

Taking Care of Buildings

The cleaner: Rodrigo, who moved here from El Salvador in 1990 and works for a cleaning and snow-removal company. He works five days a week, plays the guitar on weekends in a band at his church, lives with a roommate, and sends money home to his family.

5:55 A winter morning, still dark. Silhouettes of men and women who have alighted at the bus stop, bundled against the cold and carrying their lunches, making their way along the icy sidewalks to work.

6:00 The back hallway of the cleaning company is full of men waiting to go out on jobs. Everyone is speaking Spanish. Handshakes, high-fives, some embraces. Behind a door at the end of the hall are the executive and administrative offices, which Rodrigo cleans every morning. He begins by laying out supplies: spray cleaner, a duster, cloths, and latex gloves.

6:04 Dragging a garbage can, Rodrigo makes an initial circuit of the empty office — a labyrinth of waist-high cubicles — emptying trash and relining wastebaskets. He picks up a couple of paper cups half full of cold coffee and empties them in the bathroom sink before throwing them away.

6:14 Rodrigo goes from desk to desk, dusting and cleaning surfaces. He straightens a little but is careful not to move papers around too much and not to throw anything away.

6:29 He dismantles and cleans the coffee maker, and wipes the countertop of yesterday's grains of sugar and coffee drips.

6:37 In the ladies' room, Rodrigo pours cleanser into the toilet and scrubs it with a

brush. He cleans the toilet's surfaces with a cloth, and wraps it in another cloth so he won't accidentally use it again.

6:45 After vacuuming, Rodrigo pushes a button that raises the metal shutters on the front windows. In a couple of minutes the first accountants and administrators will show up for work. He does a quick mental checklist and then runs to wipe down the conference table.

7:01 The back hallway. The men have all left. The floor is wet with melted ice, muddy with sand. Rodrigo begins sweeping the mud into piles. Two other cleaners walk through, figuring out their schedule for the day. "You coming out with me?"

"Sure."

"Because I had someone else coming out, but he just canceled."

"I'm with you."

Posted on the wall is a notice in Spanish and English: "Horario de nieve," explaining that if you work for this company, where the work is not just cleaning but also snow removal, you need to come to work when it snows. "NO HAY EXCEPCION A ESTA NORMA."

7:07 Rodrigo cleans the men's room.

7:20 He's standing on a chair replacing a light bulb when the boss asks him to help with an emergency: a truck carrying the company's ice melt is stuck in the street, blocking traffic. The request is calm and



▲ Photo by Joan Wickersham.

cordial, but the problem is actually huge, as is the truck, a long flatbed that jackknifed coming out of a driveway and is now surrounded by police cars, blue lights blinking. Rodrigo joins a group of about 16 men, recalled from today's jobs, unloading the truck in the hope that lightening it will allow the driver to move it. Quickly, almost silently, the men are pulling the 50-pound sacks off the truck and carrying them on their shoulders back to the storage shed. It's going to take a while: there are 36 tons of ice melt to be moved.

7:40 With the truck partially unloaded, the driver is trying, unsuccessfully, to move it. Rodrigo reminds his boss, who's also outside carrying ice melt, that he has to clean another building before 8. "Right, OK," the boss agrees.

7:44 Back at the cleaning company, Rodrigo grabs a vacuum, a bucket, some cloths, and spray cleaner, and then runs down the sidewalk to the small office building next door. He whips through, emptying trash and turning on lights. Everything looks good. Tuesday is his big cleaning day here, and this is Friday.

7:59 Ladies' room. Replaces toilet paper, relines trashcan, checks paper towels.

8:01 Same thing in men's room.

8:03 Spray-cleans sinks, faucets, mirrors, soap dispensers in ladies' and men's rooms.

8:06 Quickly cleans both toilets.

8:08 Checks that the lights are working in the dance studio at the end of the hallway. He runs into the day's first arrival, a young woman who works in one of the offices. Rodrigo greets her calmly, wishes her a good weekend, and quickly vacuums the carpeted hall and vestibule.

8:10 On his way out, he picks up a thumb-tack from the vestibule floor and puts it back in the bulletin board. "OK." He takes good care of this building and cleans it daily, so everything looks spotless even though he's had to rush through today.

8:12 Back at the cleaning company, Rodrigo sweeps the hall again: it's a smeary mess of dirt and grit from the boots of the men called back to help with the truck. Now, as he begins to mop, more men assemble in the

hall. He mops, they mill around, and the dirt comes back as quickly as he can remove it.

8:35 Finally, after checking with the boss, Rodrigo empties the bucket, refills it with hot soapy water, and leaves it standing in a corner. After the men have left, someone else will quickly re-mop the floor.

8:40 He takes the bus over to the side-by-side apartment buildings he cares for. There's a supermarket near the bus stop; he picks up a salad for lunch, and stops to talk to some women standing in front of an abortion clinic. They give him literature in Spanish about shelters and adoption, which he will pass along to women in his church.

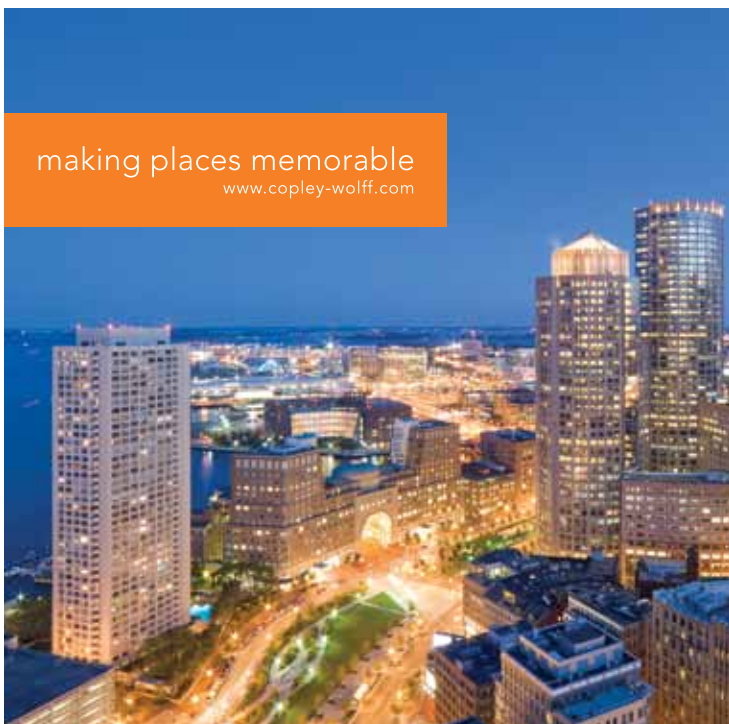
9:23 In the basement of one of the buildings, Rodrigo assembles supplies from neatly organized shelves, cleans the toilet in the small bathroom he uses, and changes his heavy boots for sneakers — he'll be running a lot over the next few hours, and the sneakers make him feel like he's flying.

9:40 Makes a quick circuit of the two

buildings' basements, checking light bulbs, turning on outside lights, dusting, wiping off laundry machines.

9:46 Outside he checks that the lights have all come on. Inside each of the building's seven entryways, he checks the floors, which are carpeted, with marble borders; they're essentially still clean from yesterday's attentions, but flecked with ice melt from people's boots. Passes through the inner door, checks the hallway carpet, and peers up the stairwell to make sure all the lights are working, three floors up. Spray-cleans and wipes inner and outer glass surfaces of inner and outer doors.

10:05 Makes the rounds of the building's seven basement entrances, sweeping, checking light bulbs, and emptying and relining garbage cans. In some cases he stores liners at the bottom of the can, but some cans are habitually smelly and he keeps the liners nearby in boxes. He runs up several staircases where he knows that old ladies prefer to leave their trash in small knotted supermarket bags outside their



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back doors. Outside, he tests lighting fixtures, slinging rags over their photo cells to fool them into thinking it's dark.

10:22 The second building has five front entryways. He checks each and cleans the doors, which takes longer here because they're Plexiglas, harder to clean, and they have lots of panes. The tile floors are gritty and salty; he'll come back to mop later.

10:50 After he finishes the second building's five basement entryways, he uses a dolly to haul the trash to the dumpster. In the first building, where he's already emptied the communal basement cans, he now picks up the bags. In the second, residents put trash in cans on back porches outside their apartments. In each of the five back stairways, Rodrigo runs up four flights, and works his way down, emptying and relining cans.

Reaching the dumpster, he smiles with relief: the weekly trash pickup has already happened so there's plenty of room, unlike some Fridays when it's overflowing.

11:46 On one of his many dumpster trips,

the dolly loaded with trash bags, a car pulls up and a woman gets out. The path is well salted, but she notices an icy patch.

"Where's the sand and salt?"

"I'm going to put a little," Rodrigo says.

"Oh."

"I'll do it now," he says, and runs.

12:30 Lunch. He eats, checks messages, listens to music.

1:00 Gathers supplies. The building has a rhythm: in addition to the daily spot-check and light cleaning, Monday is the big trash day, after the weekend's accumulation; Tuesday is a thorough vacuuming; Wednesday a thorough mopping; Thursday brass polishing. Friday is Rodrigo's day to give extra attention wherever it's needed: today, with the icy weather, it's the brass door handles and kick plates, which have gotten dull and smudgy even since yesterday's cleaning.

1:05 Pushing a wheeled bucket of steaming, soapy water, Rodrigo cleans the two buildings' 12 vestibules: sweeping, mopping,

tidying any mail and packages that have accumulated since his morning check.

1:45 Back in the basement, he drinks water — he's hot, even though the day is freezing. But he doesn't feel tired. In El Salvador, he was used to farm work and lumber work, both of which were much more grueling and paid only five dollars a day.

1:50 Crouches on the marble steps to start polishing the kick plate outside the first building's first door. As he circles the buildings, he also puts down more ice melt.

2:28 Finishes the second building's last door.

2:31 On his way back to the basement to store his supplies before returning home, he passes the dumpster. "See you Monday," he tells it. ■

Joan Wickersham's memoir, *The Suicide Index* (Harcourt), was a 2008 National Book Award finalist.

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