

# Every One of the Cleaning Women

Judith Malina

2005

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Dreamt of something else  
When she was seventeen.

They smile, they joke, they sigh,  
In their smocks and comfy shoes—  
They try not to recall the plans  
For a miracle or a marriage...

Of the schemes that each of them made  
With their young man  
In the marriage bed,  
Of a house in the fields,  
Or a store in the city...

Now they are widowed or worn,  
The man drunk, or dead, or departed,  
Or unable to make ends meet.

Every one of the cleaning women  
Hoped that the prince would come  
And rescue her from the pail and the wringer.  
The fairy tale promised  
That the girl who sat by the cinders  
Was to be clothed in splendor  
And inherit the kingdom...  
Slowly the dream wore down.

When I was eighteen and worked  
In the laundry counting  
The dirty wash, I dreamed  
That the prince would come.  
And he came. And that my talent and ardor  
Would rescue me from listing:  
Five napkins—eight pieces underwear—  
Rescue, and lead to a privileged life.

And I was the fortunate one,  
Leading a privileged life—rescued  
From smock and broom, and now my friends  
Ask me why I'm so sad  
When I see the cleaning women  
Laughing as if it were nothing.

“You and your Jewish guilt...”  
“But somebody has to do it...”

But every one of the cleaning women  
Dreamed that it wouldn't be she.

# fifth Estate

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