

Molly Maid man: Have mop, will travel

This week, the Unemployee works as a house cleaner with Highland Park-based Molly Maid.

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When I thought about my upcoming day working as a traveling maid for The Unemployee, I pictured myself strolling through fancy houses, occasionally fluttering a feather duster.

And when I met my fellow maids -- young women half my size -- I felt confident, though it took me several minutes to button my Molly Maid blouse up the unaccustomed left side.



Everything still sounded easy as my partner for the day -- Mildred Martinez, field manager of a Highland Park-based Molly Maid franchise -- went over the notes for our first job.

"In the living room, we got a special note, don't touch any of the items on the fireplace mantle. If we do it, she's gonna be mad. Because she specifically said don't touch it.

"Glass lamp on coffee table, don't touch it. Master bedroom, small glass lamp on the night stand is broken, and may have a sharp edge. So don't touch it.

"In the master bath, the silicone is full of mildew, do what you

can.

"If mildew is in the silicone, no way you can get it all," she explained. "Sometimes with Clorox, but we don't use Clorox. Clorox is nasty."

Bleach, she noted, does not inhale well.

"We love our lungs," she said.

"Sometimes you can do it at home, because it's only once. But if in one day, you use Clorox in three houses, next day three more houses, at the end of the week you might do 15 or 20 houses? So what about the whole year?"

So, just a collection of things I don't have to touch. And I'm to be protected from Evil Bleach.

But I got nervous when we unloaded the trunk of our little blue car with the pink Molly Maid logo. We carried in nine kinds of soaps and cleansers, two bags of rags, sponges, buckets, garbage bags, a couple of mops, and two vacuum cleaners, one upright and one canister.

I looked at the modest Northbrook house. There can't possibly be enough dirt in there for all this stuff, I thought. If there is, I'm doomed.

No sweat

We started in the bathroom, which, if it were mine, would have led me to congratulate myself on my tidiness.

But it was an hour before Martinez let me out of there.

She instructed me to clean the counter with a stiff sponge and a combination of two soaps squeezed out of mysterious plastic bottles.

"Move over all the things on the counter, and put them back in the same order after cleaning," she said, referring to the girly-stuff containers that I typically squint at so I don't have to see.

"Turn them around to face out. People like that."

Then I scrubbed the shower's tile and grout, which came out nice and white, despite the mildew angst.

There was no removable shower head, so Martinez showed me how to rinse off the walls: Fill a plastic cup with water and put it up against the walls and let it dribble down over the tile.

This is nuts. Why be so careful not to get the walls of a shower too wet? Why worry about another few chunks of coal in Newcastle?



Then Martinez handed me a fresh rag.

"Dry off the walls," she said.

Clean the bathtub, clean the toilet, clean around the toilet, wash the mirrors, vacuum the floor, wash the floor. I was now sweating so profusely that the homeowner's daughter gave me a glass of ice water to replenish the flood cascading off my head and splashing on the clean bathroom tile.

A few minutes later, Martinez saw that my little apron was working its way down. "Your apron is falling," she said. "Now you have a skirt."

I hitched my apron, wiped my head and joined Martinez in one of the bedrooms.

Mirror, mirror

She went left, and I went right, wiping the surfaces with micro-fiber rags, which magically sucked up the dust without Pledge or any other advertised substance.

Then I vacuumed, after Martinez warned me not to touch the walls or the furniture with the machine, to avoid marring them.

There wasn't much chance of that, with the vacuum wrapped in a padded bra, like the front end of a Corvette.

We made the bed, then headed for the master bedroom. I polished the floor-length mirror with glass cleaner, thinking,

"At least I'm sure I know how to clean a mirror."

Ten seconds later, Martinez said, "That mirror is not acceptable."

I rubbed out the streaks in the top half, being unable to get the bottom half into my focal range.

"The bottom is not good also," she said, smiling sweetly.

"I'm just going to rub this thing," I said. "Tell me when it looks OK."



In the kitchen, we washed the counters, the cabinets, the microwave, the sinks, the stovetop (including the burners and the spiders), the dog's bowls, vacuumed and washed the floors, and emptied the crumb tray in the toaster.

We had now spent more than two hours in the house, and weren't done, though it was supposed to be a two-hour job for any pair of Molly Maids. That did not include me.

The maids can take longer, but they won't get paid any more. The job is priced as a two-hour task at a set rate; each maid gets a percentage of the total.

So the maids work hard and fast. In the summer, they may labor in the heat, if customers time their air-conditioning to turn off during the day.

"I come from Puerto Rico. I've had enough hot weather," Martinez mused.

Her regular duties involve driving from job to job, making sure the 11 two-woman crews, all native Spanish speakers, are doing the work right and faring well. Her cell phone rings regularly with maids' questions "and in case they break something."

Stealing dirt

Her boss, Robert Dillon, said he once visited a customer's home to make an estimate, and walked into a room dominated by a spectacular glass sculpture.

"Is that a (Dale) Chihuly?" he asked, referring to the noted Seattle glass sculptor. Upon confirmation, he replied, "I won't even clean the room. You can be high-dusting and the pole slips or something.

"This thing has to be a quarter-million dollars. What's the point?"

Despite such reticence, all his employees are bonded, including me. And just like the others, I underwent a background check, "so the customers don't think we're coming to rob them, other than of dirt."

After I recovered at lunch, Martinez and I hit a big house in Riverwoods, where I did a lot of vacuuming and washed a three-story wooden staircase.



We cleaned an enormous bathroom, which included a marble and glass 30-square-foot shower, a Jacuzzi, 10 feet of sinks, and all-in-all, a value exceeding what I earn doing this for a year or two.

During the whole day, Martinez and I never knelt unless we absolutely had to, and that was not an accident.

"Some customers want you on the knees and scrubbing like a slave," Martinez said. "I say, I'm sorry. I promise you are going to have clean floors, but on my knees? I'm sorry.

"You have to be tough sometimes with customers. You are paying, but you have to treat us like a human."

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