



By

Diana F. Johnson

Tina sits quietly on the window ledge, day after day, on the broad sill. How she loves to stare idly out the window at the ever-moving traffic, busying herself with her continuous washing. Tina works rhythmically, licking and licking her fur; inspecting her claws. Flexing them. And as she does this, the sun's rays come through the glass -stall and shatter at the cat's huge, dark shape - then slide round her body, gathering again in a pool of light on the dusty floor.

Jana doesn't like Tina. But this cat doesn't mind. All that matters is her position at the window.

Each time the cleaning lady attempts to wipe the sill, the animal angrily challenges her. For this reason alone, Jana can't wash the dusty, brown, plaid drapes that hang limply at either side of Mrs. Tucker's front window.

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Only for a few hours, once a month, Jana cleans Mrs. Tucker's little house. The woman, a retired, real estate agent, lives alone except for the cat.

As Jana cleans, the sun's presence in the room highlights thick layers of dust, which form and swirl in the incoming shafts of light. Mrs. Tucker's electric carpet sweeper (or so Mrs. Tucker calls it) does such a fine job. It can vacuum every tiny cat hair and dust-ball from under the worn, brown couch against the wall.

The cat watches warily, eyes moving slowly, while Jana Hansen effortlessly pulls the bullet-shaped machine about the room on its shining, silver runners. The strength of the sweeper's great sucking power - the thoroughness of the cleaning it does - amazes the cleaning woman. She thrusts the nozzle forward, as if attacking, delighting in the way the dust balls beneath the couch huddle, quiver and shudder. Faster and faster the dust balls move, as the slim nozzle attachment seeks them out, instantly pulling them powerfully into the black, accordion pleated hose.

This sweeper outmatches the industrial vacuum kept at the office building where Jana works nights. No cleaner on the market can touch it. This Jana knows. She understands the machine as well as those who built it.

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When she went to the appliance store to do some comparison shopping, a ruffled looking salesman gladly demonstrated the newest model of the same brand; but she left him standing over a scattering of dust without the hoped-for sale. The new machine failed to compare with Jana's high standards - to work and work hard.

"When the sun wakes me, and there is work to be done, I cannot stay in bed a moment longer!" Jana tells her family and friends often.

Jana awakens in the morning to prepare breakfast for her husband and six children. After packing the eight brown bag lunches, she works her way, room by room, through her own small house. Bit by bit, little by little, she picks up and straightens the morning disorder.

On Mondays, she cleans for Mrs. Thomas in the early morning, then for three hours in the afternoon - Mrs. Pierpont in her antiquated and antique-laden house on the other side of town. There are many other ladies she works for on different days of the month - always rotating and alternating like this, Jana makes her rounds.

While she works, her homemade soup simmers on the back of her stove awaiting her arrival at six P.M.; there is just enough time to make supper for the family before she must leave again.

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By seven, the mother bids her children "goodbye" and drives downtown to a large, deserted office building. Here she works alone each weekday evening, dusting the desks of the many offices, and scrubbing the long corridors in the half-light. As she works, the clean floor gleams behind her. And as she continues, up-welling images of her past surround her.

At those times, the building seems to step aside, and Jana imagines herself in the middle of a vast sunflower field, with each golden flower head turned toward the sun.

Towering, stone silos appear on the horizon, shining in the bright sunlight, like the glistening floors she washes.

Jana thinks of how the sun works to make the grass grow; the grass the cows eat sustains their lives, and allows them to produce the milk in their warm bodies . . .and from the milk, she realizes, swaying on her knees and moving the wet soap-filled brush regularly with a strong arm stroke along the vinyl tiles, from the milk comes the butter and the cheese. Everything works together to help everything else. Masses of butter and cheese, and eggs too, from the chickens, the grain in the silo.... Her thoughts run on and on with the wonder of it all.

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Jana pauses and remembers, she can almost hear her mother's low, familiar voice repeating: "Everyone on the farm must do his very best job; we give much good to each other's lives. Always do your best, Jana, at whatever task."

Up and down the rows of offices the scrubwoman works, dumping out the trash baskets, unknown and uncared about by those who occupy those desks in the daytime. On she goes humming quietly, thinking about her past, never skipping anything, though no one will notice.

Jana, as a young girl, had been quite pretty. Her new husband admired his bride - her beautiful fresh face and lovely blond hair; and he liked the way she kept their little rooms so neat and spotless.

Later, when he could no longer find work on the farms, the growing family migrated to the East to Long Island and the town of Hempstead. Here, Jana began her years of work to help the family survive. It seemed quite enjoyable; for she felt sure that behind her work lay a deeper meaning. She dedicated herself to do her best as her mother had taught her. And this sense of pride and excellence Jana made sure to pass on to her children.

"I tell my children to do a good job."

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And so she cleans the miles and miles of hallways, night after night, always thinking of the northern farms and the blazing autumns, and the crisp winds blowing through the pines - the seasons changing regularly, the sun rising and setting daily, the moon swelling and shrinking to a sliver as the days of the month move forward.

The six offspring think they understand why their mother works so hard. Isn't it to feed and clothe them?

And her husband feels he knows why she works constantly. "Because she loves me and the children," he muses comfortably as he walks home from the factory with his loud, laughing fellow-workers.

After supper, the older girls finish the dishes for their mother. They also take the clean clothes out of the dryer to fold and put away in the correct flower-lined drawers.

The oldest daughter, Ingrid, a spindle-legged, domineering, high school senior with straight blond hair, supervises the younger brothers and sisters.

Helga, next oldest, consoles herself as she works under the exacting eye of her elder sister. Ulla, slim, pale, patient, embroiders flowers on pillowcases. She also does Norwegian Hardanger embroidery, counting stitches meticulously in her small universe of thread and needle.

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In the evenings after doing their homework, the children obediently finish the ironing, mending, and light housekeeping tasks assigned by their mother. The smallest son dutifully waters the houseplants and walks the dog before going to bed.

At last at one in the morning, Jana comes home to bed and a deep restful sleep to awaken with the sun to begin again to clean the designated house for that day of the month.

On the weekends, she happily cleans her own uncluttered home. What a joyous relief to dip her strong red hands into the hot, fragrant clouds of soap bubbles in the bucket. She catches the coarse brush like a fish, and on her knees, works the dirt-dissolving water into the cracks and corners of each room.

"I love the cleanness: the fresh smell after, the neatness, the rightness of it all," Jana says often.

Time moves slowly marked only by simple suppers of good meat and potatoes, and many birthdays.

There are festive nights at the Swedish club - dancing the hambo with her husband, being lifted by his powerful arms high into the air, and coming down again with loud stamping feet.

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They live in a perpetual steadiness: husband, wife, children, in perfect rhythm. Until, Jana begins to want Mrs. Tucker's sweeper too much.

For two and a half years, she cleans faithfully every four weeks at the Tucker home. The extraordinary sweeper always responding instantly with a thrilling roar when switched on, hungrily sucking up the dirt.

Jana thinks about the sweeper many times during the weeks and months. And the more she thinks about it, the more she wants it, needs it to do her work.

At first, the idea of owning the carpet sweeper, actually having it in her own hall closet, seems too marvelous to imagine. But occasionally, she does visualize herself using it to clean under the hand-painted chest in the front hall.

The next time Jana works at Mrs. Tucker's she quietly asks if the carpet sweeper might be for sale.

"Under no circumstance will I ever sell it!" the older woman booms, as she sits heavily down in her old, brown easy chair and fusses with the wispy, brown hairs, which try to escape stubbornly from helpless hairpins. This is a woman used to winning, who relishes her card club, where she rules supreme shark at the bridge table in her blue and red, paisley dress.

"No, Mrs. Hansen, it's not for sale."

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Gradually, the smooth pace of Jana's days and nights wavers. The refusal jostles the rhythm of her life. Jana arrives late. Late to one place means late to all the places after. Late to bed; oversleeping.

Could she ever persuade Mrs. Tucker to give up and, let her buy the prize? Each month she asks again, "Could I forgo my paycheck, and pay it off each time? I'll work for nothing for a year."

IS SHE NOT SUPPORTING SIX CHILDREN? IS SHE NOT PROVIDING FOOD FOR THEIR MOUTHS, CLEANING SO MANY HOMES AND OFFICES? IS SHE NOT KEEPING EVERYTHING SPOTLESS?

But Mrs. Tucker will not budge.

Even in her dreams, Jana sees herself in a mighty struggle, a tug of wills. It is always the same: there is the carpet sweeper with Jana hanging onto the nozzle and on the other end of the long, accordion pleated, flexible hose is Mrs. Tucker, clinging tightly to the silver runners with her cat (its claws firmly imbedded in the hem of Mrs. Tucker's flowing flowered housecoat), both sides pulling back and forth.

Finally, on a September day, Jana can bear it no longer; she decides to take the machine away.

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"The woman will never miss it. I'll bake some of my cookies for her and take no pay for a year if necessary. I can bring the machine each time to clean, and Mrs. Tucker won't mind after all," she reassures herself.

And so, the next time Mrs. Hansen cleans for Mrs. Tucker, when the time comes to leave, Jana Hansen refuses payment for the perfect job she has done. Mrs. Tucker frets and tries to give her the check again and again.

"Let me borrow it. I'll bring it next month," Jana coaxes.

"Keep the money; take these cookies I have baked for you."

"I don't want to give it up," Mrs. Tucker whines, besieged. But, at the same time, her face reddens with defeat. Jana is stronger; she overcomes her opponent.

"Take it," Mrs. Tucker sighs. Before the real estate woman can change her mind, the cleaning lady quickly takes every brush and attachment, each extension tube, and the bullet-shaped cleaner, places them all carefully in her car, and drives away.

That afternoon, Jana decides to use her new prize. Delighted, she goes to her hall closet and opens the door.

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There it is! All ready to clean - like no sweeper ever cleaned before. Jana carefully assembles ail of the shining, silver tubes. She pulls the sweeper into the tiny front room of her neat little house, plugs in the cord, grasps the accordion pleated, flexible hose with its nozzle, flips on the black, flicker switch on the back of the bullet-shaped cleaner, and...

Away the carpet sweeper goes - cleaning like never before. First it swallows, ker-thonk, Jana's Aunt Elsa's round, braided, multi-colored rug, which Jana's little, brown dog, Sven, sits on every evening before the fire. Next, the wonderful, powerful sweeper catches the end of Ulla's red sweater from the basket. Zip, thrip, rip, right off the needles - all gone. Jana screams with surprise, "Not Ulla's sweater!" But it is all unraveled, all gone inside the sweeper.

Jana can no longer hold on to the nozzle. It wrenches away from her, swinging wildly about the room.

The hand-painted lamp and the shade too, on the oak bureau in the corner - until everything of value - gone into the nozzle.

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Yes, even the precious clock on the mantle, the one her grandfather had carried in his hat on the boat all the way from Sweden. Only a spring remains on the bare floor. The room stands empty of all small things. Only the furniture remains.

Finally, Jana manages to flick the black, flicker switch. All is silent. All is clean.

"Oh! You dreadful machine" You are too much of a good thing!"

Mrs. Tucker spends the next morning writing an important letter to her employee at a small, wooden, writing desk adjacent to the front window. She feels most at home at her desk in the business world, she has status, position.

Firmly, and in a business-like manner, the old woman writes to Mrs. Hansen that she wants her machine back. It has sentimental value. It has been in the family for years. She encloses the check. Hearing a car door slam, Mrs. Tucker goes to the front door.

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Outside, Jana stands on the step with the sweeper in her arms. Then, in silence, Jana takes the envelope from Mrs. Tucker and places the machine and all its parts at Mrs., Tucker's feet.

Mrs. Tucker's cat cleans her whiskers on the hot, sunny, window ledge and, for the last time, the cat watches Jana's old, green Chevy crawl away from the curb.