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LETTER FROM A WOMAN JANITOR WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT

Veronica Lagunas*



Image of the author, Veronica Lagunas

I am a woman from El Salvador who started as a janitor in Los Angeles.

I was only 24-years-old.

When I was young I never dreamt of being a janitor. I dreamt of being a journalist.

Destiny took me down a different path.

I am Verónica

In my 12 years as a janitor, as sad as it is to say, I have become numb to sexual harassment. Something happens when night falls and you are a janitor. It's like a horror film that we've all seen, as soon as the full moon appears these men transform into werewolves on the prowl, looking for their next prey, hunting us in the buildings. And we are like the sheep, alone and unprotected.

* Veronica Lagunas is a female janitor who is a sexual harassment survivor. She is a member of SEIU-USWW where she is an active member of the *Ya Basta!* (which translates to Enough is Enough!) campaign to end sexual harassment and assault of female janitors in the workplace.

I am Veronica.

My first experience happened when my supervisor held his pant pockets to silence the jingling of his keys as he walked.

We all knew that you appeared without warning, like an owl.

All of a sudden you would show up while I was vacuuming and there you were, watching me, and I felt your stare focused on my body. I was afraid of you. You looked for any excuse to come and check on my work.

Another coworker constantly sent me texts, telling me that you liked me, that I didn't have to work the night shift. You text me that if I was yours you would pay my rent and that I wouldn't have to work at night.

When you reject their come-ons, and you tell them that you are a God-fearing woman, with a husband and children, they get angry and they start to say, "Who do you think you are?" "Do you think you are too good?" They start to drag your name through the mud and talk bad about you to your coworkers, saying you are conceited. Sometimes it's just easier to not say anything and remain numb.

Thank God they transferred me from that building, but the same suggestive comments that make you feel uncomfortable are common for the night shift. It has happened to me so often with coworkers and even tenants in the buildings I clean.

This is a photo of what I am going through right now.

A tenant that always harasses me sexually and won't leave me alone, constantly follows me and watches me. I already told him that I am married and I have children and that I want nothing to do with him. He takes pictures of me without my permission or even my knowledge. The other day he took this picture of me and brought it and left it on the garbage can.

It's a picture of me working. It's me. I didn't know he took it and he altered it with photoshop or something, putting dollar bills at my feet. What is he trying to say with this? Is it a proposition? When a man does this to you he makes you feel insecure.

It makes me afraid and even though I am a promotora, who knows how to defend her rights, the moment that I was faced with this-I froze.

I don't know what they think. That just because of the simple reason that I am a janitor that it means that I am desperate? Or that

you should feel sorry for me? That I am for sale? That because I am poor and have a job that is not well respected like a professional that I am on sale?

I feel uncomfortable. He works in IT and with computers and I'm even afraid that he'll record me in the restroom or something.

Working the night shift is a decent job but unfortunately when the moon comes out some see it as the perfect climate to hunt. We need to change this culture which is the norm in this industry. Many like me have become accustomed to this because it is so common. It's easier to stay quiet and numb than to fight and combat it.

That's why I am here today, because if one day my daughter's destiny turns out differently than she imagined, as mine did, I want her to know that it doesn't matter what job you have—journalist or janitor—all women have the right to work without fear, harassment or intimidation, on the night shift or any shift!

Gracias,
Veronica Lagunas

