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Must Be Nice

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BRYAN FURUNESS

MUST BE NICE

My first and favorite task of the night is to clean the midget suit of armor outside the Principal's office. I dust the slats in the tiny visor and check for gum stuck in weird places. I try to straighten everything up—especially the fingers on the little gloves, which kids are forever trying to shape into gang signs—but after I'm done, the suit stoops over again, like it's old and tired. *You and me both, pal*, is what I say to that.

Hector the supervisor says it's midget-sized because the administration was too cheap to spring for a regular-size suit of armor. Still, I think it looks nice. Noble, even, in those few seconds when it's clean and upright. Twice a year I buy chrome polish with my own money and shine it all up, but does anyone appreciate it? Ha. One time, back when I worked days, I had just finished polishing the knight and was walking away when I heard a rattling noise. I turned around to see a boy pretending to hump the poor knight right in the ass-can. That's when I requested the change to nights. I don't need to see that crap.

Hector doesn't think the suit has to be cleaned every night, but it only takes a couple of minutes. It's a good place to start. Better than the Vocational Hall bathroom, anyway. Down there, it's freaking third world. Pee in the sink. Hockers hanging from the ceiling, dripping down stall doors, spattered across the mirror—it's hocker city in there. If BOY'S VH BATHROOM shows up on your sheet, you're going to want to leave it for last. And let me tell you right now: it's going to show up on your sheet a lot because Hector never assigns it to his little favorite, Lupe. I'm not one to gossip, but there are certain things a new employee has a right to know, like how Lupe is sleeping her way to the top of the custodial assignment list. If I left these facts out of your orientation, I would not be training you to the best of my ability, and that is one accusation I will not take.

On your sheet, you'll see the protocol for cleaning bathrooms, but when it comes to the VH bathroom, I say eff that, don't physically touch anything. Here is my protocol for that bathroom: fill up a bucket with hot water and ammonia. Slop it against the walls and sinks and mirrors. Slop it all around. Whatever does not wash down the drain, pick it up with a shovel and take it out to the dumpster. Walk backwards, so you do not have to smell its smell.

And then? Once the floors have dried and the wall tiles are sparkling from the ammonia? You can spray a little Endust on the floor, just inside the entrance, until it makes an invisible slick spot for the first VH'er to slip on in the morning. Who knows? You might get two or three before the slick spot gets eaten away by pee and hockers.

Oh, you're so mean, you're probably thinking. They're just kids, Rosie, how can you be so heartless?

All I can say is, it must be nice to cut loose and throw wet glops of toilet paper around a restroom just to see how it feels. Must be nice to pee while spinning in a circle—I certainly don't know what that feels like. Must be nice to come to a clean school with fresh shining bathrooms without having to know how that happens every single freaking day. Muuuuust be nice.

Oh, don't look shocked. You'll lose those wide eyes soon enough. I give you two weeks before you start calling these kids little effers, too. But don't worry, you'll find little things to keep you going. We all did. Hector has his Lupe. Big Mike rifles through lockers and steals drugs, because what kid's going to report that? Ha! Me, I like to clean the men's faculty bathroom right after dusting the knight.

I go in without knocking in case some teacher is working late. If I see a pair of legs stiffen up under a stall door, it is a good day. It is a good day if someone has to call out in kind of a strangled voice, "I'm in here."

That's when I turn up the volume on my headphones. Does the poor teacher know the headphones are hanging around my neck? He does not. All he knows is that I can't hear him over the music, and that he is trapped. I bang around for a couple of minutes. I make comments like, *Whooo, it stinks in here*. Finally I walk up to the stall door, and give it a good pop with my mop handle. "Who's in here?" I say like I've caught a Peeping Tom.

Whoever-it-is has to identify himself, which is probably not a high point in his teaching career. Then I say, "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Fredline. I wouldn't have come in if I knew you were pooping."

It's quiet for a second. It always is. Then he says—every time, they all say the same thing—"It's all right."

Ha! That's what they say because what else can they say? Even though it's the opposite of all right! That's my big joke. Score one for Rosie. That is also pretty much the extent of my socializing for the day.

Not that I'm complaining. I am not like Hector who might explode if he had to shut up for five minutes. I am not like Big Mike who I otherwise like outside of his habit of calling his wife every hour to ask her whatcha doing when he already knows the answer! Which is cleaning! Like him! Because she works the same shift over at George Duke Elementary!

I like a little peace and quiet. This is hard for some morons to understand. Lupe thinks that because I am alone I must be lonely. A couple weeks ago, she suggested I get a dog. "Dogs are great company," she says. Oh, hey, great idea, Lupe. Just the other day I was thinking, *Boy, after a long night of cleaning up after other people, I'd love to go home and pick up some dog shit*.

What I like to do when I get home is watch *Law & Order* on TNT. I especially like the *SVU* with Christopher Meloni. I don't normally like tattoos, but on him they are very nice. Ver-r-r-r-y nice. This kind of talk would probably surprise some morons

around here who think because a lady is tough and doesn't have a husband that she must be a lesbian.

News flash, morons: I have a son, who I do not like very much, but still, I have him. He was a screamer when he was a baby, and he's a whiner now, so you can understand why I appreciate the peace and quiet of the night shift.

You know who else are bad whiners? Teachers. It's true. Just wait until your first all-staff meeting, when you get up super-early in the morning for the privilege of having teachers ignore you. They sit by themselves and say tight little sarcastic things to one another and generally act like you're a leper who does not exist.

You know what I mean.

The meeting itself is one big bitch-fest. Mainly what the teachers bitch about is us. How their chalkboards look like they've been wiped down with a hot mayonnaise sandwich. How there are hocker-icicles on their ceilings. The women are the worst in these meetings. Some lady with cat hair all over her Christmas sweater will raise her hand and tell the Principal about the microscopic piece of fuzz that has been in the corner of her room for three weeks now, and don't we have somebody to pick that up? Don't we *pay* that somebody to make our rooms totally sanitary and perfect?

Must be nice to have such high standards, I think. Especially if it's always someone else who has to hit those standards. Must. Be. Nice.

I learned a long time ago not to pay attention at those meetings. I look around; I make up my own games. Like the one where I try to guess which teacher might be my son's daddy.

My kid, he doesn't look like any of the men, but he whines like all of them. So it's impossible to tell.

Every time my kid calls me, it's bitch, bitch, bitch—how did he turn out that way? I'll take some of the blame, I guess, but not all of it. I wasn't the world's best mother, but he wasn't the easiest kid, either. I know, because I listened to other mothers talk while their children played polite little games in the sandbox. *Oh, little Timmy is having problems learning his colors. Oh, little Susie won't stop wetting her Pull-Ups at night, ooh, ooh, what should I do?*

Must be nice to deal with such tiny problems. Hey, Supermom, while you're worrying about little Susie Wetpants, my kid's showing her his wiener behind the swings. Then he's off to shove cigarette butts up his nose.

Do you smoke? Do not smoke in the school. That is maybe the one unforgivable sin. Well, one of two, I guess, along with the Endust trick. Hector can noodle Lupe in the high jump pit, but if he catches you smoking on school grounds he will shitcan you in a second.

It wasn't always so cutthroat around here. It's not like there was a "golden age of custodial services" or anything, but the job used to be better. Over the years, though, the kids got more disrespectful, the teachers got whinier, but it was all so gradual that I

hardly noticed—until Hector came and everything went right to hell.

All of a sudden, seniority meant nothing, and I started getting the shittiest assignments. All of a sudden, I was supposed to ignore all of my experience, and clean the school *his* way, follow *his* protocols.

That was three years ago. I thought about quitting. Instead, I switched to nights and figured out a few pranks, and I was able to hang on. Until now.

Excuse me. I'm fine—just a frog in my throat.

Moving on!

Up here is Mr. Fredline's room. This moron tried to marry me when I was pregnant. He thought, with his giant man-ego, that he was the only one to ever sleep with me.

I was in my mid-twenties then. I'd gotten a little baby-crazy, and for that I blame the midget suit of armor. I kept having a dream where I would open up the visor and find a little boy inside. A boy with sandy blonde hair, living inside the suit. For weeks I was tempted to peek inside, even though I knew it was crazy, and one day I couldn't help myself. I opened the visor, saw the sloppy welding job on the inside of the helmet, and cried my stupid eyes out. Shortly after that I started pushing my cart around the hallways in the evening, looking into classrooms to see who was staying late.

Listen, I was not always built like a hand bell, skinny on top and wide on the bottom. I used to be built like a stick. Which is still not very attractive, but then, most men, when offered a poke with no strings attached? When flattered that someone, even this stick woman, wants them? Bingo. Score one for Rosie.

When I started showing, one teacher quit and left town. Two or three others wouldn't meet my eyes, and got in the habit of leaving the building right after the final bell. Stupid Mr. Fredline proposed. Now my son is twenty-eight and he calls me every few months for money. I tell him no and he whines and I tell him stop it, that no one likes a whiner. Then I send him money anyway.

I don't think Christopher Meloni would approve of me sending money to my whiny son. Christopher Meloni would give me that icy look where he presses his lips tight. He probably has no idea how nice he looks when he makes that face. *Well, I'm sorry*, I tell imaginary Meloni, and then enjoy him looking at me that way.

Sorry, sorry, sorry—what a cheap word. No one means it anymore, including me. I didn't mean it when Hector caught me with the Endust, and the Principal didn't mean it when he said he had to let me go. But I feel sorry now. I'm not sure for what, or to who, but sorry is what I feel right before I fall asleep every morning to dream the same, stupid recurring dream. It's about my last day of work.

In the dream, I show up to work, pack my stuff, and leave right away. I mean, it's my last shift, right? What can they do—re-fire me? But the Principal stops me on the front steps. "It isn't going to be the same around here without you, Rosie," he says, moronically. "We're sure going to miss you."

"Funny," I say. "That's not the impression I got when you were firing me."

He looks sheepish. “I’ve been thinking,” he says. “Maybe we could just, you know, change your job title. Do you want to teach a class or something?”

I go, *Hm . . .*

He clutches his hands in hope.

“One condition,” I say. “I get to pick the kids. No boys who can’t hit the toilet. No teacher’s kids. And no other fricking whiners, either.”

The Principal puffs his cheeks out dramatically and runs a hand over his balding head, which means I am driving a hard bargain but he is thinking about it.

What I don’t tell him is that I would pick the D students, the ones who try but still suck at everything. I would take these kids and break them down to nothing, Marine-style, by opening their eyes to all the crap ahead of them in life. Then I would build them back up. Look, I would say, it’s not so bad. You can be alone without being lonely. You can play good pranks on the deserving dumbasses of the world. There is also TNT. Forever there will be TNT and your favorite shows will never leave you. Forever there will be teachers and bosses who will give you crap but I am here to tell you that there is some crap of your own you can give back.

I will pass around outlines with a few examples of crap you can give. Then we will brainstorm more examples as a group. Our pledge of allegiance will be to each other. Someone will pull out a boom box and we will put black construction paper over the windows so the kids can dance without worrying who will see.

The Principal knows none of this when he throws up his hands and says, “Well, this’ll probably cost me my job, but . . . okay! You got a deal, Rosie.”

Everyone who has been slowly gathering behind him shakes their heads in disbelief. Their mouths fall right open, they can’t believe it. Lupe punches Hector in the arm and says something sharp in Spanish. *Who the hell does she think she is?* the teachers ask each other. *Where’s her fancy diploma? Who is she to make her own deal? Who is she to pick her own students?*

Must be nice, they say to each other. Muuuust be nice. Must. Be. Nice.