

# THE VACUUM CLEANER WALTZ

*by Constance McCutcheon*

There was noise in the hallway outside my apartment door. Some sort of clumsy, loud machine was performing some sort of work and a human being was more than likely attached to it. As the stairwells in the building had been recently painted, I had gotten used to hearing some sort of commotion going on out there all day long. The noise got louder and soon it was bumping up against my door. I was on my way out at the moment, not late, but I didn't want to walk right into the arms of a workman—or two; I also didn't like being late or having to rush to be punctual. As I waited by the door wondering which unpleasant eventuality was to be embraced, I heard singing. It wasn't shy or reflective or self-consciously low, but rang unrestrainedly above the noise and bumping of the machine. Although apparently attached to the machine, it resonated perfect contentment.

When the noise and singing faded, I exited and to my surprise saw the janitor pushing an industrial vacuum cleaner outside the elevator door. It was getting on towards six in the evening. I had never seen him working about the building as late as that—never. Had I been asked to testify, I would have had to say he usually disappeared right after his lunch, a lunch he had in the furnace room where the air was close and reeked of machinery, a room removed from the open air of the courtyard by the depth of the bicycle room at the back of which the furnace room lay. In fact, whenever I looked for the janitor, no matter what time, if I found him at all, I found him sitting in the furnace room having lunch.

The poor man had not one building to take care of, but two; so he said. It was clever of him to have two. How could anyone in my building disprove his claim that he spent his afternoons diligently working at the other building, for which stint he evidently gathered unto himself all his morning energy by doing as little in our building as possible? And no one could ever call him on not being where he should be: obviously he was in transit or an emergency had come up in the place where he was not. A very convenient arrangement. That being the situation and the man, it surprised me no end to see him towards six in the evening in my building vacuuming the fourth floor hallway, and very contentedly at that.

The man, an overweight Hungarian, a smoker, and a drinker—not on the job, but a man who liked his whiskey—had been having balance problems and exhibiting a host of other worrying symptoms of impending bad health. He had collapsed two different times just recently and had been driven off by an ambulance each time. However, he had reported that, despite the fact that all those doctors had looked at him, none could tell him what the matter was. I thought I could, but I wouldn't: he had to stop being so lazy, show some incentive for his job, move around a little to earn his pay, lose weight, stop smoking, stop drinking, and stop prevaricating to wriggle away from every responsibility his job imposed on him. Considering the fact that he would never do any of those things, it certainly made sound medical sense for the

doctors to tell him the best thing he could do was not worry about it, advice the janitor seemed to be following to the letter.

“Did the doctor prescribe that you sing while you work?” I teased him. “To remind yourself that you’re happy?”

“What do you expect me to do?” he responded bluffly. “Cry?”

But he was so contented and so easy and so unhurried about vacuuming the hallway at that hour that I was genuinely perplexed.

“If I had your job, I would be,” I ventured rather impertinently. I hadn’t forgotten my engagement, but calculated that I had enough time to exploit this encounter to satisfy my curiosity—these sporadic meetings were like chancing on gold dust; it was always unexpected, you never got much, but if you took the trouble to glean what you could, what you got was precious; if I was in fact willing to embrace that unpleasant eventuality I had discarded a few moments before: rushing to be punctual. I was.

“If you had my job, you’d be doing just what I’m doing.”

“Vacuuming?”

That remark was awarded with a look of comic indulgence.

“Singing,” he corrected me. He eased the vacuum cleaner over the swell in the hallway carpet, switched it off, and turned his corpulent, overalled figure towards the full-length landing window that looked out onto the trees that rose up past us as he explained: “I spent the morning suffocating in the underground garage searching the ceiling in the dark for the leaks where the juices that accumulate from the garbage pit seep through. Next I had to tell the board of this place—”

“There’s a board here?”

He guffawed. “Certainly, there’s a board. I’m the last asshole in the world. The house manager is the next-to-last asshole, and then there’s the board.”

I wondered what kind of assholes that made the board members, but did not have time enough to venture that query.

“So the last asshole in the world had to tell the board what I told them last time I was assigned to search the garage ceiling and which they didn’t believe then, either—that even if we fixed the ceiling, which they won’t do because it’s too expensive, the garbage compressor still has to be replaced because it’s cracked. Upshot of the meeting? They tell me I’m an asshole and let me get on to my next assignment, which is jumping on eighteen garbage containers to stuff their lids shut so that the stink from the rotting garbage doesn’t get so bad that people will call and complain, making me come out at whatever time it happens to be to do that very thing. Then, as the grand finale of my day, I got to clean the shit off the wall in the back—”

“Oh! You got to it!” I interjected with relief.

A sad, but wise man nodded towards the window. Yes, he had gotten to it. “How someone could do something like that when they could have gone anywhere under the trees where there’s garden and earth and—well, coverage.”

“I have the feeling,” I volunteered, “that the person was too sick and had to lean up against the wall for support.”

“Whoever it was was stone drunk and didn’t have a clue what they were doing.”

“I’m awfully glad you got to that,” I repeated. “That was pretty important, it really was, although I’m very sorry you have to take care of that kind of stuff. It’s really unfair. It’s ... it’s awful.”

“Nevertheless,” he pointed out lucidly, “maybe you can understand why, if you had my job, you’d be singing now.”

THE END