelyn. I should pay her \$40 an hour to work on her house because it is HER house.

The bubbles burst, however, when Evelyn mentions my "charming girlfriend." Evelyn is always a step ahead of me. Usually I am the one to mention Shelley's name to a customer especially if I want to distance them and get back to work. This time I needed to be distanced. Cleaning is a two-way street. There is you (the cleaner) and there is the street. If sex were to drive up that street in a shiny new automobile, most likely it would run me over in my clean tracks. On the corpse, they would find the uniform of a cleaner. I always try to wear the same clothes when I clean. It makes me less visible and more like a machine and it adds psychic energy to my work. If my uniform walks through

a dirty room, it seems cleaner. My uniform also happens to be the one most comfortable to clean in. I wear slightly painted up bluejeans, white socks, old sneakers that I just slip off and on, the soles are smooth and thin, making it easy to crouch on my toes. I wear a headband to keep my hair out of my way and a green t-shirt with some painted and some real holes in it. Evelyn asks me what I normally wear. "The same thing," I say, "just in better shape."

Even with my cleaning and my uniform and my girlfriend and my therapy, I want to make it with Evelyn. I never make the move. This is just a part of me; it keeps me in the cleaning business. Sexual relations would make the cleaning hard to get to and it certainly would louse up my regular customers. I gotta make some money; so I sing, "Be good, Bob, Be good." Evelyn dresses up in an incredible evening gown and her hair is sitting neatly on top of her head. She is taking a cab to her brother's reception and gives me a lift into the city. She tips me regally. The cleaning man gets out and says, "Thanks for the ride." I am happy and Evelyn is happy; she has forgotten her invitation.

## Chapter 4 Dusting And Furniture

Dusting is soft cleaning. Dusting takes place in rooms that have softer light, softer colors, softer textures, and softer noises. These rooms have space for the body to make broader movements. Bedrooms, dining rooms, and living rooms are the kind of rooms to be dusted.

To dust high, wispy things or areas with many small objects, or to dust something that is delicate: use a feather duster. A feather duster really saves time and is highly effective as a dust raiser. For large surfaces like shelves, a cloth is most effective. The cloth should be soft or ragged. The roughness moves the dry dust particles along the surface. It usually takes a double sweep.

Furniture can be washed besides just being dusted. Washing brings out the furniture's natural color and shine. A good all-purpose soap to use is Murphy's Oil Soap. This is a pure vegetable soap. It comes in a jar and has the appearance of petroleum jelly. It is not sticky. It is a very pleasant-smelling product that can be used on many surfaces. The oil in the soap is even good for wood. (Look for it in hardware stores.) Work some Murphy's Oil Soap into a pail of warm water. Prepare another pail of clear water. Soak a cloth in the soap and ring it out. The cloth should be damp. Wash the piece of furniture and then wipe it down with a cloth dampened with the clean water. The clear water picks up any soap or dirt residue. Quickly polish the piece off with a clean, dry cloth in brisk strokes. If you wish to polish a piece of wood furniture, first clean it then use lemon oil. Apply it thinly and then buff with a soft cloth till the surface hardens slightly with a shine. The Murphy's in the pail will wash everything from lamps to tables to painted mouldings. Give everything the double rub. The fastest way to go through a room is to clean each item in a row going around the room.

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Ding-a-ling. "Bawb, got a job for you." "OK, give it to me." The name here is Robert Duck. The job is to vacuum the staircase in a brownstone on the Upper West Side off Central Park West. I talk to Robert Duck at his business phone number. The long and the tall of it is a newly carpeted staircase in his co-op building. I'll also sweep the front sidewalk and wash the windows in the doors. This will be three hours/\$10.50 every other week. The hours are loose because I work without supervision. A maid in one of the apartments will buzz me in. On the first effort, I meet Robert and he shows me around. It is a newly remodeled building with a bright orangy red carpet. There are eleven straight sections of stairway with ten small landings that climb the five storeys to the roof.

The vacuum is a little Hoover about the size of a football but not as fat. Its suction is moderate for its size. A short, wide hose provides an adequate suction in the rug attachment. There is enough electrical cable to vacuum the en-

tire space without changing outlets. There are so many steps that it is immediately apparent that I must figure out the least number of trips up and down them. The Hoover is kept at the top of the stairwell. I come in, leave my coat in the laundry room, and climb to the vacuum. I unscrew a lightbulb and remove it. I insert a converter and plug in the extension cord. I run the line up half a flight and into the vacuum. I start the motor, grab the handle, and climb to the top. I attach the rug attachment directly to the flexible hose because vacuuming stairs is a gymnastic event that requires total flexibility. By keeping the vacuum two steps below where I am cleaning and my feet two steps below the vacuum, I can keep my back straight and tilt forward from my ankles. On the landings, I must get down on my hands and knees to be comfortable in body. If you film me on my descent and then speed up the film, I would appear like a huge inchworm, humping backwards down the stairway, eating everything behind it.

This job isn't bad once I learn the ropes. It is clean and warm and private. It only takes me an hour and a half to do and I get paid for three. I find an intimacy with the Hoover in the single-minded exercise of vacuuming stairs. The work is warming and the carpet is a warm color. There is a skylight at the top of the stairwell that heats up the steps on a sunny day. I only have to climb the staircase twice, once to begin and a second time to put Hoover away.

One day—all grand events happen one day—I go to work stoned and out of uniform. I'm dressed in my good bluejeans and I don't have my sneakers. The carpet is clean enough for me to work in my stocking feet. I am also wearing my first pair of boxer shorts. Hoover and I are starting at the top. There is never traffic in the halls but this section is the most private. It is also bright from the sunny skylight above. We start down the steps and because of a bad design in the boxers, my cock falls through the slit and rubs up and down the soft denim. After a few steps go by, I begin to lose my concentration. I won't cop out and tell you I'm really high but... I turn over and sit down on a step. I unzip my fly to see what's happening and a great erection grows out of it. Hoover is buzzing, humming next to me. I pull the rug attachment off and contemplate the bit on the hose. Now in my adventures, I can go all the way! I fuck the sucking vacuum. The suction is just strong enough to give realistic tension to the skin of my cock. It is nice. But it doesn't go anywhere, there is only one speed. I try altering the air valve on the side but it is boring. Fantasy might do but I start to become too aware of Hoover and my best fantasy of an obliging vacuum cleaner doesn't do anything for either of us. So I pack it in. "We really came close!" I reflect while putting the rug attachment back on the Hoover.

## Chapter 5 Floors And Walls

Cleaning a floor or wall creates a progression of triangles. One side of the triangle is the floor. The second side is you leaning over the surface to be cleaned and the third side is the broom, mop, or wall. Triangles that stretch and contract along the surfaces with the best geometry produce the best cleaning.

Murphy's is a good soap to wash a wall with. Use a sponge and then wipe dry with a second cloth. You can use a harsher chemical like Spic & Span on hard enamel paint. The product, Varnex, is good for wood paneling. You wipe it on, let dry, and polish it off. It is a wax besides being a cleaner. I have used Scott's Liquid Gold and found it objectionable to human lungs and skin.

Sweep a floor from one end to the other or sweep it outside to inside. Take broad strokes to avoid making dust fly. Centralize the dirt into one spot by circling around it and sweep it into a dustpan.

Sponge mops are best on an already clean linoleum floor. String mops are better on any floor. The best string mop I have ever used is a Fuller Brush mop that costs \$6. I own one myself and am still content with it. I even enjoy not using it. This mop has tough strings made half out of string and half out of sponge. The stringiness is good for getting into cracks and pulling dirt out of corners while the sponginess is good for the flat, smooth surfaces. And, the handle is a bright, gay color) Mop the floor and remember to wring out the mop completely before the second sweep. It takes a second going over to really pick up the dirt that the first swab loosened. On linoleum or tiled floors, use a liquid cleaner or ammonia in water. Ammonia is equally effective and costs half as much as a liquid cleaner such as Mr. Clean or Top Job. Use Murphy's on wood floors with a second mopping of clear water.

I really dislike acrylic floor waxes. They aren't in any way beneficial to the flooring itself and their use as protection is limited by the amount of wear and difficulty of application. Since they are liquid, they tend to roll with the slope of the floor and build up in some spots as they thin out in others. It is very difficult to remove these built up spots. One can buy a paste wax for linoleum floors which is both good for the floor and pleasant to use. The idea of a time saving cleaning product is usually to skip the essential reasons for using the process and instead rush to a finished but cosmetic look.

Vacuum cleaners are very useful and a powerful model can replace a broom entirely. The vacuum doesn't cause the dirt and hair to fly up in your face. It pulls the dirt out of corners and cracks. It can dust high places for you. Sweep the vacuum across the floor or carpet with long slow strokes that allow suction time enough to pull up more dirt. Vacuum the upholstered furniture and sneeze less. If you do not have a vacuum cleaner and there is a very dusty floor to clean, wet a string mop and quickly run it along the floor so that the dust will become damp and rolled into balls. Sweep up the balls of dirt and then mop the floor with vigor. Floors are often the last thing to be done because they are the bottom. When the floor is done the whole room snaps like a photograph into a sprightly shape.

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Time is a pothole. Every business occasionally must fall and sprain an ankle. There are more cleaners now because of recessions in other job markets and for the same reasons there are fewer clean-up jobs. I have to call Barbara every day and ask if any jobs came in until she gives me one. After a week of calling and waiting, there is still no work. I decide to advertise on my own. The likely candidate for my pitch is the Poetry Project Newsletter. This is a monthly mimeographed bulletin which lists events and small-press book and magazine releases. The Newsletter goes out to a few hundred people, many of whom are artists and poets. I dream about washing Larry Rivers' studio floor or cleaning out John Ashbery's notebooks. I think the Newsletter of the arts could use an abject note. I submit for publication the following: Bob Rosenthal cleans house, cleans anything. Available for hire. The Newsletter prints: Poet Bob Rosenthal cleans house, makes everything immaculate.

After a week of circulation, I get my first response. A cheerful, girl's voice says she's going to get married and the party is at a friend's loft. The loft has to be cleaned up before the party and then again the day after the party. The friend's name is Pete Abelman; he lives on Broadway near the Strand Bookstore. However, the bride to be tells me that the loft is above the Strand. I ask her if the loft is as big as the Strand and she says it is. With trepidation I call Pete up. I throw him for a loop when I ask some roundabout questions concerning the size of his loft. To clear matters up, I tell him about his loft being the size of the Strand. Pete laughs and deflates my conception of his loft to its proper size. I come over on a Saturday to clean the loft for the wedding party that evening.

Walking into a loft as a cleaner expands my mind. I usually feel like a small carp as I swim in to clean the typical New York City goldfish bowl but here I feel like a dolphin dumped into a large marina. Here is Pete, a freelance journalist with a background in radical magazines. He is slightly balding, in his thirties, divorced, lives with a big white lady dog. Pete is very genial and we sit down to have a cup of instant coffee. I start to feel the inertia that sits around this dirty loft. Everything seems too big, corners and spaces under huge worktables are wholly forgotten about because of their remoteness. Pete isn't too sure what has to be done, so I take charge and tell him that I have a routine and I'll just do it. I get a giant bucket and fill it with hot water, some Mr. Clean, stuff a rag in my pocket, grab a sponge, pick a corner, and start dusting-washing everything I see. Pete is dumbfounded. I feel like a maniac but know that it is the only way to be. The floor is covered thickly with white dog hairs and a warehouse variety of dust. I clean, sweep, vacuum, do the kitchen and washroom. I'm happy everything is turning out so well for a wedding. Pete tells me his ex-wife would love me, cleaning being something that helped break them apart. He says the place has never looked better. High and deserved praise, I think to myself as I pinch a bit of Pete's dope.

I come back the next day to sweep up the plastic cups, gather the paper plates with multicolored stains, shuffle the plastic forks, and dump the ash-

trays along with everything else into plastic green garbage bags. I sweep up the floor and sample the leftovers in the refrigerator. I get a nice tip from the newlyweds and Pete takes my number. He calls me up a month later. I start to clean the loft with the same thoroughness as I had for the party but Pete soon stops me. "This is a loft, not an apartment. Little things are unimportant here. Just clean the big areas." Pete's speech breaks my pace and I gather that he is scared that I'll be there all day. Being thrown out of my pace really slows me down. I can't see what is big or little. I don't know what to do next and I end up walking back and forth pondering what to do. I decide to sneak in my former thoroughness just so I can work fast and easy again.

Soon after my first Newsletter job, the phone rings in my second job. Olivia Bee has a repairman in her house and I get the clean-up. She lives a half a block from Needle Park, 72nd and Broadway. I travel up by subway and pop my head into the grey atmosphere of exhaust fumes. The subway is on an island. I peer around and spy Papaya King, MacDonald's, and cheap trinket shops. I try to find a donut shop that appears in the movie *Panic in Needle Park*. I saw the movie on TV and paid strict attention to the donut shop scene because I knew someone who played a fag ordering some donuts. I find the same shop (same scene) and coffee up with a donut. Not even a chocolate-covered donut lifts off the oppressive feelings generated in this bloodless area.

I climb up the old staircase, each step sunken with wear, and am beckoned inside by Olivia, a short red-headed woman. She says, "Please, excuse me but I have a private call. Could you wait in here." She ushers me through a door into a little bedroom and leaves me. There is a sad rumped single bed with another forlorn bed which stows below it. There is a little dust-covered bookcase. The books are either plays or music scores. The walls are a drab beige and the single window is filthy, almost black. I sit and wait, reading lonesco. Olivia liberates me and acquaints me with the work. The apartment is filled with old, depressing and broken furniture. Tables can't be moved because their legs are not fully attached. The space is cramped and the vacuum cleaner doesn't work.

I start in to clean and get to know Olivia. She was once an opera singer but her voice is ruined by laryngitis. She is a little overweight and is pale and slack as a person is who has been ill. Medicine bottles abound on the shelves. As I clean, Olivia practices her stenotyping exercises. She types as a tape recorder repeats a paragraph from court records. "How many times did you see the patient outside of your office? I saw Mrs. Burger once in her home following the second visit to my office. And how did...?" The same testimony repeats itself until I learn the questions and answers by heart. The bathroom is transformed into a courtroom. The judge on the toilet seat and jury sitting in the bathtub listen as I fire questions at the sink. The verdict is hard work. Olivia is worried about the time because she can only afford to hire me for four hours. I work on, in the dismal forest, sometimes I discover a roach nest which I madly trounce with my feet. I notice rust and roaches in the icebox.

I meet Olivia Bee at Gerard Malanga's poetry reading at the St. Mark's Church. I feel embarrassed, as one did meeting a schoolteacher at the movies. I am reserved and polite to Olivia until I can ditch her. A few days later,

Olivia calls me up, asks me to work, and wants my opinion of Gerard Malanga's poetry. Oops trapped, Olivia's job is not worth as much as my opinions so I dodge all her questions with "I don't know," or "I never thought about it." Olivia has been awakened to poetry anew and talks all about it as I back off the phone. Back at her place, I find the roaches have multiplied treble fold. I am killing them everywhere and everywhere I clean I rouse them up. I finally feel compelled to comment on the situation. Olivia takes up the battle charge against the roaches, at least in her head. She hates to use roach spray, so I musingly suggest she get a lizard I once saw on TV that loves to eat roaches. Olivia calls up her boyfriend and says, "Bob says I have to do something about the roaches, so we are going to get the lizard..." I wonder who I am to that guy. Then, I wonder who that guy is. I want to call him back and say I was only joking about the lizard. I feel Olivia threw me like a dishrag into her boyfriend's face and I want to make amends. I think it out to rinse any bad feelings out of my system.

The next time I come, the roaches are gone because the landlord painted the apartment. Olivia is in an up mood and the radio is playing young opera singers. She fills me in on who is good and who is not. I ask her who her favorites are. She tells me, but thinks that I don't really care. I assure her that I care and I forget them. Olivia becomes inspired to sing herself. She starts warming up on some scales and the noise is terrific. It almost rattles my teeth. Olivia starts an aria but her voice breaks apart. She starts again and again her voice slips out of key. The loudness is incredible. She tells me that friends could hear her singing all the way to the corner. Olivia also says how bad this is for her throat and how it is starting to hurt. I suggest that maybe she should... She forges ahead and completes the aria and I bend over the mop. I say that I enjoyed the singing very much. I certainly am not lying since the echoes between my ears are becoming fainter. Olivia switches back to the stenotape courtroom drama. It is the same story over and over, every job is a picked flower.

Jobs start to come back and not through the agency. Old customers call me again and new ones come along through friends and satisfied customers. Advertising once in the Newsletter separates me from the agency and places me on my own. I realize that I am self-employed and the ball starts a roll of its own. Jobs come in and fill in my days; I keep my rates and minimum hours the same as with the agency. I start to plot a cost-of-living pay raise to start next fall. I am professional all the way and self-pride even furthers my cleaning abilities and dampens my desire or need to pick something off my customers' shelves. I plan to have a business card someday: Cleaningman/ does the rough stuff.

## Chapter 6 The Bathroom

As its name implies, the bathroom or washroom or lavatory is a room that already has something to do with cleaning. The concept of cleaning the washroom translates itself into the word "doing." You are cleaning the place where you clean yourself. Here you "do" instead of "clean" to avoid redundancy. There is a quality about cleaning which remains unnamed. It is the doing, not the cleaning, that meets your own spirit, which is also unnamable.

The bathroom is a hard room. The light is often bright and hard. Enamel tiles reflect brightness off the walls and the porcelain fixtures gleam as you clean. The floor is hard tiles. There are the precise shapes of drains, valves, and faucets. Sound echoes slightly. The size is small and confined which brings small details into focus and forces the muscles to work hard in short concentrated movements. In a jazz band, the bathroom plays saxophone. Its timbre is tough and clear, with a gush.

Use ammonia in hot water to clean tiled walls, then wipe dry. Powdered cleanser does almost everything else. The sink, the bathtub, and the toilet can be done with cleansing powder. It is gritty and can be lightly rubbed along the surface. Rinse very well and then buff dry with a clean cloth. Porcelain comes clean and bright with little effort. I personally find Comet cleanser to contain some green particles that react harmfully with my nose and breathing. Bon Ami is the purest cleanser and turns into a pasty material when wet. It is not as strong as Ajax, Dutchboy, or BaBo, but it is a terrific product for the bathtub. Its only drawback is that it is twice as expensive as other cleansers. I suggest keeping it around just for the tub. If you have a fine mirror and want to treat it well, do it with vinegar and water, buff dry. Mop the floor with a liquid cleaner or ammonia.

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"And when they don't realize it really doesn't matter who washes the dishes, you see, and they don't realize it enough not to care whether they wind up washing them every night. I think just a lack of consciousness of that is fine." This is an excerpt from an interview with the poet and editor Larry Fagin. Larry is talking about who does the dishes when two people are living together. Larry is separated from his wife and does not cook. Larry wants to transfer his will into a living body other than his own. Larry lives one flight up and across the tenement courtyard from me. At \$3.50 an hour, I give Larry my services.

Larry's apartment is the basic four rooms like my own apartment, but comparisons end at the blueprint. Topographically, Larry's apartment is light-years different from mine. No cracks in the ceiling, no falling plaster, no mice holes; there are built-in closets and cabinets and bookshelves, there are sanded floors, there is bright white paint on the walls. Furniture is sparse here and

what there is, is select and of natural wood. Cleaning Larry's apartment resembles polishing a gem or tuning a piano.

Larry Fagin publishes many Adventures in Poetry books every year. He is either busy or suffering from asthma. He is a perfectionist and a collector. Larry can be thrown off track by blemishes. When I clean for him, I take over his concerns and add initiative and know-how. I clean Larry's five windows inside and outside. I plug in Larry's powerful Electrolux and vacuum the high mouldings around the rooms. I vacuum everything I can, then I bring out my own jar of Murphy's and wash the front, sides, back and top of the furniture, dry and then polish off. I wash the low mouldings, I scrub the floor with a brush and mop up the dark liquid. The natural wood swells up before me, clean and fresh. Here is the renaissance of cleaning! The cleanliness of Larry's abode is hardly human. Like cleaning a bank vault, the cleaner is rewarded by his immediate prospects.

Larry could write a book on a subject like buying a suit. I find this a gentlemanly and fatherly concern and am thusly gratified by Larry's approval of my work. After I clean, Larry tells me how his apartment *sounds* better and how much better he can hear now.

Sanford, my friend who paints houses, calls me up with a possible job. He is finishing up a huge painting job for a guy he calls "Herr Brumbough" or just "The Herr" for short. The Herr sounds like a pain in the ass, but he also has the ring of a rich man with a lot of cleaning work that must be done. I call Brumbough and make a date to clean his new apartment on 5th Avenue in the Seventies. I have to get to work at 7 AM before Brumbough leaves for work, which is a contrast to Sanford, who can't find his way out of his apartment until the clock throws up its hands at noon.

The Herr's building is a huge and venerable complex staffed by an army of employees. There are at least three doormen to check me out and ring Brumbough awake at 7:00. The dew rising off the grass in Central Park gives the air a thick, sweet quality and contrasts heartily with the heavy flow of traffic down 5th Avenue. Brumbough opens the door and shows me the walk-in closet for coats. The closet is about the size of my bedroom. There is a little table with a marble top and a mirror. I take off my shirt and pull on my headband; I come out ready to clean.

The Herr ushers me into a large octagonal public hall. The floor is black linoleum with a white octagon in the center and a white border running along the sides. Off the lobby is the giant living room that overlooks Central Park. Opposite the living room is the dining room that connects to a butler's pantry with its own sink that further connects to the kitchen and maid's quarters. Straight ahead through the lobby is a hallway that ends in a T junction. There is a washroom before me, a study on the right and the master bedroom on the left. The master bedroom has its own park view and private bath. The place is enormous! I have to wash the windows besides cleaning everything that isn't painted. Brumbough leaves me after a thousand injunctions not to break anything and a little speech about how this is really a

tryout for a regular job. I know I wouldn't ever want to come back again as I set about to wash the windows. Most of the morning hours are taken up by this pursuit. I am consoled somewhat by the fact that I had raised my rate on him to \$3.75/hour and at the same moment terribly saddened that I hadn't said \$4.

Sanford comes to work in the early afternoon. He has a lot of little jobs to do and some touch-up work. Sanford has the gossip! Brumbough and his wife have been separated and now Brumbough has this new apartment and is fixing it up for her return. Sanford and I launch into our work. We each have a radio. He listens to FM rock and I listen to AM country. Our paths cross and recross; working with similar levels of enthusiasm and skill, we inspire each other to become silly. We discuss the Herr from head to toe and agree on how disagreeable he is. Brumbough is out and we are in. We can't understand why the Herr had his study painted dark brown. It is already a dark room but painted brown creates the atmosphere inside a chocolate cake. The Herr's father comes by and hangs around. The father is very sweet and speaks German with Sanford. The Herr's father starts putting the Herr down. We all express our feelings about the stupid brown paint. Sanford and I work through the afternoon, then I duck out for some sandwiches. I go down the back elevator and through the service entrance. The basement is huge and clean. There is a locker room for the employees and various corridors that twist and curve finally leading to a secret staircase and through an ironwork gate; there is the street.

Sanford is a beautiful worker. He is careful about each drop of paint. He reconditions every surface before he paints it and seems to have a myriad of skills unknown to me. He works slowly and patiently. His head, like my head, is above his work. As we work on together, we find it possible to completely communicate and have a good time and still work on our different projects. Sanford is exhausted from working every day for three weeks inside this vacuous apartment and I am dizzy from working since 7:00 AM. Sanford and I stumble around in heavy professional manners and continue into the night. The Herr returns and works hard to get in both of our ways or to get one of us in the other's way. Brumbough gives out conflicting orders which slow down the pace of the work. The Herr complains about how slow we are. I finally finish up at 9:00 PM. I am faint and robotlike as I change a lightbulb in the ceiling before I go. I receive a \$45. check and more baloney about how he will see if his wife likes my work etc. He tells me to call him for their decision. I tell the Herr if he wants me, he can call me.

Leaving Sanford to work alone in the doomed apartment is one of the toughest tasks I've ever had to perform. It is plain cruelty that Sanford must labor on with the hideous Herr. Sanford looks at me as one who is standing on the deck of a sinking ship, watching the last lifeboat heave away. We shake hands and agree, "Work is hell!" Physical brothers, we'll meet again in the next world. The joy I feel at my release onto 5th Avenue buoys me up above the street and Central Park, into the cloudy subway. I wonder how to find my way home again.

## Chapter 7 The Kitchen

Much has been written about cooking and eating. The kitchen takes care of the body's inside. Here we are actively working on sustaining our existence. Cooking is substantive whereas cleaning is not. But, alas, the more cooking you do, the more cleaning there is to do. Cleaning maintains the outside of the body. There is a choice involved with cleaning that is not involved with cooking—that is, the choice whether to do it or not. I realize some people choose not to eat but I doubt they do much cleaning either. You can eat a lot and still not clean much.

Since we have established that you probably have eaten, let's assume there are some dirty dishes left over from the meal. No one is pushing you to do the dishes (I hope) but sooner or later you'll do them. Hot water is a key to easy dishwashing. Cooking grease and organic stains are soluble in water, heating the water just quickens things up. Soap also aids the process by making the food particles slippery so they don't cling to each other or to the dish. Rinse and let dry.

Clean the stove with cleansing powder and a pail of hot water. Wipe down the surface with the powder and a damp cloth or sponge. Wring the cloth and wipe the surface to rinse it. Use a dry cloth to make the thing gleam. Don't forget those little pans that pull out under the burners. The oven can be cleaned the same way. Leaving ammonia in a shallow pan inside the oven overnight will loosen baked hard grease and make oven cleaner unnecessary. I hate spray oven cleaners because one stray whiff can knock you out. I think the brush-on kind is better and safer providing rubber gloves are also in use. A stove looks lightweight when its knobs and handles shine; the body gleams, no longer earthbound.

Ammonia and hot water will clean the outside of the refrigerator but it is not recommended for the inside. Baking soda in hot water is enough to clean the inside refrigerator walls and shelves. Wash with the baking soda solution as you would with soap and water. To speed up defrosting the freezer, I use pans of warm water. Often the water heats up the metal freezer walls just enough so that the ice can be lifted away in large sheets. Some people say it is not good to use hot water in this connection. I haven't seen this process harm a freezer yet but if one has any doubts about it, don't try it. Be especially careful if you use any tool to loosen the ice. It is very easy to puncture the freezer wall and create a giant repair bill.

Formica and similar countertops can be cleaned with cleansing powder. Hot water and ammonia will suffice most of the time. Clean the sink as discussed in the last chapter. Finish off by mopping the floor, slowly walking out of the kitchen backwards.

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Joanne's floors need to be reclaimed from the depths of dirt and dullness. She is the closest friend to ever hire me. Joanne lives in the apartment above Shelley and me. I sit at my desk and look up at the ceiling which is the floor I'll soon be scrubbing. I roll a joint and leave for work.

Joanne has black curly hair, an ingenious Jewish face, grace of movement; she is a dancer. She is the first welfare mother to employ me. We sit on the bed and smoke in the sunlight, talking about how to work through the myriad piles of Joanne's clothes and papers. Joanne explains what a well-ordered system it is and that she knows where everything is. Unfortunately that is beside the point because it is the floor we are looking for. It is too lovely just to sit in the window light and smoke. The phone rings. Joanne leaves the room to answer the phone. I hear her say, "Oh Bob's here. We're going to wash the floors and he brought some grass!"

Joanne walks back into the room and the phone rings again. Joanne turns, leaves. She says, "Hello [short pause] This phone call is for Bob!" That's odd, I muse as I start to get up on my feet. But, Joanne is still talking, "Oh, you mean *why* don't you!" I sit back down. I ponder that the person called for me but will be satisfied to give me a message. Joanne returns and says that both phone calls were from her odd and poetic-natured old-lover. He called back to say, "Why don't you sleep with Bob." Messages from elder, (young) poets must be taken in the light of the playful Gods. Yet this one struck me a shivering blow. Joanne says, "I don't vamp my girlfriend's boyfriend." I steel my body to act, for with love it is better to do than to think. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness/ so we clean it up." Frank O'Hara and Bill Berkson wrote that in 1962. In 1975, we do it.

I toss myself into hauling furniture, vacuuming, scrubbing and mopping. I clean relentlessly, madly charged with sexual shock. Before I clean the kitchen floor, I pull out the refrigerator to wash the spot it stands on. When I finish the kitchen floor, I'll be done. I start to push the refrigerator back against the wall. But Joanne wants to clean the rear of the appliance. I leave the refrigerator sitting on the unwashed square in the middle of the floor. I contemplate that spot. Is it my calling card? Is it a weak point or just the thing undone?

Shelley and I are at Joanne's; we are drinking Jack Daniel's. Joanne's friend Connie comes over. We talk about cleaning, cleaning is mentioned. Connie needs her floors done, she can see how good Joanne's floors look. It must be peculiar to socially ask someone to clean. Over drinks, Connie asks, "What do you like to eat?" When!? "Do you tell the ladies what to make for your lunch?" What lunch? "What do you like to steal?" Ahh. "You're supposed to." OK, we'll do it. We take a drunken cab to Chinatown.

Connie lives in Greenwich Village. I love to walk from the East Side to the West Side. It makes me feel smart. I come to Connie's building about

noon. Her two-and-a-half room apartment looks into a couple of directions where many angles converge and diverge. "It's like a fortress, you can see all the approaches." The bedroom is small and the kitchen is just a spit in the ocean. The livingroom is large, enhanced by a brick fireplace and natural wood floors with an inlaid design in one corner.

We sit down at the table and have coffee. Connie has soft, small features on a broad face. She looks modeled in clay with an inner core of sparkles. Connie is a waitress in a midtown hotel where the work is not too hard and the tips are pretty good. We both are fascinated by our jobs. We both enjoy meeting peculiar people. We look at each other. We both decide to go back to school. I decide to get to work.

As I start in on the bedroom, Connie buzzes around me picking up magazines and moving things. I laugh and tell her to relax. Connie says she can't relax and settles on washing the dishes. Finally, she goes out so I can clean a really loathsome area around the refrigerator without embarrassing her to death. Connie comes home, another satisfied customer. I don't steal from Connie because it doesn't occur to me to steal from a friend, besides there is nothing to steal. I figure Connie's original offer of buying something for me to steal will always be valid.

Joanne often talks of her friend Lucy. Lucy makes jewelry and runs her own business. Shelley and I meet Lucy and a buyer from Texas at a party. Lucy and I talk about Houston, Texas, which I had been to, once. Lucy communicates in a manner more direct than conversation; what is being said is not what we are talking about. This is probably because Lucy has been reincarnated so often. Maybe I'll figure out what we really said in some future lifetime of my own. Maybe I've already known Lucy, which could explain why the light conversation about why there are no sidewalks in Houston left a deep impression on me. Lucy and the buyer drive Shelley and me home. He and Lucy sit in the front seat and Lucy does most of the driving. We are driving up Sixth Avenue in the Village. The road curves but we are driving straight for the curb. The buyer reaches over and pushes the steering wheel causing the tires to turn and the car to glide around the curve. We are out of control and safe.

Joanne tells me that Lucy wants me to clean for her but is too embarrassed to ask. With Cherry gone, I need a new customer and Lucy seems to be a person perfect to work for. I call Lucy up but our schedules conflict for two weeks so we make a date for after that. Lucy says if I get a cancellation to let her know I do get a cancellation and I call Lucy up to make a new date for Thursday. All is set. Thursday morning, I am home writing about cleaning houses. I have to call up Evelyn Berkson to confirm a date for the next day, Friday. The phone rings, I am nervous and rushed—I know that is Evelyn calling me.

Hello.

Hello, you are coming to clean today, I have to go out  
for awhile but I'll be... No, we talked about Friday.

What?

I'm supposed to work for you tomorrow. I'm sure we said today.  
 Remember originally I said Sunday and you said couldn't I come sooner.  
 So I said Friday.  
 No, we were talking about a week from Friday and you called to switch  
 it to today. I was looking forward to it.  
 Remember you told me to call you today to find out whether you  
 needed me or not.  
 No, I didn't; you were supposed to...  
 Is this Lucy?  
 Yes, of course!  
 I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else.  
 I thought I was going insane.  
 I'm really sorry. Now what was it again?  
 OK. Let's start over.

Finally, I get the right message and Lucy says, "Maybe I should have said who I was." I say, "You see, I thought it was the other person when the phone rang." "So you just didn't let anyone else come in." "Yup, that's it." We both like to get through.

Lucy has a large apartment on West End Avenue in the Sixties. I walk by Juilliard as I head towards the Hudson River. Lucy's apartment is high up and overlooks a fair-size chunk of the Hudson. There is a long, thin kitchen, a large dining and living area, three bedrooms and two washrooms. The floors are wood parquet. The entire apartment is strewn with tiny pieces used in making jewelry. Each room is big so there is a lot of space to cover. The apartment needs between seven and eight hours of cleaning every week. I start in the kitchen and spend over three hours washing it from head to toe. Lucy comes in and solicits my opinion on the colors to make two silver human legs that create a walking necklace.

It is early evening; Lucy is going out with friends and I am finishing up. We make a date for next week. I mention that I may come earlier in the day because I might not have to work in the morning. Lucy says, "Yes, you do your own work." The hidden imperative in Lucy's statement makes me involuntarily say, "I am writing a book now." "Is it going to be published?" "No, well, I don't think so." "Why not?" "Because of what it is about, you see it is about cleaning." "Oh, it is about all your ladies." "Yeah." I shrug my shoulders and toss my hands into the air. Lucy walks out to meet her friends. I call out, "But I don't know if I can fit you in, in one day." "Well, you had better." "O.K. I will." "It had better be outrageous." "It will be, I only write the truth."

Lucy likes the way I clean and I am satisfied myself with the difference in the apartment. Lucy will be a terrific boss because she is in tune with the cosmos and wealthy enough to easily afford my work. Before I leave, I have to change the lightbulbs in the kitchen. I climb up on a stool and unscrew the knob that holds up a plate shaped light fixture. Something tells me I'm going to break it but I don't comprehend the message in time. The fixture doesn't slip

off like I thought it would so I change my grip to the edge to give it a pull. As soon as I touch the edge, the glass jumps away from the ceiling. I start to hear that message about breaking the glass very clearly as I bobble it a few times before it backflips and dives toward the floor. The noise of the plate exploding across the clean linoleum floor pierces my heart. This is the first thing bigger than a drinking glass that I've broken while on the job. I attribute my fumble to exhaustion and unclear thinking. I write a note that Lucy will never find even though it is out in the open. She will already know what it says as soon as she sees the lights. I sweep up the glass bits with a damp cloth and realize that Lucy won't care as much as I do and she may even be glad since the glass plate was ugly.

## Chapter 8 Special Jobs

These are tasks that need to be done less often than regular cleaning. They either require more energy or they require renting equipment or both.

Washing windows can be especially irksome if you want to wash both sides. Assuming that you can get at the glass, the secret to good window cleaning is to clean it twice. Ammonia in warm water is terrific for washing dirt off the window pane. Wipe the window down and then wipe dry. If you have some window cleaning product like Windex, use it the second time around. Window cleaning products work best on a clean surface, they eliminate streaks left from the first cleaning and they leave the glass bright and polished. A half cup of cornstarch mixed in a pail of water will also polish the glass; however, one must rub vigorously to polish off the dried-on cornstarch. Remember to use a clean cloth that will not leave lint on the glass or use newspapers to see the world clearly.

You can shampoo a rug if it is colorfast and you have a rug shampooer. The shampooer is easy to rent from a hardware or grocery store. The shampoo is clear and works chemically. The carpet need not be soaked in it. It is best if the fiber is standing up stiff, lightly brushed with the wet shampooer. It is good to brush the rug with a stiff brush while the shampoo is still damp. Brush all the fibers in the same direction so that they will dry properly aligned with the other fibers. When the rug is dry, vacuum out the shampoo and dirt.

To buff a paste-waxed floor by hand is a very grueling procedure. I recommend the use of a waxer and buffer. This machine can also be easily rented. Paste wax is not difficult to apply by hand. Rub it evenly with circular motions. Or apply it with the machine. You place the coarse papers over the brushes on the machine and put some wax on the floor. The machine picks up the wax and spreads it out. After half an hour, you buff the floor using the brushes. The machine should just float across the floor as you merely steer it. Wax doesn't have to shine to be properly applied. Paste-waxed floors should have patina—that is, a surface appearance of something grown beautiful, especially with age or use.

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Ben Cunningham no longer lives in his home. He is in a nursing care facility in New Jersey. Patsy can only afford to have me come once a month. While I work, Patsy takes the bus to visit Ben. She goes practically every day. Cleaning up the same rooms without Ben around impresses upon me a stillness, a sense of waiting. Everytime I see Patsy, we talk about how Ben is doing. Of course, there is no hope of Ben recovering his health but there is the constant wish for him to be not irritated.

It's a grey winter afternoon, I am cleaning the livingroom. I am alone as



he is an artist  
I read silently near him  
pausing to give him a light

Patsy is interested in writing and writes herself on occasion and always with a plan. She likes my poems and talks of my "gift." The next time I clean, Patsy gives me a mounted print of Ben's. I am knocked out by Patsy's gift. I hallucinate Patsy's presence at a poetry reading in the St. Mark's Church. I turn around and there she is dressed 1950's style and beaming at me. I am shocked and impulsively jerk my head to face front. Next time I look the lady is gone. I ask Patsy if she was there that night and she wasn't. Patsy asks me to have Shelley come over sometime after I've finished working. Shelley comes over and Patsy serves up drinks. Patsy must know me; she refills my bourbon without asking. We go up into the studio and look at Ben's paintings.

Ben is getting worse. He has come down with pneumonia and has been transferred to a hospital. Patsy is really distressed now though she tells me that the social worker in the hospital is an artist who knows and admires Ben Cunningham. I have to go out of town for a few weeks. When I come back, I don't hear from Patsy for a few more weeks. I'm wondering what is happening and something tells me that Ben has died. I call Patsy up. I am embarrassed because I realize this is the first time I've called Patsy about something unrelated to working. I ask about Ben. Patsy says she is sorry she didn't call me. She says she was just thinking about me. Ben did pass away. He never recovered from the pneumonia. Ben died April 5, 1975, there was no funeral because Ben "detested funerals." His ashes are spread over the Nevada desert. Patsy says she has just been doing some cleaning on her own and when she came to the toilet she thought, "Imagine writing about cleaning a toilet."

Patsy and I will work together for the first time and completely spring-clean the apartment. Then there will be a gathering for Ben's friends; Shelley and I will be there, helping out, too.

## Chapter 9 Hints

Topic A is cleaning. These are some hints to make cleaning easier to do.

Wear clothes that are loose fitting. You want to be free moving. Sneakers are good to wear because they are easy to crouch in. Dress coolly.

Do some exercise to loosen the muscles in the body. Roll the head around the neck very slowly for a few revolutions. Let the head be limp and fall forward as it slowly rounds the neck. Reverse and go the other direction. Bend over at the waist a few times to limber up the back muscles. Stretch your arms high over your head. Rotate your shoulders. Stand on your toes. Get loose.

Listen to music. It should be music that you really like. It should bring your mood up. Music of high sentiment or personal meaning is good because it can make you cry. There is something about weeping and cleaning that make them go hand in hand. Music moves your body without involving your will. The radio is really meant for you. Radio is confidential and immediate like you are.

Try to arrange your cleaning hours to fall during the part of the day when you are on the upswing. I like to clean when I am tired and sleepy. When I am done cleaning, I am awake and clearheaded. The idea is to let the work be beneficial for both you and the apartment. When you are done cleaning, you should feel happy and still have energy to have fun. Cleaning can turn exhaustion into restoration if done with grace and the will to better spirits.

Have all the supplies you will need. Here is a simple and basic supply list: Murphy's Oil Soap or equivalent, Ammonia, Cleansing Powder, Bucket, Rags, Mop, Broom, Dustpan, and Vacuum Cleaner. The last item is not essential but it can be one's powerful ally.

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I am wringing out a dark mop over the kitchen floor when Cherry Malard pops in to say her girlfriend is interested in having me clean. "Talk to Kathy," she says, pointing to the phone. Kathy and I make a date for the next week after my regular job with Cherry. Kathy Applegate lives on Second Avenue in the Sixties, which is only eight blocks away from Cherry's apartment. The next week, I finish up at Cherry's and proceed to wearily walk down Second Avenue. I stop off in a dimestore and take four photos of myself for a quarter. I fall down the chute looking drugged, heavy-lidded, and mopey. I comb my hair and do eyeball exercises, take off my glasses and straighten my back. Put another quarter in the machine, transform my looks to bug-eyed and wired. Up four floors in a tiny elevator. I go to work.

The door opens into the kitchen, on the left is a bright yellow counter which supports a photographic enlarger. On the right, is a stove, a sink, some cabinets, and a half-size refrigerator. The bathroom is straight ahead, as is the bedroom area where you turn a corner and look into the living area ending

against a row of windows. The windows are covered with plants. Some plants are on window shelves and the others hang from the ceiling. There is a sofa covered with bright Indian bird pattern and above the sofa hangs a bird cage made of red wooden sticks and inside are two tropical finches. There is a wall completely recovered, first with a rough cloth and then with photographs, prints, beads, and locks of hair.

Kathy Applegate is in her thirties and teaches English in the public schools. She is ash blonde with a slim figure and a bright eager face. But it seems to me that she is very particular. She tells me how to clean everything. After breaking me in for a while, she goes out. The phone rings. I pick it up and say hello. "Kathy?" a male voice inquires. "She went out to do some shopping. Can I take a message?" "No." Hangs up. I get a premonition that someone is going to come in the door soon and it won't be Kathy. I decide to do something obvious and start to vacuum the sofa, which I figure I could use to hide behind. In a couple of minutes, I hear the faint clicking of the door lock opening. A big muscular guy walks out of the kitchen. I turn off the vacuum and slowly straighten up, "Hello." "Oh, hello, my name is Boris." "Bob," I say and we shake on it.

Kathy's medicine chest reveals many prescription bottles. There are unmarked bottles too. One has a variety of pills and the other has five green-and-white SKF spansules. She knows her pills, I gather. Here I am again about to steal. A little angel whispers in my ear, "This is not novel and it is not even a challenge." A tiny demon pipes up, "You know you want those green-and-white pills!" I shake my head and close the cabinet door. Looking at my face in the mirror, I decide there is too much involved. Sin is a natural fascination created by the amount of cleanliness is next to you-know-whatness. I suppose if I were a burglar I might occasionally feel an odd desire to clean up after myself. It is unsafe for the burglar to clean too much and it is unsafe for the cleaner to steal too much. Both the burglar and I still share the same fascinations.

Cherry tells me that Kathy really likes me. "As a person," she adds, Kathy realizes after my first day that I do know how to clean and now she enjoys working with me. We often clean together. Kathy is talking on the phone to her astrologer. She describes me to him as being fastidious. He declares I must be Virgo. Kathy asks me my sign and I answer, "Leo." Hmmmm. He needs my birthday, hour, and location and soon I am read out to. My moon is in Virgo and so is my Mercury. So that explains it. Kathy is interested in my Mercury as well as my Moon.

Kathy and Cherry make similar health foods; Cherry is good at cakes and Kathy is great with drinks and shakes. When I work, Kathy offers me mixed fruit juices, yogurt with molasses, and a health drink made from blended almonds, bananas, and honey. The almonds, with a little water added, blend into almond milk. These foods are terrific energy boosts. With new energy, I go into the livingroom.

The sofa is covered with birdseed that the birds have tossed overboard. I turn on the vacuum and vacuum the sofa. On the coffee table next to the sofa, I notice a little pile of grass. I say, "You don't want me to vacuum this up, do you?" "Oh either put it in that little box or smoke it if you want to." "Well, sure, don't care if I do." "It's great dope!" Kathy says as she fetches the papers. I

smoke it up and Kathy stays straight. I continue with a slower cleaning of the living room. I put the upholstery attachment onto the vacuum and start to suck up the birdseed off the bright bird background. The motor in the vacuum sends out bleeps that put shivers down my spine. I am being contacted from outer space. I look up and see Cherry and her dog, Orchards. The sight makes me laugh out loud since I had just spent a punishing day at her house the day before. Cherry says, "I always turn up at unexpected moments." Kathy and Cherry giggle in the kitchen as I make the livingroom incredibly, U.F.O., gleaming CLEAN. I also find Boris' knife. Inconspicuously waiting on the dresser for me to see and feel, the knife hits me like a telegram. I read it once and put it down.

I am cleaning Kathy's cupboards with Clorox to remove or counteract the build-up of radioactive acidity. I think it probably works. Kathy says she wants to take some photos of me. This is a coincidence because I want some photos of me in my uniform before the shoes wear out and the tshirt falls apart. Kathy takes an entire roll. A few close ups in the apartment and then, when I'm done cleaning, we go outside in the brisk March wind. She shoots the rest of the film in front of the school. My t-shirt has holes in it so I shiver. Kathy says, "You're too stiff." I relax by looking at Kathy's legs. Romance is ever a key to unlock the door. "That's good!" Kathy calls out. Before we part, I ask Kathy something about next week. She mishears me and answers, "Where am I going now? Just going home."

Anything that pretends to be good or is good can be ruined. Too much praise of my work would ruin me because I may feel inclined to raise my rates or go on to bigger and better cleaning jobs. Most people are considerate enough not to overpraise my work. Making love with a customer would ruin the cleaning. My employers and I create a relationship with a void in it. That void is the work to be done. I am afraid of ruin for I feel unruined. These are my pretentions. Evelyn Berkson straightens me out. I am finishing up mopping the hallway. Evelyn is distraught from many sides, she turns to me and says, "How come you are so relaxed?" "I'm not really relaxed." "Yes you are, compared to me." "I guess I'm sort of a loner. I know how to be alone." "That's good."

A few minutes later Evelyn says, "You really are nice." I stop mopping and look at her. She looks away and says, "I envy Shelley, I really do. She is very lucky." "I can be ruined." I say.

"What? Oh I know that but you don't seem like the kind of guy that goes around hurting people." I say, "Yes, uh. I try not to." I am left holding the mop; everything is confused except that I heard Shelley's name. I have never heard it while cleaning before. Evelyn seems to be pointing the way home. Love is what always points the cleaning man home.

## Chapter 10 The Clean House

Now the thing is complete. Every room stands connected. Everything in the house follows a clean line. There you are! You don't have to think about cleaning house. If muddy feet walk in, it makes you indignant. The house is just cleaned, it stands in its full kinetic potential. The goof is that the potential is only towards getting d\_\_y. But the moment is blinding and all of its aspects are glowing. The clean house is exciting.

The clean in the house is what rubbed off you. It is your effort. There was you then there was the house, you added energy and one plus one makes two. Clean is the number 2. You aren't lonely; you are on stage.

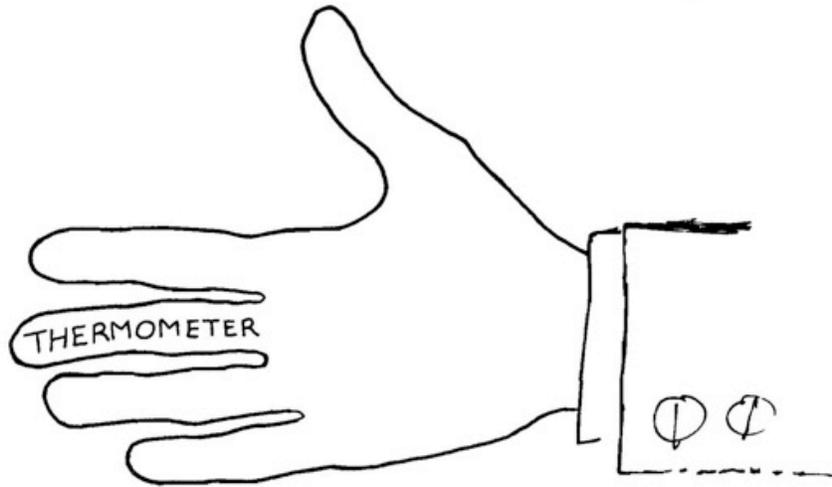
Cleaning house means coming together. Applause. Take a bow quick before the curtain. The clean house is a jumping off point. I can't tell you more.

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