Nickel and Dimed

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BARBARA EHRENREICH

Ehrenreich's childhood was spent moving frequently around the country, as her father worked his way up from mining into middle-class status. She attended Reed College in Oregon, and received her Ph.D. in cell biology at Rockefeller University. After the birth of her first child, she became involved in the fight for better women's health care. She ultimately became a full-time writer, breaking into the field with articles on women's rights and social justice issues. She continues to balance her journalism and book-length projects on social and inequality issues with her activism in health care, women's rights, and economic justice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act," a piece of welfare-reform legislation that drastically reshaped welfare programs, reduced federal spending on welfare, and required many to work in exchange for receiving social benefits. As Ehrenreich was beginning her experiment, this law was beginning to kick in, meaning that millions of Americans formerly on welfare were now about to join the workforce (in most cases the low-wage workforce). This was also a time of economic growth and near-full employment for the United States, which many today—especially after the 2008 economic crisis—remember as a time of relative wealth and abundance. In fact, part of Ehrenreich's goal was to show that this time, perceived by the mainstream as prosperous, was *not* a period of prosperity for everyone, and that most low-wage workers were entirely left out of the economic growth benefiting many other Americans. Her book also sought to counter the idea that economic growth and full employment would do away with desperate poverty, since both were in evidence at the time she was writing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Nickel and Dimed taps into a long American tradition of "muckraking" journalism, in which writers investigate abject social conditions and corrupt corporations in order to promote reform. The Progressive Era, around the turn of the 20th century, was witness to multiple muckraking exposés. One of the most famous was Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890, which revealed the awful conditions of New York City's immigrant slums through a photojournalism exposé. Another was Upton Sinclair's 1906 *The Jungle*, in which he exposed shocking conditions in the Chicago meatpacking industry. Sinclair's work eventually led to legislation that sought to put an end to such conditions. More recently, "investigative" or "watchdog journalism" have been the terms used in describing the kind of activist-related writing that Ehrenreich pursues and achieves in her book.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*
- **When Written:** 1998-2000
- **Where Written:** United States (Florida, Maine, Minnesota)
- **When Published:** 2001 (with an afterword from 2008)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Reportage/Memoir
- **Setting:** Key West, Florida; Portland, Maine; Minneapolis, Minnesota
- **Climax:** Each chapter has its own climax, but one scene in Maine is particularly climactic. After growing increasingly frustrated with the way her team leader at The Maids, Holly, must stoically work through dizziness, pain, and stress, Barbara screams into the phone at her boss, Ted, fuming at his willingness to put profits above the well-being of his workers.
- **Antagonist:** In general, Barbara's antagonist is economic culture in America, which accepts the acute distress of low-wage work as a given. She recognizes that such an antagonist is intangible and difficult to pin down, so she constructs more material antagonists in her bosses, including Ted and Howard, as well as the more faceless corporations for which she works.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Seeing Things? Though Ehrenreich calls herself an atheist in *Nickel and Dimed*, she describes her experiences of mysticism and "seeing God" as an adolescent in her most recent book, *Living With a Wild God*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Nickel and Dimed opens with Barbara Ehrenreich, a writer and journalist from Key West, Florida, at a lunch with her editor discussing pitches and article ideas. She's often written about poverty, and at the moment the book opens, millions of Americans are about to leave welfare as the 1996 welfare reform legislation kicks in. She speculates what it would be like to actually try to live on the minimum wage, and says that some enterprising journalist should try to do it—not thinking that the

editor will say it should be her.

As her book project takes shape, she plans to spend a month in each of three places—Key West, Portland, Maine, and Minneapolis—intending to see if she can reach the end of the month with enough money to pay the next month's rent. If she can't, she'll quit and start over in the next place. Barbara grew up in a relatively comfortable environment, but all the previous generations of her family were working-class miners, and poverty has been close enough to her that she clings gratefully to her comfortable, flexible writing job. She recognizes that her task will hardly approximate the real-life *experience* of a poor person, since she is healthy, has no children in tow, and is only doing this experiment temporarily. She is trying merely to see if she can achieve an equilibrium between income and expenses.

Barbara starts in Key West. Her first goal is to find a place to live, no easy task given that she'll have to stay close to a budget of $500 a month. She finally finds a decent-seeming trailer, though it's a 45-minute commute on the highway from the city. Barbara is hoping to apply for hotel housekeeping jobs, since she remembers how tired waitressing made her as a teenager, and she figures she's been "housekeeping" at home for years. She fills out dozens of applications from the help wanted ads, though soon realizes that these ads don't necessarily mean there's an opening—they're how employers account for high turnover in the low-wage workforce. She also seems to be pushed towards the service jobs rather than housekeeping jobs, most likely since she is a white, native English speaker.

At one hotel, she is sent over to work at the accompanying restaurant, which she calls the "Hearthside." It's a sad-looking place, ruled over by a red-faced, snarling cook named Billy. Even with tips, she's not making much more than minimum wage. Barbara quickly befriends Joan, the feminist hostess, and Gail, her coworker. She feels under-qualified and unskilled, slowly realizing that she's only average in this world. She also learns more about the difficulties faced by her fellow employees, especially in housing—there are no secret economies for the poor, she realizes, and instead everyone is scrounging by in a near-emergency state, with some even sleeping in vans. As the tourist season ends, Barbara calculates that she won't make it to the end of the month with her wages as they are, so she finds a second job at Jerry's, a national fast-food chain. It's a hectic environment with a moody manager, Joy, and she only lasts two days holding down both jobs—she then has to quit the Hearthside, since Jerry's pays more. There, she befriends a teenaged Czech dishwasher named George. Meanwhile, she encounters constant suspicion and surveillance that she experiences from management. She also discovers that everyone at Jerry's only manages to get by through having a second job. Finally, she begs the woman at the hotel attached to Jerry's to give her housekeeping work. This, however, only lasts one day before she has a catastrophic shift at Jerry's that night: George has been accused of stealing, she's dealing with four highly demanding tables, and at one point Joy corners her to yell at her. She storms out—and her time in Key West ends.

Next, Barbara chooses Maine, since it's white enough that she doesn't think she'll stick out as a low-wage worker. Though Portland seems to have a tight labor market, Barbara finds that it's still a $6-7 an hour town. In addition, there are few rent options for less than $1,000 a month, and even the low-rent options are far out of town. She ends up staying in the Blue Haven Motel, which has low-cost apartments to rent by the week in the off-season. Barbara applies for multiple jobs, filling out a personality test for a housecleaning service called The Maids that seems to be meant to weed out anyone who's freethinking and curious, though it's an easy test to "psych out."

She accepts the first two jobs she gets. One is as a dietary aide at a nursing home, where she's assigned to serve meals at the Alzheimer's unit, which she finds far easier than Jerry's. The other is at The Maids, where she has an orientation that consists of a video showing the exact cleaning methods to be used. She's sent off with a team to clean houses, which turns out to be highly aerobic work, especially since they're only allotted a certain amount of time per house. Most of the women still don't seem to have enough money to eat more than snacks.

Barbara prides herself on her ability to keep up with the younger women, though she realizes that she's had the benefit of good health care and diet for decades. She also finds that housecleaning work creates unwanted intimacy with owners and a troublesome, highly unequal relationship between the owners and the cleaners. At the same time, her more mundane concerns include her own money issues. She tries to call around for food aid, but most places are only open during working hours—inconvenient for the working poor—and she finally gets a hardly nutritious dinner for $7.02. Her time at The Maids comes to a climax when Holly, a team leader, grows dizzy and faint and injures herself at one of the houses, but refuses to rest, since she doesn't want to waste the manager Ted's time and is afraid of losing her job. Ted seems to care for little other than money, but Barbara can tell how much his approval means to the others—probably because they get so little validation elsewhere.

Barbara's final part of the experiment is in Minneapolis, where she interviews for a job at Wal-Mart, which has a similarly demeaning personality test and also requires a drug test—requiring Barbara to detox since she's smoked marijuana recently, but also prompting her to think about how low-wage workers are viewed with suspicion and distrust. She also applies for a job at Menards, a hardware store, but declines it when it turns out she'll have to work eleven hours straight on her feet. Barbara also struggles, once again, to find cheap housing—no affordable apartments have availability, so her only option is to stay at a motel in the city for an exorbitant $295 a week.

At Wal-Mart orientation, Barbara feels that she is meant to be inculcated into a kind of cult of Sam Walton, in which employees are "associates" and their bosses "servant leaders." Nevertheless, her interviewer, Roberta, is careful not to mention wages until after assigning Barbara straightaway to orientation, meaning that there's no time for a prospective employee to bargain or compare options. At Wal-Mart, she's assigned to the ladies' section, where she and her new friend and coworker Melissa measure their work in terms of carts filled and returned. She has to be careful about what the company calls "time theft," and she jealously guards her two 15-minute breaks, since she's exhausted by being on her feet all day.

She grows increasingly cranky and bitter and wonders how much such a job would change her personality. Barbara ends up moving into a Comfort Inn for $49.95 a night, a bit cheaper but still far from affordable, which means she'll have to end her experiment early since she'll never manage to equal income with expenses. She finally tries to stir up union feeling among her coworkers, though this is mainly a halfhearted effort that only has the effect of making her see how other employees are also struggling to survive on their Wal-Mart wages.

In the "Evaluation" section of the book, Barbara details the lessons she's learned through her experiment. She's realized how no job is truly "unskilled," though low-wage workers are rarely, if ever, rewarded or congratulated for their effort. She goes through the cities she's lived, showing that Portland was the only place where she was able to stay ahead of expenses—and there she was only able to do that by working seven days a week.

Barbara argues that society fails to see the desperation of low-wage workers because we're used to thinking of poverty as linked to unemployment. The working poor, however, have to deal with rising rents and costs, even as the "labor shortage" taking place in all the cities where she lived put little upward pressure on wages. Barbara argues that employers have fought endlessly to prevent wage increases from happening. In the meantime, low-wage workers are made to feel shame and are constant targets of suspicion, while at the same time are becoming increasingly invisible to upper-class people, who share few of their spaces and so rarely interact with them.

In the Afterword, Barbara briefly explains what has changed since the book's publication, six years earlier—there's been a living wage campaign, but at the same time costs have risen and public services have been cut. Barbara ends by detailing a few things readers can do to help, from volunteering to supporting government candidates, but argues that changing the economic culture of the United States will take far longer.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Barbara Ehrenreich – The narrator and protagonist of the book, Barbara Ehrenreich is a middle-aged writer and journalist from Key West, Florida. Relatively well-off, though from a family of humble beginnings, she often uses her personal experience to compare and contrast with life as a low-wage worker. Barbara is energetic, funny, and wry: she often deals with the difficulties of her experiment by joking with others or using dry humor in the text. Barbara is an activist, clearly left-wing and firmly on the side of low-wage workers. She takes a dim view of corporate power—and also often uses her ironic humor to critique the self-centeredness and greed of upper-class people, even while acknowledging that she herself can be considered one of them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ruthie – A patient at the Alzheimer's ward in Maine.

Gail – Barbara's friend and coworker at the Hearthside, who struggles with health issues due to her lack of health insurance.

Joan – The hostess at the Hearthside, whom Barbara especially likes since she's a feminist.

Phillip – Barbara's boss and the manager at the Hearthside.

Stu – Barbara's assistant manager at the Hearthside.

Billy – The red-faced, bad-tempered cook at the Hearthside, who at $10 an hour makes the most of the other workers and lives in his own trailer.

Lionel – The teenaged busboy at the Hearthside from Haiti, whom Barbara likes.

George – The 19-year-old Czech dishwasher at Jerry's, who has recently immigrated to the United States, and is accused—probably unfairly—of stealing.

Joy – Barbara's moody and unpleasant manager at Jerry's.

Vic – The assistant manager at Jerry's.

Lucy – Barbara's coworker at Jerry's.

Carlotta (Carlie) – Barbara's coworker during her brief stint as a housekeeper.

Karen – A woman whom Barbara speaks to in her attempt to get food vouchers or aid in Portland.

Gloria – Another woman whom Barbara calls as she tries to obtain food aid in Portland.

Pete – Barbara's coworker at the Woodcrest Residential Center.

Grace – One of the Alzheimer's patients at Woodcrest.

Letty – Another Alzheimer's patient at Woodcrest.

Ted – Barbara's boss and the franchise owner at The Maids,

who is obsessed with the bottom line.

Pauline – Barbara's coworker at The Maids, who has been working there for two years and is crushed when Ted doesn't acknowledge her work on her last day.

Helen – One of Barbara's team leaders at The Maids, who has a bad foot.

Holly – Barbara's coworker at The Maids, who often grows faint from hunger, but who doesn't seem to appreciate Barbara's attempts to help her.

Maddy – One of Barbara's team leaders at The Maids, who is struggling with childcare issues.

Rosalie – One of Barbara's coworkers at The Maids, a recent high school grad who only eats half a bag of chips for lunch.

Lori – Barbara's coworker at The Maids.

Marge – Another coworker at The Maids.

Colleen – Another coworker at The Maids.

Hildy – An apartment manager at the Hopkins Park Plaza in Minneapolis.

Roberta – The woman who hired Barbara for a job at Wal-Mart, who is careful not to mention wages unless she's forced to so as to eliminate prospective employees opportunity to compare wages against other options before they start work.

Paul – Barbara's prospective boss at Menards in Minneapolis.

Steve – Another prospective supervisor at Menards.

Melissa – Barbara's coworker at Wal-Mart, and the one she's closest to.

Howard – The assistant manager at Wal-Mart.

Ellie – Another manager at Wal-Mart.

Stan – A Wal-Mart employee who initially had dreams of going to school while working.

Marlene – Another Wal-Mart employee, who believes Wal-Mart doesn't treat its employees well.

Isabelle – A Wal-Mart employee whose salary has gone slightly up after working there for two years.

Alyssa – A Wal-Mart employee who is in the same orientation as Barbara.

Caroline – The aunt of Barbara's New York friend. She had moved from New York to Florida to completely start over; she now lives in Minneapolis and offers help and friendship to Barbara.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE ECONOMICS OF POVERTY

When Barbara Ehrenreich set out to write the book that would become *Nickel and Dimed*, her stated goal was pretty straightforward: to see if she could pay for rent, food, and other bills as a low-wage worker. As Barbara came to learn, and explains throughout her book, such a goal is far from simple. Barbara reveals the complications that arise from trying to survive on a minimum-age job—complications often hidden to those who aren't working as low-wage workers—to make the case that such labor is ultimately unsustainable. One major economic lesson from this experiment is how wildly inefficient living and working in poverty can become. Without savings, Barbara cannot afford the deposit for an apartment, and so ends up having to pay far more for a motel room—a situation that, she learns, is far from uncommon. Without a full kitchen, she cannot cook and freeze large quantities of food, and so ends up having to eat both more expensively and very unhealthily at fast-food restaurants and convenience stores. Even organizations meant to assist low-wage workers only complicate things even more: food banks are often only open 9-5, when most people are at work, and the food they offer is similarly made up of unhealthy, empty calories.

Without savings to rely on, and often without financial help from parents or other family members, low-wage workers are in a constant state of emergency. One illness or other unforeseen event can mean that they are immediately facing destitution. It doesn't help that companies often withhold the first week's payment, which means both that a low-wage worker will be desperate even while working, and that changing jobs is far less easy or attractive than one might assume. In addition to drawing on these examples, Barbara constantly refers to prices, costs, and calculations in her own experiment. Work is not a way out of poverty, she argues, but rather a physically and emotionally damaging state in which the economic laws of supply and demand often simply don't apply. She thus seeks to prove that low-wage workers are forced to fight an uphill, or even impossible, battle: that their problems stem not from individual weaknesses or laziness but from entrenched structural issues that make working your way out of poverty excruciatingly difficult.

LABOR

In *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara sets out to experience the working life of low-wage laborers first-hand. She is, of course, interested in poverty in general—as a journalist, Barbara had covered the topic extensively before writing this book—but here she is particularly concerned with the plight of the *working* poor.

Labor is defined in economic terms throughout the book, as work performed in exchange for payment. But the term also serves to encapsulate the notion of physical, emotional, and mental toil faced by the country's lowest class of workers.

Low-wage labor is often directly linked to physical pain: from eight-hour shifts without a bathroom or sit-down break at a restaurant, to the physical exertion required to clean a home, hourly-wage workers must often exhaust themselves physically in order to earn their income. This physical labor can sometimes lead to medical problems—often compounded by a lack of insurance, which many of these workers cannot afford—which endanger their ability to work, leading to a devastating cycle. Over the course of the book, Barbara realizes that this physical exhaustion is mirrored by mental and emotional exhaustion as well. In her experiment as a low-wage worker, her energy is constantly directed towards the well-being of others, usually at the expense of her own. With little time to relax and no extra money to pay for even small luxuries like a movie or a dinner out, there is no respite to be found from a grueling daily schedule—especially when it becomes necessary to work up to seven days a week in order to survive.

Ultimately, low-wage labor is portrayed not as a proper exchange for income but as an arduous, unsustainable system whose victims are the low-wage workers themselves. By explicitly describing the physical and emotional toil of low-wage labor, Barbara argues against the prevailing social rhetoric of work as noble and meaningful, showing that many Americans simply can't afford to subscribe to this notion of labor.

SHAME AND SOLIDARITY

Compounding the taxing nature of their work, low-wage laborers are often forced to feel like low-class citizens both by their employers and by society at large. Though Barbara is only temporarily inhabiting this world, she too is unable to escape the sense of shame she comes to feel from the way she is treated as a low-wage laborer. This is especially the case for occupations in which the economic gap between employers and employees is highly visible, such as housekeeping. Barbara describes how demeaning it feels to be scrutinized by a homeowner while scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees. At these homes as well as at places like Wal-Mart, videocameras and other tools—including the ubiquitous drug test—serve as means of surveillance, making workers feel that they are under constant suspicion and are not to be trusted.

In a broader sense, Barbara shows how low-wage workers are made to feel both invisible and unwanted, a shameful underclass, by the rest of society—even as society is in vital need of their labor. Customers at restaurants pay little attention to the fact that their waiters and waitresses are overworked and underpaid, failing to tip and making unreasonable demands. Barbara also seeks to disprove the kind of worldview that understands poverty as the fault of the poor. She shows, for instance, how difficult it is to eat healthfully while poor, even as many look disapprovingly on the obesity of the working poor.

Partly as a result of this shame, Barbara shows, low-wage workers often band together and support each other. Barbara's coworkers cover each other for bathroom breaks, offer each other a place to stay, and swap tips for how to deal with chronic pain stemming from their jobs without health insurance. These kinds of relationships reveal a solidarity that helps to combat the social and personal disapproval placed on such workers from outside.

INDIVIDUALS AND CORPORATE RHETORIC

Nickel and Dimed makes an explicit contrast between the experience of individual workers and the corporations for which they work. Indeed, the "corporation" is portrayed as a shadowy, distant entity that initially seems to have little impact on the daily working life of Barbara and her colleagues. However, Barbara soon comes to understand how much of low-wage work is dictated by both the needs and the rhetoric of corporations. Corporate rules are, in some cases, tied to the culture of surveillance and suspicion that is also linked to shame. At Jerry's, the Key West restaurant, headquarters decides to reduce break time to squeeze out more productivity from the staff. And at Wal-Mart, employees are constantly warned against "time theft," or spending any time chatting or otherwise failing to make money for the company—which in the employers' view is a dire crime. For the corporation, Barbara argues, profits are what ultimately matters, and workers are little more than drones rather than human beings, meant to work in pursuit of profits.

Nevertheless, the corporations for which Barbara works also employ a whole language and rhetoric around how they support and enrich individual workers' experiences. Videos produced by Wal-Mart and The Maids are meant to make workers develop a sense of loyalty and belonging to the corporation, while still stressing the possibilities of individual growth. Barbara shows how effective this marketing can be as she describes the guilt of her coworkers at the possibility of failing to achieve their employers' standards. But she argues that corporate rhetoric is deeply disingenuous, no more than a myth that hides how little corporations care for individual development. Instead, this rhetoric serves to strengthen a system in which corporations benefit far more than the individuals they employ.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DRUG TESTS

At nearly all of Barbara's jobs, from waitressing to sorting ladies' wear at Wal-Mart, drug testing is either threatened or required. At one point, Barbara cites research showing that in one study, out of hundreds of thousands of drug tests and millions of dollars spent, less than a hundred prospective employees failed the test. She argues that rather than a true safety or security measure, drug testing symbolizes and underlines the deep suspicion and sense of distrust that many employers have for their employees. They fail to consider low-wage workers as human beings deserving of the same kind of dignity as anyone else. To complete a drug test, a prospective employee has to drive to a hospital or doctor's office and usually pee into a cup without the benefit of much privacy. The process is meant to remind the prospective worker that he or she is in a position of dependency on the employer and lower-class status.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Henry Holt & Company edition of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* published in 2008.

Introduction Quotes

❝ So this is not a story of some death-defying "undercover" adventure. Almost anyone could do what I did—look for jobs, work those jobs, try to make ends meet. In fact, millions of Americans do it every day, and with a lot less fanfare and dithering.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

As Barbara lays out the source of her decision to "go undercover" and attempt to live like the working poor, she is eager to point out that her story is not a heroic tale of adventure—she does not want to be seen as particularly exceptional or clever for doing what she did. Instead, she attempts to make clear that for many Americans, the battle to make income equal expenses takes place each day. Furthermore, rather than complain or protest about it—although that can and does happen—the working poor are often silent, if not willing, participants in this unfair system.

Of course, part of the reason why Barbara says she wrote the book is because those battles are, to another part of the American population, largely invisible. Barbara will stress throughout the book how little she, along with the audience she presumes to speak for—that is, educated, middle- to upper-class Americans—fully comprehend the struggles of the working poor. Part of her goal will therefore be to educate the public about the quantifiable facts behind trying to make ends meet.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Cooks want to prepare tasty meals, servers want to serve them graciously, but managers are there for only one reason—to make sure that money is made for some theoretical entity, the corporation, which exists far away in Chicago or New York, if a corporation can be said to have a physical existence at all.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

As Barbara begins her job at Hearthside, the restaurant, she begins to witness a disconnect between the lowest-rung employees, the servers and busboys, for instance, and the management. Even though managers are often former cooks, Barbara argues that once they are promoted they are no longer as interested in keeping employees and customers happy, but rather become more concerned with following the instructions from a far-away corporation. For a place like Hearthside (not the restaurant's real name) there may be thousands of franchises across the country, all accountable to this corporation, often at the expense of those on the ground in each location. Indeed, Barbara claims that often these two groups have competing, even opposite interests—that making money and preparing and serving well-made meals are often at odds with each other. Still, Barbara shows how this is hardly a well-matched fight, since the disembodied, abstract nature of a corporation can be difficult to understand when one is working on the ground. Furthermore, all the money comes from the corporation, and when one is living hand-to-mouth, one often has to sacrifice quality for cash.

There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara has learned that her coworker Gail is thinking about leaving a horrendous roommate situation and moving into the Days Inn. She is shocked that Gail would consider spending $40-60 per night, but she has not taken in to account how difficult it can be to find the money for a month's rent plus a deposit, which are almost always necessary to move into an apartment. As a result, Barbara begins to realize, the poor end up paying a huge premium simply because they lack the necessary savings.

Barbara had assumed, like many of her readers, that things always somehow "work out," that the poor find ways to support themselves and live off a small income. Here, she begins to understand just how impossible poverty can make any kind of economic choice. Not only are the working poor unable to make enough of an income to live comfortably, they are actively punished for doing so, as they are made to pay premiums and special costs that simply do not exist for those who are better off. Barbara's claim is part of her general desire to counter those who would critique the poor for taking advantage of welfare or other economic breaks.

I had gone into this venture in the spirit of science, to test a mathematical proposition, but somewhere along the line, in the tunnel vision imposed by long shifts and relentless concentration, it became a test of myself, and clearly I have failed..

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the most hectic, stressful shift she has faced thus far, Barbara leaves Hearthside and takes off her apron, resolving not to return. She has been yelled at by customers and managers and is on the verge of tears, something to which she is not accustomed. In the introduction, Barbara had laid out her careful, well-reasoned plan for how she would go about her experiment. But the scientific spirit she had embraced now finds itself clashing with the harsh realities of actually living out this job and this economic level of society. The acute stress of the job has prevented Barbara from acting rationally, instead forcing her to give in to her feelings of helplessness. In addition, Barbara seems to see this failure not just as one of science but as a failure of her own character, or her ability to face difficulty and to see it through. Confronted with the facts of her reactions, and with a great sense of shame, Barbara has to reconsider the proper or even possible attitude that one can have in such a situation.

Chapter 2 Quotes

What these tests tell employers about potential employees is hard to imagine, since the “right” answers should be obvious to anyone who has ever encountered the principle of hierarchy and subordination.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara has gone to a job fair put on by Wal-Mart, where she is handed an opinion survey. She's told that there are no wrong or right answers: she just has to state how much she agrees with certain statements, such as the ethics of denouncing a coworker or whether management is to blame when something goes wrong. Barbara immediately sees that the apparent lack of right or wrong answers is a sham—there is clearly only one "right" way to perceive the situations given, at least from the perspective of the potential employer. By hewing closely to the assumptions of "hierarchy and subordination," Barbara can be sure to tell the prospective employers what they want to hear.

As a result, she cannot really understand why such surveys are at all helpful to the employer, since it is so easy to fake a meek and subordinate attitude. As she will conclude at other moments, these kinds of requirements seem more directed towards ensuring that employees know their proper place.

How poor are they, my coworkers? The fact that anyone is working this job at all can be taken as prima facie evidence of some kind of desperation or at least a history of mistakes and disappointments [...] Almost everyone is embedded in extended families or families artificially extended with housemates. People talk about visiting grandparents in the hospital or sending birthday cards to a niece's husband; single mothers live with their own mothers or share apartments with a coworker or boyfriend.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara has begun to notice some signs of acute economic distress among her coworkers: even though they are working a strenuous, labor-intensive job, some of them barely eat lunch. She resolves to stay quiet and listen as much as she can in order to better understand the situation of each one of them. Barbara has already been struck by the grueling, difficult nature of the job and by the relentless corporate-speak of the management, such that she recognizes that this job would not be a first choice for anyone.

However, what Barbara learns here has less to do with her coworkers' view of the job itself than with the ways in which they all, however precariously, are making things work. Each woman relies upon a network of family members, friends, or housemates, even as each often also serves as a support for other people in her own network. There seems to be little space for solitude or independence in their lives, and much of what they discuss here reflects the duties that they have in visiting or taking care of members of their networks. However, there also seems to be an added layer of safety and continuity in the very size and extent of such networks as well.

The hands-and-knees approach is a definite selling point for corporate cleaning services like The Maids. [...] A mop and a full bucket of hot soapy water would not only get a floor cleaner but would be a lot more dignified for the person who does the cleaning. But it is this primal posture of submission—and of what is ultimately anal accessibility—that seems to gratify the consumers of maid services.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

It is a 95-degree day as Barbara participates in the cleaning of Mrs. W's house, and as she moves, sweating, from room to room, she muses on the nature of the task at hand, and the disconnect between the service she is really supposed to provide—a cleaned home—and the rhetoric and appearances around the job. By getting on her "hands and knees," Barbara is supposed to show just how hard she is working: the management of The Maids therefore can "prove" to their customers that the money they spend is worth it for the labor they get in return.

Barbara recognizes that the posture is much more about symbolism than about competence: she could clean the floor much better with a soapy mop standing up, but she realizes that the hands-and-knees approach is not about providing as good a service as possible. Instead, it places the employees in a position of subordination, echoing the hierarchical relationship between customer and employee by the very space that each takes up, one standing over the other bent over. The posture is not just painful but also lacks dignity, Barbara shows, serving only the purpose of gratifying both management and customer.

So ours is a world of pain—managed by Excedrin and Advil, compensated for with cigarettes and, in one or two cases and then only on weekends, with booze. Do the owners have any idea of the misery that goes into rendering their homes motel-perfect? Would they be bothered if they did know, or would they take a sadistic pride in what they have purchased—boasting to dinner guests, for example, that their floors are cleaned only with the purest of fresh human tears?

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara has been congratulating herself on her ability to keep up with women who are often much younger than her. However, she recognizes that the main quality they do share is their various physical ailments and the ways they find to treat and medicate them. Barbara's interest in work

throughout the book is, in this section, described explicitly in terms of physical labor, the aches and pains that such work can wreak on the body. Such pains cannot be done away with for her coworkers, who can't afford real treatment nor the time to rest, but can only be "managed" by medication, cigarettes, or alcohol.

Barbara once again ponders the relationship between such pain and the customers that are the indirect cause of these troubles—a relationship that so often remains theoretical, since each group can seem abstract to the other. Barbara seems undecided as to whether the customers' knowledge of that suffering would really horrify them, or whether they would take it in stride. She certainly uses hyperbole in imagining the homeowners bragging to their dinner guess about the "fresh human tears" that result in their gleaming floors, but the exaggeration is meant to underline the disconnect between the painful reality of the workers and the sparkling result that is all that the wealthy customers notice.

❝ Yes, I want to help Holly and everyone else in need, on a worldwide basis if possible. I am a "good person," as my demented charges at the nursing home agree, but maybe I'm also just sick of my suddenly acquired insignificance. Maybe I want to "be somebody," as Jesse Jackson likes to say, somebody generous, competent, brave, and perhaps, above all, noticeable. Maids, as an occupational group, are not visible, and when we are seen we are often sorry for it.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker), Holly

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara had noticed her coworker Holly feeling faint and nauseous at one of the houses. Holly thinks she is pregnant but doesn't want to tell Ted until she's sure, so that she doesn't risk losing her job. Barbara has convinced Holly to eat one of her sports bars and has taken on some of Holly's responsibilities: she feels strong, in control, and benevolent until she makes a mistake and drops a pan onto a fishbowl in another home.

Now Barbara wonders whether her desire to "help" Holly is truly motivated by her essential goodness, or whether her desire is more selfish than that. By helping out and "being good," she realizes, she is more likely to be noticed and appreciated by other people. As a maid, she understands, she has entered a group that is not only invisible and unacknowledged but often actively looked down upon. As a result, it becomes more appealing to look for any way to regain some of that social recognition, even in the smallest of ways.

❝ I am wondering what the two-job way of life would do to a person after a few months with zero days off. In my writing life I normally work seven days a week, but writing is ego food, totally self-supervised and intermittently productive of praise. Here, no one will notice my heroism on that Saturday's shift. (I will later make a point of telling Linda about it and receive only a distracted nod.) If you hump away at menial jobs 360-plus days a year, does some kind of repetitive injury of the spirit set in?

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara has just finished her shift at Woodcrest, which was more stressful than usual, and has gone to a state park to rest and to think over her past few weeks working two jobs, with no days off. Once again, Barbara brings up the topic of validation and recognition for one's work. This is something that she is used to having regularly as a result of working as a writer, since her work is published and responded to by many. It is this kind of validation that gives her the strength and motivation to work hard and to refrain from becoming exhausted or disillusioned. Such positivity is entirely absent in Barbara's work as a maid and as an aide at a home for Alzheimer's patients. Even when she seeks out praise, it is barely given to her.

Barbara has previously discussed the physical and bodily harm that can stem from grueling menial labor. Here, she wonders about other kinds of harm—emotional, even spiritual—that can stem from such jobs, with no rest or days off to break up the monotony and recover.

❝ "I don't mind, really, because I guess I'm a simple person, and I don't want what they have. I mean, it's nothing to me. But what I would like is to be able tot ake a day off now and then…if I had to…and still be able to buy groceries the next day."

Related Characters: Colleen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of her time with The Maids, as she does at each place where she works, Barbara shares with a few of her coworkers that she is actually a reporter and has been investigating working conditions at places like The Maids. She asks Lori and Colleen what they think about the owners of the houses that they clean. While Lori says she's inspired to get to the level of these owners, Colleen has a different reaction. She is not envious of the wealthy customers, nor angry about the obvious disparity between her wealth and theirs. Instead, her goals are more limited, confined to the level of her own expectations. Colleen doesn't expect or hope for an entirely new way of life, but rather wistfully imagines a world in which she could work hard but also take days off, without that decision affecting her very ability to eat and to feed those she supports. In essence, what she expresses to Barbara is a desire to find a way out of the precariousness that characterizes the lives of so many of the working poor.

Chapter 3 Quotes

There's no intermediate point in the process in which you confront the potential employer as a free agent, entitled to cut her own deal. The intercalation of the drug test between application and hiring tilts the playing field even further, establishing that *you*, and not the employer, are the one who has something to prove. Even in the tightest labor market—and it doesn't get any tighter than Minneapolis, where I would probably have been welcome to apply at any commercial establishment I entered—the person who has precious labor to sell can be made to feel one down, way down, like a supplicant with her hand stretched out.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara has gone through the job application process at two places, Menards and Wal-Mart, and now she realizes that she's technically been hired at both, almost without realizing it, and without the chance to negotiate her salary or work hours. Barbara argues that corporations string potential employees along, making them feel like contingent, replaceable figures, until they can benevolently extend a job offer that one can only gratefully accept. Drug tests, for Barbara, are a clear example of how corporations subject individuals to embarrassing, undignified procedures in order to underline the true balance of power between them.

By describing her experience in a place like Minneapolis, which at the time Barbara was there was in great need of labor, Barbara argues that it's impossible to explain this hierarchical process as a result of high supply and low demand. Instead, she claims, the purpose of such processes is to put the potential employee in his or her "proper place." Part of the motivation for this might stem from the need to keep workers feeling lucky to have a job and less likely to pose problems or leave for another place. In addition, Barbara believes that another result is to cut off the possibility for salary negotiation, so that companies can get away with paying their employees as little as possible.

Today [Melissa] seems embarrassed when she sees me: "I probably shouldn't have done this and you're going to think it's really silly..." but she's brought me a sandwich for lunch. This is because I'd told her I was living in a motel almost entirely on fast food, and she felt sorry for me. Now I'm embarrassed, and beyond that overwhelmed to discover a covert stream of generosity running counter to the dominant corporate miserliness.

Related Characters: Melissa (speaker), Barbara Ehrenreich

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Melissa is a coworker of Barbara's who began at Wal-Mart around the same time that Barbara did, and the two have forged a friendship around the hectic, stressful pace of the working day. Part of Barbara's reaction to Melissa's generosity in bringing her a sandwich stems from the embarrassment that comes from knowing that Melissa, unlike her, is probably living in truly precarious conditions. But she is also touched by this action. Barbara has spent much of the book realizing that the corporations for which

she works care little about their employees and are eager to wring as much out of them as they can in pursuit of profits above all. But here she recognizes that an alternative economic mindset does exist, one in which a kind and generous act is not considered a liability, even though the working poor are among the least able to afford such generosity.

But now I know something else. In orientation, we learned that the store's success depends entirely on us, the associate; in fact, our bright blue vests bear the statement "At Wal-Mart, our people make the difference." Underneath those vests, though, there are real-life charity cases, maybe even shelter dwellers.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara is driving back from the Community Emergency Assistance Program, where a woman has given her non-perishable and other food items that will be able to fit in the hotel room where she is now living. Barbara is thinking over what the woman admitted to her: that she had mixed Barbara up with another employee from Wal-Mart who had come in a few days earlier. Barbara has proof, then, that she is not alone in struggling to make ends meet even with a full-time job. And she recognizes that the bright blue vests that all Wal-Mart employees wear unite them outside the workplace as well, as emblematic members of the working poor.

For Barbara, these vests are also a cruel reminder of the gap between the cheery, employee-first language that Wal-Mart strikes as a corporation, and the reality of those individual employees. Wal-Mart may claim that their employees "make the difference," but ultimately they are not interested in what it takes for the employees to arrive at work each day and even to achieve the basic necessities of food and shelter. Barbara's point is that the blue vests create an abstract, homogeneous group of "employees" that denies the lived experience of each one.

Alyssa looks crushed, and I tell her, when Howard's out of sight, that there's something wrong when you're not paid enough to buy a Wal-Mart shirt, a clearanced Wal-Mart shirt with a stain on it.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker), Howard, Alyssa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

Alyssa has been paying close attention to a clearanced seven-dollar polo shirt, and has found a stain on it. As she tries to ask the fitting-room lady to lower the cost for her, the manager Howard appears and says that there is no employee discount on clearanced items. Alyssa is frustrated and upset, and Barbara's words are meant less to cheer her up than to confirm her frustration with the unfairness. At the very least, Barbara claims, Wal-Mart employees should be able to afford the items that they sell, especially when Wal-Mart champions its reasonable prices. In addition, Howard seems far more concerned with keeping a hawkish eye on his employees, preventing them from straying at all from the company regulations, than with the potential contradiction with which Alyssa is faced—that of struggling to afford a shirt that would most likely just be used as part of her uniform.

Evaluation Quotes

The first thing I discovered is that no job, no matter how lowly, is truly "unskilled."

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

As Barbara looks back over what her experience as part of the working poor has taught her, she first draws several conclusions on the personal level before going on to make broader, more sociological claims. Here she echoes something that she had mentioned at the beginning of the book, when friends had asked if people could "tell" that Barbara was undercover. That attitude presumes, she had claimed, that the relatively educated and wealthy are smarter and more clever than others, mapping onto the distinction often made between "skilled" and "unskilled" labor.

Barbara concludes from her time at the various low-paying jobs that this distinction doesn't mean much. A job may be

paid little and may have little dignity or prestige associated with it, but it involves its own challenges and its own skill set. Indeed, at several points in the book, Barbara had grown frustrated at her inability to keep up with others, such as at the moment when she quit Hearthside. It is easy, she shows, for more educated people to consider that they earn what they should relative to the skills they provide, which implies that those who aren't earning as much simply have less valuable skills. Barbara is seeking to challenge such an attitude.

> Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don't need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara goes back through her budget for each of the places she lived, asking herself how she could have made better choices or been more strategic in order to create a more sustainable lifestyle. However, she concludes that few of those mistakes ultimately made a difference. Instead, what remains striking to her is how precarious her life was in each of these places, despite the fact that she is healthy and mobile, with a car that has allowed her to seek a much greater variety of jobs.

Barbara had gone into this project at the historical moment of welfare reform, which was characterized in part by the assumption that incentivizing people to work would reduce poverty. Here Barbara argues that this assumption was flawed, because even working difficult and strenuous jobs has not been enough for her to support herself. With low-paying jobs as the only avenue for the working poor to ensure the basic necessities of food and shelter, the disconnect between rent prices and the wages that such jobs pay is unsustainable.

> The money taboo is one thing that employers can always count on. I suspect that this "taboo" operates most effectively among the lowest-paid people, because, in a society that endlessly celebrates its dot-com billionaires and centimillionaire athletes, $7 or even $10 an hour can feel like a mark of innate inferiority.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara attempts to apply the laws of economics to the realities that she's experienced, and identifies several ways in which these laws fail to be confirmed. One is in the assumption that workers are well-informed and well-educated enough to choose rationally between a number of options, such that they are always maximizing their self-interest. Barbara argues that in practice this doesn't happen, in large part because of what other social scientists have labeled the "money taboo." In a society that celebrates wealth but looks down on sharing one's own salary or financial information in public, such a disconnect virtually ensures that low-wage workers keep quiet about their own situations, both out of shame that their wages are so low, and out of a socially prescribed norm that disapproves of their discussing such wages. As a result, companies benefit, since they don't need to keep up with other companies in order to ensure that they have enough employees or are paying reasonable wages.

> What surprised and offended me most about the low-wage workplace (and yes, here all my middle-class privilege is on full display) was the extent to which one is required to surrender one's basic civil rights and—what boils down to the same thing—self-respect.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Barbara asks why, if workers are discouraged from seeking better wages and conditions elsewhere, they don't just

simply demand better ones at the places where they do work. She identifies one reason as being the community-oriented corporate rhetoric that attempts to make employees feel like part of a team and invested in the company. Here, she proposes another possibility: the routine interruption of basic civil rights. This takes place, as we have seen, in the process of drug testing, which is embarrassing and degrading, as well as in purse searches and in the constant monitoring by managers, which creates an environment of suspicion.

Barbara argues that these infringements on civil rights are not just shocking to someone from the (white) middle class who has never had to question her own freedom in a democratic society. In addition, these procedures create a fundamental gap between different socioeconomic levels of society, ensuring that those who make the least are constantly reminded of their proper place and making it difficult for them to ever question this place. Without the self-respect that comes from understanding oneself as a free member of a democracy, it is unlikely for a low-wage worker to consider him- or herself as worthy of better wages or conditions.

> My guess is that the indignities imposed on so many low-wage workers—the drug tests, the constant surveillance, being "reamed out" by managers—are part of what keeps wages low. If you're made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you're paid is what you're actually worth.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Barbara explicitly identifies a number of the procedures that work to keep low-wage workers "in their place." She calls them "indignities," but they are just a synonym for what earlier has been labeled infringement on civil liberties. For Barbara, the economics of the working poor are not to be isolated from the social and ideological elements of their lives. Indeed, she argues that the shame workers are made to feel, the degrading nature of the procedures to which they are subjected, are directly tied to the absurdly low wages that they are paid. Indeed, as she has argued elsewhere, it is in companies' interest to prevent their workers from considering themselves as worthy of a higher wage, so it is also in their interests to make employees feel as unworthy as possible.

> These experiences are not part of a sustainable lifestyle, even a lifestyle of chronic deprivation and relentless low-level punishment. They are, by almost any standard of subsistence, emergency situations. And that is how we should see the poverty of so many millions of low-wage Americans—as a state of emergency.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

At an earlier moment, Barbara had sought to challenge the notion that there are "secret economies" on which the poor draw—economies that the non-poor assume somehow exist, but in reality are entirely absent. Here, she once again challenges the idea that poverty is difficult and unpleasant but ultimately sustainable. She has witnessed first-hand physical and medical distress stemming from labor, such as Holly's dizziness or coworkers who have been forced to live in a van when not at their jobs.

Indeed, Barbara argues that if we consider poverty merely as a difficulty like any others, we fail to realize that the situations of many low-wage workers are emergency situations. That they go on for so long, she shows, does not make them any less of an emergency. By employing the term "state of emergency," Barbara places poverty on the same level as a natural disaster or war. By doing so she makes a powerful case for the significance of the working poor and their experiences as a battle to be waged in another way than through military means.

> The "working poor," as they are appropriately termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.

Related Characters: Barbara Ehrenreich (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

As she concludes the book, Barbara introduces another new term that, like "state of emergency," is meant to shock her readers into understanding and ultimately inspire them to take action against the status quo. We are used to thinking of philanthropists as wealthy individuals who give out of charity and generosity to people like the working poor. Here, Barbara argues that often the opposite is the case: that the working poor are the true philanthropists. She had seen this reality most explicitly while working at The Maids, during which she saw how grueling, exhausting labor worked to keep the homes of the wealthy spotless while actively denying the human labor that went into that process.

Barbara broadens that example to make a point about low-wage labor in general. In order for wealth to exist elsewhere, in order for the economy to be apparently thriving and growing, a substantial part of the population must sacrifice its own security and standards. Barbara thus argues that the experiences of the working poor are not an aberration from society, but a necessary part of how society functions: any solution, therefore, will have to take into account this relationship.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: GETTING READY

Barbara Ehrenreich tells the reader how the idea for this book came about: at a lunch with her editor from *Harper's* magazine discussing future articles she might write, including more articles about a topic she'd covered previous: poverty. With welfare reform about to take place, Barbara wondered how women could survive on $6 or $7 an hour. She mentioned that someone should do old-fashioned journalism and try it herself, meaning someone younger—but her editor half-smiled and said, "*You*."

Barbara situates the reader within a particular historical moment, at which national economic policy regarding welfare reform is about to transform the lives of many of the country's poorest citizens. The exchange with her editor also hints at her credentials, provides a bit of humor, and establishes the task that she'll seek to accomplish over the course of the book.

Barbara comes from a family familiar with low-wage work: her father and other relatives were miners, while her husband was a warehouse worker when they met, and her sister has shuttled through various low-wage jobs. For her, a writer, sitting at a desk is a privilege and an opportunity to be grateful that she has moved up in the world—now she hesitates to go back.

With this additional background info, Barbara makes clear that low-wage work is far from alien to her and her family. She knows going into the project how "work" can mean wildly different things depending on the kind of labor.

In addition, Barbara knows she could already figure out the numbers herself, paying herself an entry-level wage and totaling up her profits and expenses at the end of the month. She already knew, also, that a single mother leaving welfare would struggle to survive without government assistance: in 1998, when she started the project, it would take a $8.89 hourly wage to afford a one-bedroom apartment, and the typical welfare recipient had a 97 to 1 chance of landing such a job.

As the project begins, quantitative research has already been done—and it's shown that Barbara will be facing an uphill battle in her attempt to match income to expenses. If she decided simply to complete the project by adding up wages and expenses on a piece of paper, she already knows that she would fail.

Barbara ultimately decided to think of the task as a scientist—in fact, she has a Ph.D. in biology, and was trained to do experiments. She thought she might discover some hidden tricks that would allow her to get past the basic math—after all, about 30 percent of the workforce got paid $8 an hour or less. She set certain rules: she could not fall back on her professional skills; she had to take the highest-paying job offered and do her best; and she had to take the cheapest accommodations (while still safe) that she could find. She bent these rules several times, by convincing an interviewer that she could say *Bonjour* or *Guten Tag* to restaurant guests as a waitress, for instance.

Given the apparent impossibility of living on minimum-wage profits, Barbara concludes that her first-hand experience might reveal some secrets about the economics of poverty that even the economists have missed. The rules that she sets for herself underline her insistence on being as authentic as possible in the experiment; however, that she sometimes fails to keep these rules only underlines how difficult it is to make a living without educational or other advantages.

Barbara would describe herself as a divorced homemaker reentering the workforce after a long break. She listed three years of college and listed her real-life alma mater, though no one seemed to care much. She would also set limits on any hardship: she would always have a car, and she would rule out homelessness. She would spend a month in each place and try to see whether she could find a job and earn the money to pay a second month's rent—if not, she would quit. She makes the point that this wasn't an adventure story: millions of people do this every day.

Here, Barbara sets out in detail the terms of her project. We learn that even college—such a cause of anxiety for middle- and upper-class Americans—matters little in the low-wage workforce. Barbara writes in a straightforward way about her experiment, which makes sense given her decision to treat it like scientific research rather than as a shocking, dramatic "adventure story."

Barbara is quick to say that she is in a comfortable financial position and could certainly not "experience poverty" in a real way: instead, she just wanted to see if she could match income to expenses. She had the added privilege of being white and a native English speaker, meaning that she was offered certain kinds of jobs over others—waitressing rather than hotel housekeeping, for instance. She also didn't have young children, unlike many women leaving welfare, and was in much better health than many low-wage workers.

Barbara reiterates the idea that she is simply doing an experiment and not truly living this lifestyle—making the point that for many people low-wage work is life *and not simply a temporary project. She also clearly lists her advantages of language, ethnicity, and family situation, all of which can have further negative effects on people's ability to gain and hold down a job. In other words, Barbara is engaging in this experiment with many built-in advantages.*

During her jobs, Barbara talked about her real-life husband and relationships. People later asked her whether her co-workers couldn't "tell," as if educated people are different and somehow superior than the lesser-educated. Instead, she was only different in that she was inexperienced: low-wage workers are just as heterogeneous, and just as likely to be funny or smart, as anyone in the educated classes. What did make her different was that she returned each night to a laptop on which she took notes, often changing the details to protect the privacy of people she worked with.

Throughout the book, Barbara will use her "real-life" past and experience to make comparisons with low-wage work in order to puncture stereotypes and increase awareness among her readership, which she assumes to be middle- or upper-class. Here, she shows how many people from these groups implicitly look down on low-wage workers.

While Barbara notes that her story is far from a typical case, she claims that it is in fact a best-case scenario, in which someone with every advantage attempts to survive in the low-wage economy.

While low-wage work always comes with economic difficulties, these can often be compounded by additional factors.

CHAPTER 1: SERVING IN FLORIDA

Barbara begins her project near her real home, in Key West, Florida. She first attempts to find a place to live, assuming that if she can earn $7 per hour, she can afford to spend $500-600 in rent and still have $400-500 for food and gas. In Key West, this means she is looking at trailer homes like the one fifteen minutes from town without air-conditioning or a television—but at $675 a month, it's too much.

By beginning her project near her real home, Barbara learns first-hand how one city can hold multiple worlds and realities depending on one's economic situation. Key West for the poor is a place where even trailer parks are too extravagant for minimum-wage work.

Barbara admits Key West is expensive, but notes that like New York City, the Bay Area, or Boston, tourists and the wealthy are competing with the people who serve them. So she makes a choice many low-wage workers must make between affordability and convenience, and chooses a $500-per-month trailer thirty miles up the highway—a forty-five minute drive. It's a depressing drive, but the place is a quaint kind of cabin in the backyard of her landlord's convertible mobile home.

One of Barbara's advantages is having a car, but she makes clear that low-wage workers must cling to any advantage they have, as that advantage often serves as compensation for other disadvantages. One of these is living in a tourist area, where the power and resources of the wealthy mean that the poor are relegated by the cost and availability of housing to ever farther and unpleasant living quarters.

Barbara looks through want ads, hoping to avoid certain jobs, like waitressing, because she remembers how tired it made her as an eighteen-year-old. She's left with supermarket jobs and housekeeping. She fills out application forms at various supermarkets and hotels. At Winn-Dixie, she has a twenty-minute computer "interview" (ensuring that the corporate point of view is represented) and is left to wait in a room with posters warning about the ways union organizers will try to trick you. The interview asks if she has any problems that might make it difficult to get to work on time, how many dollars' worth of stolen goods she's purchased in the last year, and if she would turn in a fellow employee caught stealing.

Tests and "interviews" like the one Barbara fills out at Winn-Dixie will turn out to be a key element of applying for any low-wage work. Questions like those Barbara mentions show how these tests are looking for employees who are obedient, dutiful, and honest to the point of putting the company before fellow employees; the question about stolen goods additionally reveals how companies inherently distrust their potential employees, which Barbara will show is part of a broader atmosphere of corporate suspicion of low-wage workers.

Barbara is told to go to a doctor's office the next day for a urine test: **drug testing** is a general rule for low-wage work, she discovers. She thinks the $6-an-hour wage is not enough to compensate for such an indignity. She has lunch at Wendy's, an unlimited Mexican meal for $4.99, and fills out an application form to work there, also for around $6 an hour.

At this point, Barbara still feels like she has enough options to be able to turn down work in order to conserve her dignity (an idea she will be forced to give up later). Neither of these jobs even reach the low $7 threshold she had calculated.

At one hotel, Barbara notices that the housekeepers look like her, "faded ex-hippie types" with long hair in braids. No one talks to her except to offer an application form. At another Bed & Breakfast a man tells her there are no jobs but to check back soon, since no one lasts more than a few weeks.

The atmosphere Barbara paints here is a generally downtrodden one. High turnover is one major symptom of low-wage work, since such workers are constantly in an economically precarious situation. The turnover is not because of laziness, but because continuing in a job is impossible.

No one calls Barbara back for three days, and she realizes that the want ads do not necessarily mean jobs are available: they are how employers account for the constant turnover in the low-wage workforce. She has to simply be flexible enough to take whatever is being offered, which finally happens at a discount chain hotel. She goes there for a housekeeping job and instead is sent to apply for a waitress job at the dingy attached "family restaurant."

Barbara is faced directly with the link between low-wage work and high turnover, and begins to understand that this environment means that she cannot be picky with her job—"choosing" a career is a privilege for the wealthier. Though she has negative memories of waitressing as a teenager, she ends up having to accept such a job.

The manager, a young West Indian named Phillip, interviews Barbara without much interest, mainly wanting to know what shifts she can work. He tells her to show up the next day in black pants and black shoes—he'll provide the polo shirt embroidered with "Hearthside" (the name she's made up for this place).

Unlike the corporate computer interview, this one seeks not to weed out individuality but merely to fill in an empty labor slot on the calendar. With her uniform provided, Barbara is officially a part of the low-wage workforce.

Barbara works there for two weeks from 2pm until 10pm for $2.43 an hour plus tips (a footnote explains that employers are legally allowed to pay less than minimum wage as long as the wage plus tips equals minimum wage per hour—but Barbara never heard this law mentioned or explained to her).

Barbara's footnote suggests that some people may be making even less than minimum wage due to the sneaky evasion of employers. Waitressing wages are particularly vulnerable to shifts based on the economy, the tourist season, and even things as simple as customers' moods.

When Barbara arrives, a red-faced, long-haired man is throwing frozen steaks against the wall and cursing: the middle-aged waitress named Gail assigned to train her says that that's just Billy, the cook. Gail mixes pieces of instruction with personal confidences, like the fact that she misses her boyfriend who was killed in a prison fight a few months ago—he was only in prison for a few DUIs, she explains.

Immediately, Barbara is thrust into an environment that's rough around the edges, from Gail's boyfriend's legal troubles to Billy's wild behavior. Ehrenreich has a talent for making these coworkers come to life, especially when she befriends some of them to make it through the days.

As she learns about the job, Barbara no longer fears being overqualified—instead, she misses being simply competent. While she understands the procedural aspects of writing, as a waitress she simply has to deal with requests from all sides. She has to master the touch-screen computer-ordering system, and must take up her non-serving time in invisible "side work," from sweeping and scrubbing to restocking in order to be ready for the 6pm dinner rush.

Transitioning from a desk job to waitressing, Barbara is humbled to find that "unskilled" work is far more difficult that she'd thought, and hardly devoid of skill. By detailing the variety of skills that, in fact, she needs to employ, Barbara punctures another stereotype of low-wage labor.

Barbara is surprised to realize how much she cares about doing good work—a philosophy given to her from her father, who pulled himself up from the copper mines of Butte to the Northeastern suburbs. When she wakes up in the middle of the night, she thinks not of her missed writing deadlines but of the table where she screwed up a kid's order. She's had the "service ethic" kick in, making her want to serve the customers, who are working locals like truck drivers, as if they're in a fine dining establishment. There's a sewer repairman who relaxes in the air-conditioning for a half hour before eating. There are German tourists who actually tip when Barbara uses her basic German—Europeans, coming from high-wage "welfare states," often do not know they are supposed to tip.

As she mentioned in the introduction, Barbara is not entirely a stranger to low-wage labor, given her father's mining history and her own childhood spent climbing the rungs of the economic ladder. By humanizing her customers (even the Europeans who don't know they're supposed to tip), Barbara adds a more relationship-oriented dimension to her job. This is helped by the fact that many of the customers are far from middle- or upper-class themselves, so Barbara can feel a certain solidarity as she helps them enjoy their time off.

Barbara and other servers are indulgent to customers, often sneaking on a higher amount of croutons than the amount mandated by management (six). Gail uses her own tip money to buy biscuits and gravy for an out-of-work mechanic. They use their small pieces of autonomy in assembling the salads and desserts and giving dollops of sour cream and butter. Barbara suggests that American obesity is due at least in part to the fact that waitresses show their humanity, and earn their tips, through these kinds of covert extras.

Barbara is not the only one to lend the job a more human dimension by flouting the rigid corporate rules that dictate everything up to the last detail (number of croutons). Barbara shows that this tendency is a natural one, probably among many service workers, and adds a hint of her characteristic humor to make her point.

Ten days in, it seems like a livable lifestyle. Barbara likes Gail and Lionel, the teenaged busboy from Haiti, as well as the older Haitian dishwashers. She especially likes Joan, the hostess, who is a feminist and tells Barbara that they women have to stick together. Joan stands up to Billy after he curses the female servers. Barbara finishes up by 10pm or 10:30, gets to bed by 1:30 or 2am, is up by 9 or 10am, reads while she waits for her uniform to be washed, and heads back out.

After a week or two on the job, what Barbara most enjoys and remembers is her relationship with her coworkers—another example of solidarity in a sometimes hostile environment. Nevertheless, her hour-by-hour description of her days shows how monotonous such labor can be, especially given her long commute.

What makes this lifestyle far less sustainable is the management: the constant surveillance for signs of laziness, theft, or drug abuse. In the restaurant business, managers are often former cooks, and don't make that much more money, but are now firmly on the side of making money for the corporation—a theoretical entity which is based far away. Managers try to prevent any downtime, meaning that Barbara drags out little chores so as not to be exhausted during slow periods. On one slow day, Stu catches her glancing at a USA Today and assigns her to vacuum the entire floor with the broken vacuum cleaner, which can only be done on her hands and knees.

Barbara learns for the first time what will become a common theme: the contrast between the experience of individual workers and the priorities of the corporation. Corporations, as we'll see, have certain priorities in common, including efficiency, suspicion of their employees, and an emphasis on the bottom line. These priorities trickle down even to managers who used to be on the other side, leading to unpleasantness for the workers who bear the brunt of such obsessions.

At her first mandatory employee meeting, Phillip complains about the messiness of the break room, reminds them that their lockers can be searched at any time, and says that gossip among the employees must stop. Four days later, they are all brought into the kitchen at 3:30 p.m., and Phillip announces that there's been some "drug activity" on the night shift. Now, all new hires will be tested, and current employees could be subject to random **drug tests**. Barbara finds herself blushing: she hasn't been treated with such suspicion and felt so ashamed since junior high.

Again, these are several concrete examples of the ways in which corporate rhetoric can demean and embarrass employees, as well as treat them like potential enemies or even drones. They lack basic rights like privacy or free speech, and are subjected to humiliating random drug tests. That Barbara hasn't received such treatment for years reminds us how different middle- and upper-class workers are treated.

Some start to gossip that Stu, who has been in a worse mood than usual, is to blame. Barbara is ready not to trust him, since he doesn't seem to have a clear role and he has tried to get into Barbara's good graces by complaining about Haitians taking over the country.

There are various levels in the hierarchy of Hearthside, and while Stu exerts control over the waitresses, he can also be subjected to the needs and suspicion of the corporation.

Housing is the top source of difficulty in most of her coworkers' lives. Barbara learns that Gail is sharing a room in a flophouse (a cheap boarding house) for $250 a week, and though her male roommate has started hitting on her, she can't afford the rent alone. A Haitian cook shares a two-room apartment with his girlfriend and two other people. A breakfast server pays $170 a week for a one-person trailer with her boyfriend. The wealthiest of them is Billy, who makes $10 an hour and pays the $400 per month lot fee on the trailer that he owns. Joan lives in a van parked behind a shopping center and showers at a friend's.

As part of her experiment, Barbara will seek to supplement her own experiences with those of the people she works with and sees around her. Here, she concentrates on housing, which is generally precarious (trailers, boarding rooms) and usually far from ideal—though this often depends, again, on comparative advantages like owning a trailer or being a native English speaker (the Haitian servers seem to have the most crowded situation).

For Barbara, some of these living arrangements don't seem to make sense. Gail tells her she is thinking of escaping from her roommate by moving into the Days Inn. Barbara is shocked that she'd be paying $40-60 per day, but Gail is similarly shocked that Barbara would think Gail could afford a month's rent and a month's deposit for an apartment, even if the apartment might cost less long-term. Barbara had allotted herself $1,300 for start-up costs, so she could afford to pay for a deposit.

In the introduction, Barbara had made clear that not every aspect of her project would be authentic—the fact that she began with over $1,000 was one of them. Gail, for instance, is forced into a wildly inefficient economic situation just because she doesn't have enough existing money to put down a deposit on an apartment and therefore save more over time.

There are no secret economies or tricks for the poor, Barbara realizes: if you can't afford a deposit, you end up spending far more for a room by the week. If you only have a room, you can't cook big portions of food to freeze for the rest of the week—instead, you eat fast food or convenience store food, which is more expensive and unhealthier. Without health insurance (which, at the Hearthside, kicks in only after three months) you pay the price for the lack of routine care. Gail ran out of money for estrogen pills, and the Hearthside health insurance company said they lost her application form, so now she has to spend $9 per pill until they complete her paperwork.

Barbara's conversation with Gail leads to an important realization about the economics of poverty, in which inefficiency reigns. She gives various examples—housing, food, and health insurance—all of which add up mainly because the working poor simply can't afford to be smart about money. Some of these examples, like Gail's pills, initially seem like trifles, comparatively unimportant, but as Barbara shows, even something small can balloon into a crisis when there isn't a large margin for error. The fact that the housing market and other aspects of the economy seem to be set up in such a way that the poor are blocked from acting in the most cost-efficient ways is one of Barbara's realizations in her experiment. It's not that the poor are dumb or lazy; it's that the system is stacked against them.

Barbara's tips usually cover her meals and gas, with a little bit left over. But as the tourist business slows, her tips go down and her wage amounts to about minimum wage or $5.15 per hour. She will be $100 short by the end of the month. She makes her lunch every day, and eats dinner at the Hearthside for $2. She'll have to find a second or alternative job.

After the first few weeks, what had seemed like a sustainable situation suddenly turns unsustainable, though due to circumstances beyond Barbara's control. Yet, again, this is another of Barbara's realizations: that being poor is like living on a knife's edge, and that even minor shifts or things totally out of your control can completely transform your situation. The poor, in other words, have no buffer to protect them.

Barbara starts making the rounds again at hotels. Almost all the working housekeepers she sees are African Americans, Spanish-speaking, or Central European refugees, while servers are almost all white and native English speakers. Her search leads her to Jerry's (not the real name, and part of a national hotel/restaurant chain) which, like the Hearthside, offers her a job as a server rather than housekeeper. Jerry's has about four times as many customers as Hearthside does—she accepts.

Barbara is realizing that the color of her skin will impact the kinds of jobs she's offered—though she had applied for housekeeping jobs, she's shunted towards waitressing, and given her precarious finances she has to accept whatever she's offered. Jerry's higher volume means that she'll probably make more money, but also that this job will be far more demanding.

Jerry's only seems to offer artery-clogging meals, which come from a massive kitchen above the grimy, foul-smelling garbage and dishwashing area. Sinks are clogged with food, and counters are sticky with spills. Servers use their hands for everything, even though there's often no soap in the bathroom. There is no break room since there are no breaks for the six- to eight-hour shifts. Almost everyone smokes constantly, from the servers and cooks to dishwashers. Often customers come fifty at a time from their tour buses. Rarely does Barbara have time for conversation with fellow servers or customers.

Barbara paints a vivid and extremely distasteful portrait of Jerry's, or at least the side of it that remains unknown to customers. By doing so, Barbara gives readers a glimpse into what goes into the meals that they may casually enjoy at a restaurant like Jerry's. The lack of breaks, the sudden flooding of the restaurant by tour buses, and the inability to develop relationships with servers or customers further make the place a far from ideal work environment.

For two days, Barbara manages to work both the breakfast/lunch shift at Jerry's and the later shift at the Hearthside. But when she finally has a chance to sit down and eat something, Stu yells at her. She tells Gail she's just going to quit. Gail, in turn, tells her excitedly that Phillip is letting her park overnight in the hotel parking lot and sleep in her truck.

Though Barbara had needed to supplement her income, now that it turns out working both these jobs is unsustainable, she sticks with the higher earnings (though greater unpleasantness) of Jerry's. Barbara is unimpressed with Phillip's "generousness," which seems to keep Gail in a still-precarious housing situation. That Gail is pleased by it details just how much the expectations of the poor can be lowered by their experiences.

Barbara finds she can only survive at Jerry's by treating each shift as a one-time-only emergency. She starts to be in constant pain, and takes four ibuprofens before each shift to deal with spasms in her upper back. In her regular life, she'd take a day off with ice packs and resting, but can't afford to do that now.

This is the first of many examples of self-medication and emergency, unofficial treatment, which Barbara will show is a common element of low-wage work, since such labor is often physically grueling, and because the workers often can't afford and aren't provided with real health insurance.

Barbara does take breaks sometimes, but increasingly her old life seems strange and distant, her emails and messages from people with odd worries and too much time on their hands.

Just as low-wage workers are often invisible to the upper classes, their jobs seeming strange and different, the reverse is also true, showing how foreign the two worlds are.

Management is generally calmer at Jerry's, except for the manager, Joy, whose moods vary wildly within a shift. On Barbara's third night, Joy pulls Barbara aside abruptly only to tell her she's doing fine, except she's spending too much time chatting with customers and is letting them "run her" or ask for too many minor changes in their orders. Barbara feels chastened. She realizes that she doesn't get to express a positive service ethic like the college servers at the fancy downtown restaurants. Her job is just to move orders between the tables and kitchen, and customer requests are just interruptions to this transformation of food into money. Barbara actually starts to see the customers this way, against her will. The worst, she says, are the "Visible Christians," who are needy and difficult and then leave a $1 tip on a $92 bill.

Like Phillip, Joy is able to exert an inordinate influence over her subordinates, not only regulating how they act but also how they feel. Just as she did at Phillip's break room meeting, Barbara feels psychologically put down. With the efficiency needs of management always winning out, there's no place or time for her to develop individual relationships with other people, rather than being simply a drone whose role is to serve management as efficiently as possible. Barbara shows how this mentality can become an entire world view, which she describes through the humorous example of certain, especially bad-tipping customers.

Barbara makes friends with the other "girls" on her shift, including the fiftyish Lucy, who limps towards the end of the shift because something has gone wrong with her leg, which she can't figure out without health insurance. They talk about all the usual girl things, though not potentially expensive topics like shopping or movies. No one is homeless, usually thanks to a working husband or boyfriend, and they tend to support each other if someone's feeling sick or overwhelmed.

Eventually, Barbara is able to develop relationships with her coworkers, which she again uses as an opportunity to learn more about the various difficulties faced by the low-wage workforce. Her examples show that her coworkers are entirely normal people, whose problems lie, once again, in areas like health insurance and housing. As they do within the job, they find ways of supporting each other outside work as well.

Barbara's favorite is George, the 19-year-old Czech dishwasher who has been in the States for one week. When she suggests he grab a cigarette from someone's pack lying on a table, he is appalled. Barbara tries to teach him a little English, and learns that he is paid $5 an hour not by Jerry's but by the "agent" who brought him over, with the other dollar of his salary going to the agent. He shares an apartment with other Czech dishwashers and can only sleep when one of them leaves for a shift and a vacant bed is left.

Barbara writes fondly about George, who is not only a pleasant person to work with but also an example of how low-wage workers can easily be exploited, especially if they're further disadvantaged by their ethnicity, lack of English language skills, or immigration status. Other elements of survival like housing become even more precarious and miserable when compounded by these disadvantages.

Barbara decides to move closer to Key West, because gas is costing $4-5 per day, and tips at Jerry's average only 10 percent, meaning that she's averaging about $7.50 an hour. She also had to spend $30 on tan slacks, the uniform, far out of her budget.

In order to make her budget work, Barbara constantly has to recalculate her wages, expenses, and extras like the uniform she had to buy, all of which means that she might have to change housing situations on a dime.

Everyone who doesn't have a working husband or boyfriend seems to have a second job, from telemarketing to welding. Barbara thinks she can get a second job if she doesn't have a forty-five minute commute, so she takes her $500 deposit, the $400 she's earned, and her $200 for emergencies, and pays the $1,100 rent and deposit on a trailer in Key West. It is eight feet in width and a few yards from a liquor store, bar, and Burger King. The park has a reputation for crime and crack, but it is mostly quiet and desolate, filled with other working people.

Though working two jobs at Jerry's and the Hearthside didn't work, Barbara thinks she can join the majority of her coworkers working two jobs even if she has to pay more for a trailer closer to home. This trailer park is far from idyllic, but it seems to be occupied mainly by those in a similar situation to Barbara, which shows how broadly her own circumstances and ability to pay can be applied.

At Jerry's, an announcement on the computers used for inputting orders states that the hotel bar is now off-limits to restaurant employees, due to a twenty-three-year-old who had snuck out one morning and returned to the floor tipsy. Everyone feels the chill and suspicion. The next day, the dry-storage room is locked for the first time: Vic, the assistant manager, says that one of the dishwashers was trying to steal something, and he has to keep him around until Vic finds a replacement. He's talking about George.

This incident only serves to exacerbate the atmosphere of suspicion and distrust between management and employees. With regard to George, this atmosphere touches Barbara personally for the first time. She's seen first-hand how honest George is (from his horror at the idea of taking a coworker's cigarette). The locked room becomes another emblem of suspicion.

Barbara wishes she could say she stood up to Vic and insisted George be given a translator, or that he's honest. But she admits that she's been infected with a new caution and cowardice, and worries that in a month or two she might have turned George in.

This example shows how the constant pressures of a job like Barbara's can affect even someone's personality, making him or her more frightened and pliable and, in the eyes of management, a more ideal employee.

Barbara isn't to find out, since near the end of the month she finally lands a housekeeping job. She walks into the personnel office at the hotel attached to Jerry's and insists that she couldn't pay the rent without a second job. The frazzled personnel lady marches her back to meet the housekeeping manager. The job pays $6.10 an hour, from 9 a.m. till "whenever," so hopefully, she thinks, before two. Carlotta, a middle-aged African-American woman missing all her top front teeth, will be training her.

Only by embarking on extreme, proactive tactics does Barbara manage to get the specific kind of job she's been looking for all along. The detail about Carlotta's missing front teeth provides a vivid reminder of what can happen after a lifetime working at a job that doesn't offer health insurance nor pay enough for employees to have their own.

On this first day, Carlotta or "Carlie" and Barbara move through nineteen "checkouts" (rather than "stay-overs"), which require more work. They work four hours without a break, with Barbara covering the beds and Carlie the bathrooms. They keep the TV on, especially the soaps, which keep them going. Barbara feels like an intruder into the tourist's world of comfort and leisure, though with backaches and constant thirst.

At this new job, Barbara has to master a new set of skills and new vocabulary (another reminder that no job is really "unskilled"). In housekeeping, the contrast between tourists' leisurely, privileged experiences and the physically grueling nature of the housekeepers' labor is particularly evident.

All Barbara learns about Carlie is how much she is in pain, making her move slowly—while the younger immigrant housekeepers finish by 2 p.m., she isn't done until six. Though they pay by the hour now, there's talk about moving to pay by the room. Carlie also becomes upset and hurt at slights, like the rudeness from a white maintenance guy.

Carlie can only deal with the comparative disadvantage of her chronic pain by relying on being paid by the hour—the potential shift is, of course, meant to benefit management. Carlie's sensitivity, like Barbara's sense of being chastened at Jerry's, may be exacerbated by the job's indignities.

Barbara asks to leave at about 3:30, and another housekeeper warns her that no one has yet managed to combine housekeeping with working at Jerry's. She rushes back to the trailer and swallows four Advils before spending the rest of her hour-long break trying to clean ketchup and dressing stains off her tan slacks.

Barbara had mentioned that every shift at Jerry's was like a state of emergency, and now her attempt to juggle two jobs only ramps up the volume. Again, self-medication is the only fix, no matter how short-term, that she can find. The poor can only ever treat their symptoms—both physical and regarding their finances—and never address the root causes of their problems.

At Jerry's, George is distraught. Barbara resolves to give him all her tips that night. She takes a short break for dinner before the rush—only one, new cook is on duty. Four of her tables fill up at once, all clustered around each other, and each has her running constantly. Table 24 consists of ten British tourists who each order at least two drinks and an array of food. One of them sends hers back and insists that the others' go back as well while she waits. The other tables grow restless, and table 24 rejects their reheated main courses. When Barbara returns to the kitchen with the trays, Joy confronts her, asking if it's a "traditional, a super-scramble an eye-opener?" Barbara has no idea what she's talking about, but at that moment a customer barges into the kitchen to yell that his food is late, and Joy screams at him to get out of the kitchen.

This scene is one of slowly increasing tensions, a crescendo of conflict that seems will inevitably end in disaster. As readers of the book, who are probably more often customers rather than servers at restaurants, we see the other side of service, in which a single customer's complaint or difficulty can lead to a crisis for the waitress handling the table. Barbara knows that the ten British tourists were most likely not purposely making her life hell, but by portraying this dramatic scene she seeks to show how thoughtless people can be, failing to understand that there are real, individual people that will have to suffer the consequences of their thoughtlessness.


Barbara simply walks out, without finishing her work or picking up her tips. She is almost surprised to find that she can simply walk out the door. Though she went into this project with a scientific mindset, it has become a personal test, and she feels that she has failed. Plus, she's forgotten to give George her tips, which makes her feel even worse. For the first time in many years, she is on the verge of crying.

After the rising crescendo of tensions, the climax is abruptly cut off when Barbara barges out. Her "scientific" mindset has been invaded by her emotions. A job like this, we realize, is often inevitably tied to the person as a whole—it can't simply be parceled out as one aspect of his or her life, and a failure in it can feel like a life failure.

Barbara moves out of the trailer park and gives her keys to Gail. Gail tells her that Stu had been fired, apparently for ordering crack while still in the restaurant and trying to pay from the register. Barbara never finds out what happens to George.

As the chapter ends, Barbara ties up the loose threads, attempting to track down what happened to the people she's formed relationships with. Her inability to find George suggests the invisibility of the poor within the broader world.

CHAPTER 2: SCRUBBING IN MAINE

Barbara chooses Maine because of how white it is—from college students and professors to the hotel housekeepers and cab drivers. She feels she'll fit in as an English-speaking Caucasian in search of low-wage work. She also had noted on an earlier visit that Portland seemed eager for employees—a TV ad mentioned a "mothers' shift" for a telemarketing fair, and the radio was promoting job fairs. The lengthy help-wanted ads she downloads from the newspaper's web include several promises of "fun, casual" workplace environments, which she finds appealing.

In Key West, Barbara had found herself steered towards particular jobs and not others because of her ethnicity and native language ability. In Portland, all the talk of job faires, special shifts, TV ads, and appealing workplace environments seems to suggest a tighter labor market (meaning that there are fewer available workers per open job), which should, in theory, provide better economic possibilities for low-wage workers because they should have more leverage.

On August 24th, Barbara arrives at the Portland bus station and takes a cab to the Motel 6 where she'll stay until she finds a job and home. She knows it can't be common to leave a familiar place and settle down far away where she knows no one, but she figures that these kinds of dislocations take place in the lives of the very poor, who might lose their job or babysitter, or live with a sister who throws you them because she needs the bed, et cetera.

Barbara admits that her experiment can sometimes be less authentic than a true low-wage workers' experience, but the disjunctive nature of her project—how she jumps from place to place—also gives her an opportunity to mention how stressful and discontinuous the search for jobs and attempt to settle down can be for many low-wage workers.

Barbara has arrived with a laptop and suitcase with some clothes, a tote bag with books, and $1,000. She's paying $59 a night for a room in a Motel 6 that still contains remnants of previous inhabitants, like deposits of cigarette smoke and Cheeto crumbs under the bed. Outside the main entrance there's a Texaco station and Clipper Mart, and across the turnpike (which is terrifying to cross on foot) there are more food options, like a supermarket and Pizza Hut. She brings pizza and salad back to dinner.

As usual, Barbara is able to paint a garish but effective portrait of the bleak shopping strips and suburban outposts that cater to the less affluent members of society, through details like Cheeto crumbs and fast food marts. The detail of the turnpike shows how Barbara's car provides a particularly useful advantage—places like these are not made for those without one.

Barbara reasons that it should feel exhilarating to blow off all old relationships and routines and start over from scratch. But educated middle-class professional like her, she realizes, never hurl themselves into the future without a plan or to-do list. Everything is always anticipated. Now, to get a job she needs an address, but to get an apartment it helps to have a history of stable employment. She decides to do everything at once and use the hotel phone as her answering machine.

This time, rather than comparing her move with those of low-wage workers, she contrasts it with the experiences of those in her own income bracket, for whom economic precariousness is just not a possibility. Now, lacking any job or address that would tie her down, she sees no way of getting out of the complicated loop of instability.

It turns out that while there are plenty of condos and $1,000-per-month apartments, the only low-rent options seem to be thirty minutes south—though even there rents are over $500. A few phone calls reveal that the poor tend to live, at least during the winter, in the low-rate motel rooms after Labor Day.

Having experienced the inconvenience and expense of a long commute, Barbara knows that that is not a sustainable option for the kinds of jobs that she'll be looking for.

Barbara goes to check out a room share instead, for $65 per week. The landlord shows her around, saying that the roommate is a "character" but has a job. In the basement of the motel-boardinghouse, there's a closed door to the kitchen, but there's someone sleeping in there, so they can't go in. the room is down the hall from the kitchen, with two unmade twin beds and a few light bulbs, with no window.

In financial terms, the room share is Barbara's best bet, but she had also committed herself to sticking with the best job and apartment she could get, and given the details she provides here, it doesn't seem like the room share would really count as stable, safe housing. For the working poor, cost-effective can also mean unsafe.

Barbara decides to forgo the room share, and visits the SeaBreeze motel, but at $150 a week it's too much. On the way home, she notices that the Blue Haven Motel on Route 1 has apartments to rent for $120 per week, and it looks almost picturesque. The security deposit is only $100, so she pays on the spot. She probably could have found something better with more time, but she's eager to get out of the Motel 6.

While Barbara had expressed shock at Gail's idea of moving into a motel, now she finds that living in a motel is probably her best, or only, option. While she mentions she could have found something better, often the working poor simply can't afford to wait long enough for something affordable to arise.

Barbara now knows to apply for as many jobs as possible. She's ready to move on from waitressing, and she doesn't have enough office-type outfits for clerical work, so she calls about cleaning, warehouse and nursing home work, and manufacturing. Applying is humbling, since it consists of offering yourself and your life experiences to a series of people who just aren't very interested. She is interviewed by a bored secretary at a tortilla factory, and fills out an application at Goodwill, which she knows has been positioning itself as the ideal employer for the poor recently out of welfare. There, no one meets her eye except for one person staring and making swimming motions above his head, perhaps to warn her off.

Equipped with several lessons from her first attempt in Key West, Barbara sets out on the job hunt. She had learned earlier, but now can confirm, that the process of filling out constant applications is draining and, at its worst, emotionally damaging. She casts a wide net, as is shown by the mention of both a tortilla factory and Goodwill, where the contrast between its self-presentation in its marketing attempts and the unappealing atmosphere of the place becomes acutely evident.

At a Wal-Mart advertising a job fair, a woman shows up after a ten-minute wait, flustered since, as she explains, she just works there and she's never interviewed anyone before. Barbara fills out a four-page "opinion survey" with, apparently, no right or wrong answers. The form has questions about forgiving or denouncing a coworker caught stealing, and if management is to blame if things go wrong, with answers ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree." Barbara finds it hard to believe that employers can learn anything from these tests, since most people can see through to the "right" answers—knowing to say she works well with others, but would denounce them for any infraction, for instance.

The "survey" bears much resemblance to the test Barbara had to fill out at the supermarket in Key West. Questions about ratting out fellow employees appear to be a common trait to these tests. Barbara can easily see what they're meant to do—weed out potential employees who would cause any strain on management or be anything other than dutiful, obedient, and loyal only to their managers.

At a housecleaning service called The Maids, Barbara is given the "Accutrac personality test," which warns at the beginning that there are multiple measures that detect attempts to "psych out" the survey, but the "right" answers are just as transparent. Barbara decides the real information is for the employees, who learn that they can keep no secrets from their employers, who will control every part of them.

"Psyching out" the test is just what Barbara has been doing all along, and she doubts there's any way to prevent that. In general, for her, these tests symbolize and are meant to promote the authoritarian nature of low-wage work for a corporation.

Barbara is surprised to learn from her job hunt that Portland, despite its labor shortage, is still a $6-7-an-hour town. At another housecleaning service, Merry Maids, the interviewer tells her not to try to calculate the "$200 to $250" per week in dollars per hour, but of course she does anyway and discovers that it comes to $5-6 per hour for heavy labor with risk of repetitive stress injuries. She realizes that one job will not be enough, and that the laws of supply and demand do not seem to apply here.

Having seen various examples of Portland's need for labor, Barbara now shows that wages in Portland seem impervious to the economic laws of supply and demand that should increase workers wages. Employers, she notes, find sneaky ways at getting around these laws, by calculating in weeks rather than hours, for example, without accounting for the grueling physical nature of the job.

After two days of job applications, Barbara sits and waits in her small, dingy Motel 6 room (she can't move into the Blue Haven until Sunday). The phone rings twice that morning, and she accepts both jobs immediately: a nursing home on weekends for $7 per hour, and The Maids starting Monday for $6.65. She isn't sure how "maid services" differ from agencies, but the office manager assures her that the work will be easy and familiar. She'll supposedly be done at around 3:30, leaving time for job hunting for better options in the afternoons. She celebrates by eating dinner at Appleby's—$11.95 plus tip for a burger and glass of wine.

Another skill Barbara had learned in Key West: be flexible with the jobs being offered that day. This time, she's managed to secure two jobs right from the start, which hopefully will prevent the kind of financial precariousness she experienced once the tourist season ended in Key West. Her optimism is further shown through her confidence that she'll have time to job hunt in the afternoons, and by her willingness to "splurge" on a dinner at Appleby's.

The next day Barbara wakes up early to be at the Woodcrest Residential Facility (also a made-up name) by 7:00am for her first day as a dietary aide. Her supervisor tells her about her rights and responsibilities. Today they'll be working in the locked Alzheimer's ward, which involves transferring food from the main kitchen to the ward kitchen and serving and cleaning up after the residents.

Having applied to every job she could find, now that she has one Barbara has to adapt to the needs of the workplace. Again, she'll have to learn a new skill set and learn to work with a new set of management probably with its own particular (and overbearing) style.

As a former waitress, Barbara finds this work relatively simple, rushing around pouring decaf-only coffee and taking "orders." The fact that it's an Alzheimer's ward means she doesn't have to worry about forgetting things, but she tries to remember the residents' names: Grace, who demands that her untouched cup be refilled, Letty, a diabetic who sneaks doughnuts from others' plates, and Ruthie, who pours orange juice all over her French toast.

Here, Barbara can draw on her previous experience in developing these new skills. As she had done at the Hearthside, she makes an effort to reduce the monotony and impersonality of the job by forming relationships with the customers, remembering specific details about each one of them.

Cleaning up is less pleasant, since a "dietary aide" ends up meaning a dishwasher—rinsing, presoaking, and stacking the dishes of the forty people at each meal, before bending down to the floor with the full rack of 15-20 pounds. Though Barbara is used to washing dishes at home, it's a struggle to make sure there's always a new rack ready as soon as the last one is done, all while keeping an eye on the residents.

Once again, the less visible elements of work tend to be the least appealing, as well as requiring physical strength and exertion. Barbara's title of "dietary aide" would hardly seem to suggest the need for such physical endurance and stamina.

Barbara chats with Pete, one of the cooks, during the midmorning break. She'd like him to be an ally, since she realizes that a dietary aide is dependent on a cook just like a waitress is. They sit in Pete's car smoking cigarettes. She tells him that her dad's last days were spent in an Alzheimer's facility, so it already feels familiar. Pete warns her about one coworkers backstabbing and their manager's strictness.

Barbara has also learned how helpful, as well as enjoyable, it can be to have fellow employees as friends. Pete helps Barbara get a handle on the social dynamics of the facility—she's seen how much they can differ from place to place.

Pete continues asking Barbara questions, and she feels awkwardly that Pete might be treating this as a date. He says that he's made far more at restaurants than he makes now, but it doesn't bother him, since he's gotten rich from gambling and investment (even though he's driving a rusty old car and his front teeth are in a sad state). He says he tried just staying home since he doesn't need to work, but he got stir-crazy from not being around a community. Barbara is somehow touched by this, the idea that the facility could be a true community.

Pete's stories are fantastical, but they also speak to the broader disjunction between economic classes, which can lead to wishful thinking and a longing to break out of one's lower economic position. At the same time, Pete's reasoning confirms for Barbara the importance of establishing human relationships in these kinds of jobs.


At lunch, Barbara is surprised to find that many residents seem to recognize her and are happy to see her. She starts thinking she'll become the star of the facility and compensate for her own father's more impersonal care—until she refills the milk class of a tiny old lady who immediately throws the entire glass at her, soaking her clothes.

Now it's Barbara's turn to concoct her own fanciful stories, a path that nevertheless doesn't last long—though she will often return, seemingly naturally, to a kind of white knight or savior complex she has toward her coworkers.

That night, Saturday, is Barbara's last at the Motel 6, and she decides to try to see what there is to do for fun with limited means. There is a marquee in front of the "Deliverance" church downtown advertising a "tent revival," and, as an atheist, Barbara is curious enough to drive over. About 60 of the 300 seats are filled, mainly with white "hillbilly" types, and a woman gives Barbara her own Bible. There's singing and preaching, from a man saying that the Bible's the only book you need to another attacking the "wicked" city for its low attendance at the revival. Barbara wonders what good an immortal soul would do for her Alzheimer's patients at the Woodcrest.

This is one of the few times that Barbara ventures out of her stated purpose of simply trying to equate income with expenses. Here she casts an anthropological eye on a religious tent revival, injecting some humor into the narration. Barbara clearly shows her cards here—she's an atheist, and is skeptical of the preacher's claim on spiritual knowledge and truth, especially when he seems mainly concerned about the bottom line.

Barbara thinks it would be nice if the preachers mentioned income inequality and Jesus's precocious socialism, but only the crucified Jesus seems to make an appearance here—she sneaks out.

Barbara is constantly thinking about her experiment, and manages to draw connections between the economic troubles of the poor and whatever she's experiencing.

On Sunday Barbara moves into the Blue Haven, though it's smaller than she remembered, with the toilet less than four feet from the kitchen table and the bed right next to the stove. But her anxiety starts to ebb, since she now has an address, two jobs, and a car—this time a Rent-a-Wreck. She is one of the only people in the community with a unit to herself: the others are mainly blue-collar couples with children, crowded three or four into an efficiency or one-bedroom. A grandmotherly type tells her that living in a motel can be hard at first, but she's been there for eleven years now.

Barbara had begun her stay in Portland with none of the three things she lists—a car, address, and job seem to be general markers of stability allowing her to become less anxious. However, the situations of the other people in the motel that Barbara surveys seem to challenge the inherent stability of just any living space, since the residents are often crowded into small rooms.

Barbara arrives at The Maids' office on Monday morning at 7:30, knowing little about the cleaning service besides that it has three hundred franchises nationwide. Her uniform will be kelly-green pants and a blinding yellow polo shirt. In the next day and a half of training, she learns about the code of conduct—no smoking, eating, drinking, or cursing in a house.

Barbara had accepted the job as one of the first she could get, and now once again must adapt to the specific skills, necessities, and social requirements (not to mention uniform) of this new job opportunity.

About 20 other employees arrive for the free breakfast provided by The Maids. The average age is the mid-twenties, and all but one is female. Barbara and the other new girl sit and wait while the teams are dispatched to the day's houses—one woman tells her that you aren't necessarily on the same houses every week or even the same team from day to day. Perhaps one of the advantages for the owners is the lack of relationships developed, she thinks, since the customers almost exclusively communicate with the office manager or the franchise owner, Ted.

Waiting for her orientation gives Barbara the chance to observe the (mainly) women heading out to work around her. Unlike at her previous jobs, no one stays in the same place or even with the same group each day, and she's already familiar with how management's suspicion and sense of distrust can hobble attempts at developing relationships with other coworkers.


It's difficult to see the advantage to the cleaner, since while independent cleaners can earn up to $15 an hour, and The Maids charges $25 per person-hour, the cleaners receive $6.65 per hour. The only advantage seems to be that you don't need a clientele or a car.

Just as Barbara had had to choose between convenience and affordability for a trailer in Key West, this same economic choice pops up again—it seems it's impossible to have both.

Barbara is led into a tiny room to watch a videotape of the company's method of dusting, bathrooms, kitchen, and vacuuming. Each is broken down into sections: where to begin vacuuming, how to disinfect surfaces, and where to polish or buff. Ted stops in sometimes, mentioning proudly that this was all figured out with a stopwatch. He warns that there's a danger in undersoaking the rags with cleaning fluids, which are less expensive than her time, and Barbara thinks it's good to know that the company considers *something* cheaper than her time.

While Ted is officially Barbara's boss at The Maids, the franchise has such a devotion to efficiency that the orientation is conducted completely by video, so the company can ensure that everyone is following the exact same method at no additional cost. This method seems to be one, once again, that prioritizes efficiency and low cost for the company (though not, Barbara thinks, for the employee).

The vacuuming video is the most disturbing, dealing with a vacuum that is meant to be strapped around one's back like a backpack. When strapped in, the video seems to say, the maid will *become* a vacuum cleaner. Barbara is exhausted by this video and by the sterile, impersonal model home and model maid.

The possible physical discomfort of such a task seems to be banished from the video, which considers maids as just another useful tool in the efficient, seamless cleaning of each house.

Barbara realizes that there is no water involved, unlike the methods taught to her by her mother, a compulsive housekeeper on a war against germs. The video never mentions germs: scrubbing is only for removing visible impurities, while wiping is for everything else. The cleaning, in fact, is entirely cosmetic, from giving toilet paper rolls a special fold to spraying the house with the signature air freshener.

This detail about the pure surface value of the cleaning serves to make Barbara—and the reader—recoil against the implications of a corporation's dogged pursuit of profits and efficiency, not only at the expense of employees' well-being but also of a job well done.

On her first day, Barbara realizes the video had been in slow motion—the team races to the car and from the car to the house. Her first team leader explains that only a certain number of minutes are allotted per house. After an hour, even dusting becomes like an aerobic exercise, but as soon as she's done she must report to the team leader to help someone else.

Barbara's team puts The Maids' emphasis on efficiency into practice. All the employees nevertheless seem intent on doing the job the best they can, even as this job, more than the others where Barbara's worked, seems especially physically grueling.

The promised thirty-minute lunch break turns out to be a five-minute pit stop at a convenience store. The older women eat sandwiches and fruit, while the younger ones tend to eat pizza or a small bag of chips. Barbara recalls a poster showing the number of calories burned per minute for each task—on average, in a seven-hour day, she notes, 2,100 extra calories are needed. Barbara admonishes Rosalie, a recent high school grad, for her lunch of a half bag of Doritos, but Rosalie responds that she had nothing else in her house and she doesn't have money with her. She admits that she gets dizzy sometimes.

Barbara's off-time experiences with her coworkers give her the opportunity to try to understand how people manage to live on such a small income. Here, it turns out, they don't really manage at all—even a basic mark of economic stability and survival like having enough to eat seems to elude some of these women. The younger ones, especially, seem to struggle more with figuring out how to fuel themselves on a small income.

Barbara doesn't want to ask straight out about her coworkers' economic situations, so she listens. Eventually she learns that everyone seems to live among extended families or house-mates—the oldest, Pauline, owns a home, but she sleeps on the sofa while her children and grandchildren sleep in the bedrooms. There are signs, though, of real difficulty: they argue about who will come up with the 50 cents for the toll and if they'll be quickly reimbursed by Ted; someone has a painfully impacted wisdom tooth and is frantically calling to try to find free dental care.

As Barbara has observed in her own lodgings at the Blue Haven Motel, housing only seems to work if people surrender the possibility of privacy and rely on, or extend help to, others in similar situations. Each dollar counts for the women working at The Maids, and the woman seeking healthcare further underlines how one thing that goes wrong can easily become an emergency.

On Barbara's first Friday, it's 95 degrees, and she's teamed with Rosalie and their leader, Maddy, who's sullen and brooding about her childcare issues: her boyfriend's sister watches her 18-month-old for $50 a week, already a stretch even though a real daycare could be $90. The first house to be cleaned is a 5-bathroom spread, a massive place that Barbara compares to a beached ocean liner. Maddy hopes that "Mrs. W." will give them lunch, but Mrs. W seems exasperated when the nanny, one of several other caretakers, brings them to her.

Barbara has already learned how much of the talk among employees at low-wage workplaces is about simply how to survive on such wages, especially when compounded by other needs like child care. These difficulties create an uncomfortable contrast with the sprawling wealth of the "Mrs. W." estate, and with the owner's lack of interest in them.

In this case, Barbara is grateful for The Maids' special system, since it means she only needs to move from left to right, room to room. She dusts around a whole shelf of books on pregnancy, breastfeeding, and raising children. As she Windexes and wipes the endless glass doors, she watches the construction guys outside drinking Gatorade—maids cannot drink while inside a house. She sweats constantly, unable to replenish fluids like in her regular, yuppie life. In the living room, she wonders if Mrs. W. will ever realize that all her amassed objects and expressions of individualism are, in another sense, just an obstacle between a thirsty person and a glass of water.

Mrs. W.'s worries about childcare have little to do with Maddy's. It's a 95-degree day, and Barbara finds that even the construction workers seem to have it better than she does, since they can drink whenever they'd like. Once again, Barbara contrasts the conspicuous consumption and materialism of Mrs. W.'s home not only with the financial situation of her cleaners but also with the demanding physical labor required to clean her home.

Next, Maddy assigns Barbara to clean the kitchen floor, following The Maids' corporate "hands-and-knees" approach. It's a selling point, even though the advantage is undermined by the fact that the maids are instructed to use barely any water. But the posture of submission seems to gratify the customers. She realizes at one point that Mrs. W. is staring at her—she wonders if she's about to be offered a glass of water, but Mrs. W. just wants to make sure that nothing is missed.

For Barbara, the method promoted by The Maids has far more to do with marketing rhetoric and selling points than with actually cleaning a home. This is exacerbated by the shame she is made to feel by having to kneel in a position of submission, watched over carefully by the homeowner who is both economically and literally "above" her.

At the end of the day, Barbara rushes home and congratulates herself on her first successful week, accomplished without a breakdown. Still, it turns out she often doesn't end work until 4:30 or 5:00, and, sweaty and soaked, there's no way she can go to other job interviews after work. Instead, she goes for a walk on the beach, and stops to listen to a group of Peruvian musicians, transfixed. She gives them a dollar after their song—that dollar is worth about 10 minutes of sweat.

Barbara had been overly optimistic about her ability to use her two existing jobs as a jumping-off point from which to seek better options: it turns out that much low-wage work is not at all conducive to long-term planning, merely because of the physical toil that goes into it, leaving her with little energy left to pursue other options.

Soon, though, Barbara starts to suffer from a skin disease. At first she thinks it's poison ivy from hunting around for a way in when customers forget to leave the door unlocked (which Ted blames on the maids, saying it "means something"), or it may be the cleaning fluids. She knows she probably shouldn't work since she looks like a leper, but Ted has no sympathy for illness or injury. He says it must be a latex allergy and sends her off. She breaks down and calls her real-life Key West dermatologist, who prescribes various creams, which set her back $30.

Barbara's rash gives her the chance to detail further examples of Ted's single-minded focus on the bottom line, even to the extent that he'll blame locked homes on the cleaners or make Barbara go out even while looking like a "leper." Here, she does resort to the advantages of her "real life," suggesting that the situation would have been far worse if she hadn't been able to do so.

Barbara, Rosalie, and Maddy fantasize one day in the car about full water immersion after cleaning a house with a pool and gazebo. They aren't even allowed to wash their hands in the houses after drying and buffing the sinks.

The total lack of water—both in The Maids cleaning process and throughout the real maids' days—suggests an environment of deprivation, especially offensive when contrasted with the decadent pool and gazebo.

Barbara has been proud of how she's kept up with women twenty or thirty years younger. Any bond they have is physical: everyone shares their medication and complains about their back pains and cramps. Lori and Pauline can't vacuum because of their backs, while Helen has a bum foot and Marge's arthritis makes scrubbing painful. It's a world of pain manage by Excedrin, Advil, and cigarettes, with alcohol on the weekend. Barbara wonders if the owners have any idea of the misery that goes into making their homes perfect, and if they'd care if they did. One owner, who actually offers her water, works part-time as a trainer and says she tells her clients to fire their cleaning lady if they really want to be fit. Barbara refrains from saying that this exercise is brutally repetitive and more likely to cause injury than strengthen muscles.

The physical pain suffered by the employees of The Maids testifies to the arduous nature of their labor. They do manage to forge bonds among each other thanks to this common affliction, but it's solidarity that certainly comes at a price—one only made more difficult by the fact that few of them can afford to take a day off or see a doctor for prescribed medications. Barbara's conversation with one owner makes clear the extent to which they live in two separate universes, in which "exercise" is either a luxury or a constant battle against pain.

The owner of another sprawling condo points out the marble walls of the shower stall, which she says have been "bleeding" onto the brass fixtures. Barbara wants to say that it's not her marble bleeding but rather the working class, which has enabled her comfortable life, that's bleeding. Of course, Barbara admits to herself that she is not a member of that class—she can work hour after hour because she has gotten decades of good medical care, a high-protein diet, and workouts in expensive gym. She has, however, never employed a cleaning service, finding the idea of such an asymmetrical relationship repugnant.

At some points, Barbara's continuous humor turns melodramatic, revealing her more militant social activist side. Of course, her experiment makes her experience particularly dramatic, since she is constantly able to contrast her former life with her current one, and realizes how financial comfort can build up over decades to give her enormous advantages. This perhaps makes her even more deeply conscious of the enormous gulf created between a cleaner and homeowner (a gulf that someone who has always been a low-wage worker may in some ways not notice as acutely because they've always been made to feel this way).

For instance, Barbara is shocked the first time she encounters a shit-stained toilet. There are several kinds of these stains, she explains, and while she wouldn't have wanted to know this, she is forced to figure out how to clean each kind. Pubic hair is another unsavory aspect of cleaning the homes of the elite. Owners can also spy, leaving tape recorders or video cameras: Ted encourages them to imagine that they're under constant surveillance. Owners also arrange to be home so that they can check up on them while they work.

These vivid and even repulsive details are given on purpose, so that the reader can understand just how much indignity goes into the job of a housecleaner. In addition to distasteful aspects of the job, cleaners are also subjected to an atmosphere of surveillance that is directly tied to mistrust and suspicion, which can easily make them feel like lower-class citizens.

Barbara isn't interested in decorating and lacks the vocabulary to describe in detail all the intricate furnishings of these houses. The books are mainly for show: real life seems to go on in the large-screen TV room. She is mainly offended by all the antique books bought in bulk and placed on end tables, not to read but for quaintness and "authenticity."

Countering the shame she's made to feel through her job, Barbara turns the cards and "spies" on the houses she cleans, painting a pretty damning portrait of the materialism and anti-intellectualism of the upper classes.

Around a quarter to a third of the houses seem middle-class rather than rich. However, once Barbara asks her team leader, Holly, if the next house is "wealthy," and Holly responds says that if they're paying to have their house cleaned, they're wealthy.

Wealth is relative: from Barbara's former-life perspective, there's a wide range in these houses, but there's also a thick line drawn between houses that can be cleaned and those that aren't.

In late September, Barbara starts being assigned to Holly's team day after day. This is a serious team, and conversation is restricted to the houses about to be cleaned. Holly is visibly ill. She is twenty-three and manages to feed herself, her husband, and an elderly relative on her salary, minus rent, or $30-50 per week (only a little more than what Barbara spends on herself). She weighs very little and only ever eats than tiny cracker sandwiches. Every afternoon in the car she starts food-fantasy conversations, asking others what they've eaten recently.

Barbara has seen first-hand the difficulties faced by her coworkers in trying to survive on their salary, but Holly's situation seems more dire than most. In fact, as we've learned, since there are no "secret economies" for the poor, no secret tricks that make it easier for the poor to get buy on their meager wages, something has to give, and in this case it's Holly's ability to eat, which she gives up so that the rest of her family can survive.

One day Holly admits that she's a little nauseous, but refuses to say any more. Barbara suggests Holly refrain from vacuuming, but Holly refuses. When Barbara finishes her task, she rushes into the kitchen to find Holly slumped over the counter. Holly admits she's probably pregnant, but she wants it to be a secret until she can inform Ted. Barbara can only talk Holly into eating one of her sports bars. Barbara also takes over the driving for the rest of the day. For the first time, Barbara feels she has a higher purpose than just meeting New England bourgeois standards. The next house has a Martha Stewart-like owner who insists that every decorative pot and pan hanging in the kitchen near the ceiling needs to be polished, which can only be done by kneeling on the kitchen counter and reaching up. As Barbara does so, a pan slips and comes crashing down into a fishbowl: fish fly and water soaks everything. Barbara's only punishment is seeing Holly's terrified face.

Barbara, as we've seen, has a bit of a savior complex, and this kicks in when Holly collapses at one of the houses. Barbara has become pretty disgusted with the job, or at least has very little respect for the people whose houses she cleans, and Holly's crisis gives her an opportunity to feel like her work has a larger meaning. Unfortunately, the exacting demands and standards of the homes they have to clean ends up complicating Barbara's mission. The book is full of minor climaxes like this one, in which tensions ratchet up to a finale that's somewhere between funny and horrifying. Here, the disastrous aspect is magnified by how deeply Holly takes to heart her work.

They take a cigarette break, and Barbara muses that she has to get over her "savior complex," her desire to save the people she is working with. She wonders if she wants to do this because she is sick of her insignificance. Barbara asks why so many owners seem hostile or contemptuous, and Holly says that the owners think the cleaners are stupid, that they mean nothing to them. At convenience stores, a maid's uniform seems to make even other employees look down on them. Barbara gets stares at supermarkets. She wonders if she's getting a small glimpse of what it would be like to be black.

This is the first time that Barbara explicitly acknowledges this savior complex of hers and tries to work out where it might come from. Earlier, Barbara has talked about the inability for customers to consider or care about low-wage workers serving them: here, she goes a step further, suggesting that there is an element of shame placed upon these workers not just by individuals but by society at large.

At the next house, the liquid around Barbara's toilet brush spills out on her foot. In normal life, she would take off the shoe and sock and throw them away, but here she can do nothing but work through it.

This detail is a microcosm of Barbara's livelihood in general—she must work through with only the resources she has.

Barbara also has problems of her own: money issues. She didn't get a check her first week, and learns that the first paycheck is withheld until she eventually leaves or quits, so that she doesn't fail to show up a second week. The rent for her first week at the Blue Haven was more expensive at first because the tourist season wasn't deemed completely over, and she had to spend extra money on kitchen supplies at Wal-Mart. Until the other checks arrive, she'll have to live even more leanly.

Barbara has calculated her income and expenses down to the last dollar—which can work, if barely, only if nothing goes wrong. Of course, a tiny margin of error means she's always on the verge of disaster. This precariousness is only aggravated by the withheld paycheck, another example of suspicious management.

Though help for the working poor exists, it takes determination and, ironically, resources to find it. Barbara calls the Prebles Street Resource Center one evening after work and learns that it closes at 3 p.m. (not practical for the working poor). She waits on hold for the help number listed and tells the operator that she is employed but needs some immediate food aid or cash assistance. The man asks her accusingly why she needs help if she's employed, and why she didn't check out the rents before moving, but finally gives her another number. After several more calls she reaches Gloria, who tells her to go to the food pantry in Biddeford the next day between nine and five—times that are also no good for a working person.

Here, Barbara attempts to navigate the resources available to the working poor—resources which she knows, intellectually, exist, but which she realizes function in a far more complicated and bureaucratic fashion. Within just a few minutes, she's made to feel ashamed for not looking for better rents, and comes to realize that these kinds of resources, while supposedly directed towards low-wage workers, in fact fail to take into account the schedule of these very workers.

So Gloria connects Barbara to Karen, who finally tells her she can pick up a food voucher at a Portland Shop-n-Save, and asks what she'd like for dinner. She can't have cash, and is limited to any two of a list including spaghetti noodles, baked beans, and hamburger—no fresh fruit or vegetables.

Again, the poor are looked at suspiciously—they aren't even trusted to buy food if they're just given cash. Barbara draws a connection between poverty and the inability to eat healthfully, despite society's disapproval of the obese poor. Nearly everywhere they turn the poor are faced with impossible Catch-22s.

After picking up the food, Barbara calculates that she's acquired $7.02 worth of food in 70 minutes of calling and driving, minus $2.80 for phone calls.

Less than five dollars (net) is hardly worth all the trouble, unless someone is truly desperate.

At the Woodcrest on weekends, Barbara tries to forget, like the residents, about the functioning people they used to be, and treat them as toddlers at a tea party. She makes friends with other cooks, nurses, and dietary maids, and enjoys the lack of supervisors and the greater autonomy.

Unlike her job at The Maids, this one lacks an overarching corporate philosophy and the suspicion and distrust that tends to accompany it; instead, Barbara can actually do her job as best she is able to.

One Saturday, though, Barbara arrives to find that the other dietary aide has failed to show up and she'll be the only one. A dishwasher is broken, and a set of keys she needs is missing. Barbara only remembers the day as a panicky blur, remembering the lesson learned at Jerry's about how to refrain from stopping and thinking.

Nevertheless, crises are never far from Barbara's line of vision, meaning that her experience at each shift can vary wildly depending on circumstances outside her control—she has to employ all her mental and physical energy just to get through the day.

After work Barbara visits the state park, and wonders what a few months with zero days off would do to a person without the kind of accolades and praise that come from writing, for instance. She already has tunnel vision: slights loom large, and mistakes aren't easily forgotten. She wakes up at night after the Woodcrest solo day convinced that Pete deliberately was trying to trip her up, until the next weekend he brings her breakfast as a treat and she realizes her theory was groundless.

Even though she's working seven days a week, Barbara's life is still precarious—and she finds that even her personality shifts due to constant labor without rest. The example of her paranoia about Pete is a comical one, but it reveals a broader truth about the harmful effects of constant work on someone's psyche.

Barbara starts her third week at The Maids committed to staying detached, like the others seem to do. One of the only forms of rebellion she's seen, in fact, is theft—at one meeting Ted says that there's been an "incident," and the perpetrator, whom the nearly 100-percent-reliable Accutrac test somehow failed to weed out, is no longer there.

Barbara's coworkers are perhaps more resigned to the daily grind and small, constant slights of the job, which are new to her. For Barbara, theft can be understood as a reaction to the struggle of the job.

As Barbara scrubs and Windexes, she tries to cobble together a philosophy of nonattachment, melding a socialist Jesus with a tale her friend had told of rich people paying to do menial chores at a Buddhist monastery in California. In this new fantasy, she is part of a mystic order performing hated tasks cheerfully rather than working for a maid service. She's realized, for instance, that the pay clock only starts at 8 a.m., even though they have to arrive at the office at 7:30, but this time she doesn't complain.

We already know Barbara is not religious, and here her "philosophy" is more intellectual than spiritual—really anything she can use to get through the day. Minor examples of unfairness are everywhere, including the extra, unpaid half hour, but here Barbara follows her coworker and chooses to resign herself rather than fight back.

Only a day later, Barbara's mood of detachment is shattered when Barbara cleans the home of an actual Buddhist, with a Buddha statue in the living room. As they leave in the usual rush, Holly trips and falls down and screams. She says something snapped, but she'll only consent to calling Ted from the next house, while Barbara begs her to go to the emergency room. At the next house Barbara tells Holly not to work, and as she listens to Holly talk to Ted, she feels the Zen detachment fade away. She grabs the phone and begins a diatribe to Ted about putting money above his employees' health, before hanging up on him. She tells Holly that she won't work if Holly won't sit down—she'll go on strike. But Holly ultimately wins out, continuing to work.

Barbara's nonattachment philosophy takes a comical turn as Buddhist spiritualism jars with the banal toil of housecleaning. Once again, crisis strikes, and it becomes increasingly clear that Holly is in no state to be cleaning houses—though she obviously relies on this work, which is evident because of how frantic she becomes at the possibility she won't be able to continue. Barbara's activist side kicks in here, as she yells at Ted everything she's thought about, and has put into this book, about the questionable morality of management.

On the ride back, Barbara imagines the rousing argument against human indignity she'll give when Ted fires her for insubordination. Marge, another cleaning lady in the car, says that she looks tired. Barbara won't be fired, Marge says brightly, but the rest of them need her—and she can't just leave Ted in the lurch. Barbara asks why they're all worrying about Ted—he can hire anyone to do the job. When Holly mentions the Accutrac test that they have to pass, Barbara says that that's bullshit—anyone can pass it. She knows this is insulting to Holly and her sense of professionalism, and she's gone against the no-cursing rule. Even now, however, Barbara isn't sure how she should have handled the situation.

Of course, Barbara can afford to mount a social protest against unfair management—unlike her coworkers, this isn't her real life. This scene in the car also helps to explain while the other women don't rebel or even complain about their difficult working conditions. Ted has managed to create almost a cult of loyalty around him; this is useful to him, since he can treat his employees less well, but it also has the effect of making them feel necessary and wanted.

Ted doesn't fire Barbara—he says he's sent Holly home, but that you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. A few days later Barbara is out with Holly, who hasn't forgiven her, and Ted calls to say that Barbara is to be sent back to the office to join another team. Ted picks her up to bring to her to the other team. As he drives her he tells her he's giving her a raise, and then says that he's not a bad guy and cares about his girls. He just wishes a few "malcontents" would stop complaining. Barbara knows she's supposed to name names. Instead she asks him if Holly will be paid for the day he sent her home. He says of course, chuckling in a forced way.

Here, Barbara gets a sense of Ted's tactics, in which he tries to win each employee over to his side, so that he can then keep tabs on the others. Barbara, of course, is not falling for these tactics. She takes quite a skeptical attitude to his professions of kindness and generosity, given that she knows he cares only about squeezing the highest profits as possible out of his "girls." At the same time, that Holly doesn't "want" to be helped only underlines how desperately she clings to any job.

Barbara wonders why anyone puts up with this job when there are so many others. But changing jobs means at least a week without a paycheck. There's also the appeal of Ted's approval and praise, which keeps many of the workers going. On Pauline's last day—she's sixty-seven and has been on the job longer than anyone—Ted makes no mention of her departure and doesn't wish her well privately. Barbara offers her a ride home that day, and Pauline talks mostly about how hurt she feels, and how Ted hasn't liked her since she stopped being able to vacuum.

Here Barbara plunges into the broader economic lessons of her time with The Maids—without first-hand experience, one could easily assume that a low-wage worker could simply quit and look for a more appealing job, which she now realizes is not very viable. In addition, management can keep an iron grip on the emotions of employees, who have often bought into the corporate rhetoric.

Barbara wonders if Ted's approval means so much because of the chronic deprivation and lack of approval for a job well done. No one will congratulate or support these women—they do an outcast's invisible work. Ted may be greedy, but he represents a better world, in which people wear civilian clothes to work and live in nice houses. Sometimes he'll even send a team to his own house to clean.

The invisibility of low-wage workers will gradually become a major theme for Barbara, who sees first-hand not only how such workers are looked down on, but also how they're often simply forgotten or ignored. In such cases it makes sense that Ted's approval assumes vast importance.

Low-wage work may have the general effect of making one feel like an outcast, Barbara thinks. On TV, nearly everyone makes $15 an hour or more, and all the shows are about middle-class professionals. It seems like nurses' aides and fast-food workers are anomalies. The poor are not a part of visible culture, even of religion, if the tent revival she attended in Key West was any indication.

The invisibility of the low-wage workforce is not just an issue of individual thoughtlessness or lack of empathy, Barbara shows. Even such a general cultural medium as television portrays a world in which the working poor simply don't take part, which can only alienate them even more.

On Barbara's last afternoon on the job, she tries to explain what she's been doing to the other workers. At first, no one listens, but then Lori latches onto the idea that Barbara has been "investigating," which Lori finds hilarious. Barbara asks how they feel about the owners, whose situations are so different from their own. Lori says she feels motivated—she'd like to get to where they are. Colleen, a single mother of two, says she doesn't want what they have, since she's a simple person. But she'd like to take a day off once in awhile and still be able to feed herself the next day.

Barbara had mentioned in the introduction how surprised she initially was at her coworkers' lack of surprise—after all, she hasn't been in hiding but rather has been accomplishing the same tasks that they have. Lori's and Colleen's responses portray the possible range of reactions to stark economic inequality, from envy and motivation to resignation at such a blatant contrast.

CHAPTER 3: SELLING IN MINNESOTA

From the sky Minnesota looks lush and picturesque. Barbara isn't sure why she chose Minneapolis as her next destination: she knows Minnesota is a pretty liberal state and generous to its welfare poor, and an Internet search has shown that there are jobs for $8 an hour and studio apartments for $400 or less. This time, she's looking for a more comfortable situation.

Barbara's internet research seems to show that Minneapolis' economic situation will be favorable to low-wage workers. Of course, if Maine's tight labor market is any indication, we readers should be suspicious of such optimism.

Barbara gets a $10 map of the Twin Cities at the airport and picks up her new Rent-A-Wreck. She's staying at the apartment of friends of friends while they're back east for a few days, in return for taking care of their cockatiel (despite her phobia of birds). It's a tiny one-bedroom with furnishings from the late seventies. It's pleasant and cozy, and Barbara has learned that part of low-wage working life is sharing small spaces with others—in this case, a cockatiel.

Barbara's short-term living situation is probably pretty authentic, given what she's learned about the necessarily crowded apartments and shared rooms occupied by many of her coworkers. The cockatiel tidily symbolizes the minor tribulations that stem from having to be flexible about living arrangements.

The next morning, Barbara starts her job search, this time looking for a change to retail or factory work. She fills out applications at the closest Wal-Marts and the Targets across town, when it strikes her that with her lack of experience, she'll have a better chance showing up in person. She calls one of the Wal-Marts and speaks to Roberta, who tells her to come into her store office. Roberta had six children before starting at Wal-Mart, so she's sympathetic to Barbara "re-entering the workforce." But after she takes Barbara's personality survey to the computer to score, she comes back with the news that three answers are in need of further discussion. Barbara had left wriggle room in some survey questions so it didn't look like she was faking out the test. It seems this was the wrong approach—it pays to be a full-blown suck-up.

Having gotten a relatively comprehensive introduction to the trials of low-wage labor in waitressing and housecleaning, Barbara is now ready for a change. Once again, she's required to fill out a survey or test, according to which there are supposedly no wrong answers. However, Roberta's desire for "further discussion" seems to challenge this claim. Barbara now can confirm that employers are looking for full-blown obedience and lack of independent thinking, and will be concerned if that doesn't seem to be the case with potential employees.

After going through the questionable answers, Roberta introduces Barbara to Sam Walton's personal philosophy—service, excellence, and something else Roberta can't remember. Barbara expresses wholehearted agreement. All that's left is to pass the **drug test**. Unfortunately, Barbara has had a slight "indiscretion" in the past few weeks involving marijuana, which she knows can linger in the body.

Barbara uses Roberta's inability to remember the third branch of Sam Walton's philosophy in order to subtly poke fun at it—if it's that important and memorable, you would think it would be difficult to forget it. The drug test crops up again as a way for management to control employees.

So Barbara goes back to the help-wanted ads, and heads to an interview for an assembly job across town. She gets overwhelmed in the afternoon urban traffic and doesn't reach the factory before 5. Lost, she pulls into a parking lot and sees a Menards housewares store (like a Home Depot) with a "Now Hiring" sign. Paul in the personnel office hands her the personality test: it seems rougher, asking questions about fistfights and whether dealing cocaine could ever not be a crime. Paul says she'd be good in plumbing at $8.50, as long as she passes a **drug test**.

At times like these, Barbara literally stumbles into job opportunities—another example of the strange disconnect between the tight labor market and the low wages she's being offered. This personality test seems oriented towards a different, probably rougher crowd, but it similarly attempts to trick out potential employees.

After a full day of job searching, Barbara is feeling worn down from having to lie throughout the personality tests—she wouldn't snitch on an employee and doesn't believe management rules by divine right. It also frustrates her that her ability to perform a job well and her engaging qualities can be trumped by smoking pot. That weekend she goes on a drug detox, informed by internet searches and assisted by $30 ingredients bought at GNC.

In addition to the fact that the questions asked can easily be psyched out, Barbara realizes that the very process has a more subtle consequence, sucking the energy out of potential employees and making it clear that there's no way they'll be able to get around employer requirements and surveillance.

On Saturday Barbara also goes through all the apartment agencies, and comes up only with 12-month leases and plenty of places where they don't answer the phone. The cockatiel, constantly squawking and pacing, prevents any kind of relaxation. On Sunday she goes to the home of an aunt of a friend from New York. Though Barbara has been concerned that it's artificial to move to a totally new place without housing (making the project of her book inauthentic), friends and family, or a job, it turns out that this woman did exactly that in the seventies, moving from New York to Florida.

Already, Barbara's internet searches prior to arriving don't seem to square with the reality on the ground—especially given that she can't afford a deposit on a 12-month lease, a common issue for people like those she'll be working with in Minneapolis. Barbara's visit to her friend's aunt gives her the opportunity to supplement her own tale with a "true" story of someone who did seem to manage to make it entirely on her own.

Caroline lives with her family in a three-bedroom for $825 a month, which doesn't seem bad to Barbara, though the block is full of drug dealers and the dining room ceiling leaks. But Caroline gets $9 an hour at a downtown hotel, and her husband makes $10 as a maintenance worker. Together, at $40,000 a year, they're official "middle class."

This anecdote recalls Barbara's question to Holly about which homeowners were "wealthy"—the notion of class can be relative depending on various factors. But Caroline's family also reveals that even "middle-class" families can be struggling.

Caroline is a real-life version of Barbara's experiment: she'd been working in New Jersey when she left a difficult home situation and decided to leave for Florida, where she'd heard the rents were lower. She had clothes, Greyhound tickets, and $1,600 in cash. The bus dropped her and her kids off outside Orlando, where they stayed at a low-priced hotel and found a church. People from church drove her to the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children, a federal food program) and to find a school and day-care. Soon she found a job cleaning hotel rooms for about $300 a week, which gave her backaches and meant her 12-year-old had to watch the baby all evening.

The beginning of Caroline's story seems to echo what Barbara did in Key West, including the relatively small amount saved up in cash. The theme of developing relationships in solidarity crops up again, here in the form of friendships developed at church. Though Caroline did manage to find a job, it came with major disadvantages including physical pain and the inability for her to see her children often.

Caroline was in constant stress and anxiety, in addition to pain from work. But she made a few friends, including Irene, a migrant farmworker whose boyfriend murdered a man who had raped her and was permanently in prison. Caroline took Irene in and she got a job, but after awhile Irene started drinking and carousing and finally left to live with a man. Caroline hasn't been able to find Irene since. Caroline also met her current husband in Florida, though the two suffered bouts of homelessness before ending up here.

Caroline's story forces the reader to recognize, once again, the acute physical and emotional distress that comes from low-wage labor. The instability inherent in it can lead to stories like that of Irene, who floats in and out of lives with her coworkers (just as Barbara has, though artificially so because of her experiment). Though Caroline's life is now relatively stable, it's clearly not without a great deal of struggle

When Barbara leaves to go, Caroline comes back with a family-sized container of homemade stew. Caroline truly did it all on her own, with children, Barbara realizes, while she herself is only a pretender.

Another reminder of how members of the working poor often only manage to make it due to kindness and solidarity shown by others.

On Monday, **drug test** day, Barbara goes to a chiropractor's office for the Wal-Mart test. She is sent into a regular public rest room with plastic containers to fill (she could easily have substituted someone else's pee with a vial). For Menards, she is sent to a suburban hospital, where, after forty minutes, a nurse arrives and tells her to go into a bathroom to wash her hands and pee while the nurse waits with her purse. She realizes how much drug testing limits workers' mobility, since each potential new job requires the application, interview, and drug test, requiring hours spent driving around and money spent on babysitters.

Barbara describes in a detailed fashion a process that, most likely, few middle- or upper-class readers (barring professional sports players) would have experienced. The major lessons she takes from the experience deal with how much drug testing allows employers to exert control over workers, not only in their mobility but in their privacy and personal lives, which are interrupted in order to apply for a job at all.

Barbara continues applying for jobs, since she doesn't yet know the **drug tests** results. She applies for one entry-level customer service job, involving a group interview conducted by Todd in a large room at "Mountain Air," an "environmental consulting firm" offering help to people with asthma and allergies. They will be sent out to these people in their own cars and make $1,650 if they complete 54 2-hour appointments in a month. Mountain Air is really looking for a self-disciplined, money-motivated, and positive attitude—nothing about healing the sick, Barbara realizes. Todd stresses that the job is a question of taking people who have a serious problem, though far less serious than they think it is, and leaving them happy with a "Filter Queen" appliance. Barbara completes a personal 3-minute interview, and says she wants the job to help people with asthma. Nothing about the bottom line—which perhaps is why, 2 hours later, she's told there's no job for her.

Like many of Barbara's interludes, this one both provides a bit of humor and serves to make a broader, relevant point about low-wage workers and the corporations for whom they work. Like The Maids, Mountain Air seems to embrace empty rhetoric and skills that, after considering them, don't make too much sense. From "environmental consulting" to selling a "Filter Queen" appliance, such vocabulary leaves Barbara confused as to what the job even entails, other than making money for Todd or those above him. Of course, Barbara intimates, there's no way a goal of "helping people with asthma" could possibly get her a job at such a place.

The apartment search, meanwhile, is increasingly desperate: the vacancy rate is apparently less than 1 percent, and even lower for "affordable" housing. Barbara is only now realizing how vast Minneapolis is, and that her two job possibilities are about 30 miles apart. There is one place, the Hopkins Park Plaza, which rents "affordable" apartments weekly or monthly. After days of trying to get in touch, she reaches Hildy, who says she might as well come apply (for $20), even if nothing's available. Turnover is always high, Hildy says, so Barbara decides to turn down a $144-per-week basement apartment without a kitchenette—which turns out to be a mistake.

For the first time, Barbara has to navigate her way through a city where there's an affordable housing crisis—even in places without such a crisis, she'd struggled to find a decent and affordable place to live. Barbara's various attempts to reach Hildy underline how much time and energy such a search can take (recall all the energy spent on trying to find a food pantry). It's difficult to tell without hindsight whether her decisions will turn out to be "mistakes."

The rental agents that Barbara does reach recommend finding a weekly motel until something opens up. But the lowest is the Hill View at $200 per week, and it's far outside the city, with no commercial establishments around. Another, Twin Lakes, is inside the city, but is $295. Everything looks gray and stained, but it's her best bet, and she takes it.

Once again, Barbara has to do her best to juggle competing concerns—affordability, safety, gas prices, and ability to commute to work, among other factors. Everything she looks at, she realizes, has its own disadvantages.

On the job front, though, Barbara is told to show up for orientation at Menards on Wednesday morning. A blonde in her forties explains the rules, and says that the tools they're required to wear on their belts will be deducted from their paycheck. They're handed vests and IDs. Barbara has to ask if this means she's hired, since there's been no offer made, but it seems she is.

Though she hasn't been told she's been hired, Barbara is already being treated like an employee—vest, badge, rules and regulations and all. There's no intermediate point between applying and being hired, as Barbara will realize.

Barbara meets her supervisor in plumbing, Steve, who's nice, though she realizes the shelves contain no items she can name. But she learns she'll be starting Friday and will be making an incredible $10 an hour.

Barbara is already aware that even the lowest wage labor requires certain specific skills—that she's been hired speaks more to the fact that there aren't that many available workers rather than to her skillset.

Though Barbara doesn't need the Wal-Mart job now, Roberta calls her telling her to come the next day for orientation. When Roberta says the wage is $7 an hour (only after Barbara asks specifically), she decides she certainly won't take the job, but will attend orientation for the sake of inquiry.

Again, Barbara is invited to orientation without explicitly being told that she's hired, nor being told her wages (until she asks). This evasiveness speaks to one way employers hope to keep wages low, by keeping them out of the conversation until its too late and relying on potential employees' discomfort with conflict or asking direct questions.

The Wal-Mart orientation, which Barbara believes is unrivaled in grandeur and intimidation, is supposed to take 8 hours. They begin with a video on the history and philosophy of Wal-Mart, including an almost cult-like legend about Sam Walton and Wal-Mart's transformation from a five-and-dime into the nation's largest private employer.

Once again, Barbara goes through an orientation in which the corporation at large, rather than middle management, instructs employees in how best to fulfill its own policies and philosophy, complete with an origin myth of the Waltons.

Sam is shown saying that the best ideas come from the employees or "associates," like having a "people greeter" welcoming each customer upon entering the store. The associates are encouraged to think of managers as "servant leaders," serving both them and the customers. But the music turns ominous as the video warns of problems with "associate honesty," like thefts by cashiers.

Barbara writes all these phrases between quotation marks herself, showing just how skeptically she regards the special vocabulary and rhetoric employed by management. For her, such language is no more than muddying or hiding the truth.

Another video talks about the feeling of family for which Wal-Mart is so well known, meaning that there is no place for a union—in fact, it says, unions have been targeting Wal-Mart for years to greedily collect dues money. Employees could lose their voice to the union organizers and even their wages and benefits would be put at risk, the video warns.

Barbara makes it clear here that the videos seek to bias employees against unions before they even begin working: unions sometimes serve as a tool for employees to demand higher wages, so the dire warnings make sense for management.

Next are the rules against jewelry and blue jeans, and especially against "time theft"—doing anything other than working during company time (even as the employees' time doesn't seem to count, since during orientation they are often left for many minutes at a time in the small training room).

The warnings begin to accumulate, and by contrasting the time wasted in the orientation with the absurd-sounding "time theft," Barbara shows how little Wal-Mart seems to trust or care about its employees.


Barbara drinks a caffeinated coffee—rare for her—and finds herself wired for the next steps: creating name cards for themselves, participating in Computer-Based Learning on topics like what to do if pools of human blood should appear on the sales floor.

The narration turns almost surrealist, as it's difficult to tell whether Barbara's overwhelmed state comes from the caffeine or from the ridiculous tasks.

That night is a sleepless one. Budgie the cockatiel has gone haywire and refuses to return to his cage. Small things have been going wrong: Barbara had to spend $11 to replace her watch battery, three wash cycles ($3.75) to get out an ink stain on her khakis, and pay $20 for the belt she needed for Menards. She's still jittery from the caffeine, even though she's due at Menards at 12.

When you're living off close to minimum wage, small expenses and unforeseen costs can quickly add up. For Barbara, caffeine exacerbates this stress, but here caffeine also stands in for the constant stress and anxiety many low-wage workers feel when anything minor goes wrong.

Barbara now realizes that she's employed at both places, but the endless orientation at Wal-Marts has done some work on her, and she can't imagine mastering plumbing projects when she's so sleep-deprived. She calls Paul, who says she'd be working from noon to eleven, and that $10 an hour can't be right—he'll have to check. Now Barbara is unnerved. She tells Paul she can't start. It's all, she admits to herself, because of the coffee mistake, since she's now too exhausted to work for 11 hours in a row.

In a normal, low-stress state, Barbara was able to coolly compare the advantages and disadvantages of the jobs at Menards and Wal-Mart, but now, the physical stress she's dealt with makes her act irrationally, making decisions based on the moment rather than on what makes economic sense. Barbara shows how easily this can happen to any low-wage worker.


Barbara wonders why she hadn't bargained with Roberta about the wages. She realizes that employers are clever with their hiring process: one moves from application to orientation without ever meeting the potential employer as a free agent able to bargain. Even in a tight labor market like Minneapolis, the potential employee is made to feel like a supplicant.

Barbara had thought that economic laws of supply and demand would work in her favor in Minneapolis, but now she learns that employers have various tricks to pay as little as they can—and to make employees feel like they're not worth a better option.

On Saturday, Barbara packs up and heads to the Twin Lakes, where she finds that the room she'd requested is now taken. She calls the Clearview Inn, another rental place, which is $245 per week and closer to the Wal-Mart. That price is still higher than her aftertax weekly pay, but she's confident she'll get a room from Hildy next week, and the weekend job at a supermarket that she applied to.

Once again, Barbara's well-thought-out plans are stymied by unforeseen events, meaning that she's forced, again, to recalculate her budget. The fact that her new rent alone is higher than her income doesn't bode well—at the very least it means she'll be playing catch-up for the next few weeks.

The Clearview Inn may well be the worst motel in the country—not an easy feat. There's a stench of mold when the wife of the young East Indian owner shows Barbara in. She switches to another room with a bed, chair, drawers, and a TV fastened to the wall, with a single overhead bulb. There's no AC or fan and no bolt on the door. She can see through the other motel windows to rooms with a woman with a baby, two bunches of teenagers, and various single men.

In her attempt to balance affordability and proximity to work, Barbara has had to give up cleanliness—it seems that it's impossible to have all three at her budget. If her view is any indication, the working poor in Minneapolis are just as likely to have to live in close quarters in less-than-ideal apartments in order to make things work.

Without a bolt, shades, or screens, Barbara feels vulnerable and is afraid to sleep. She dozes on and off, realizing at one point in the night that poor women really do have more to fear than women who live in houses with double locks, dogs, and husbands.

Another, less mentioned aspect of low-wage working life is the likelihood of a lack of safe living conditions, which is only exacerbated by issues faced by women.

That Monday, Barbara arrives to Wal-Mart and is directed to ladies' wear. Ellie, a manager, sets her to "zone" the summer dresses, or group them by color, design, and size. She helps Melissa, also new on the job, to consolidate certain Kathie Lee dresses so that the other silky ones can be prominently displayed in the "image" area.

Once again, Barbara is faced with new expectations and a new vocabulary to master, from "zone" to "image" when referring to ladies' wear—skills that the corporate orientation was less interested in cultivating than it was in explaining the rules.

Their job turns out to be keeping the ladies' wear area "shoppable." Instead of asking if customers need help, they're meant to put away the "returns" and the items scattered and dropped by customers. For the first few days, Barbara struggles to memorize the one thousand-square-foot layout, from the "woman" sizes through the Kathie Lee and teen-oriented Jordache collections. There are dozens of each kind of item, and the layout suddenly changes every few days.

As with her job at The Maids, Barbara's position here seems less oriented to the customers' needs (an actually clean house, help with finding something) and more to maximized efficiency. Her struggle to memorize everything is another reminder that "unskilled" labor is anything but.

Barbara feels resentful and somewhat contemptuous the first few days: nothing's very urgent, and no one will go hungry or be hurt if she makes a mistake. Wal-Mart mandates that all employees in this section be called "ladies," and bars them from raising their voices or swearing, which she also finds grating.

Barbara had gotten through the day at her other jobs by attempting to feel needed or significant (even though this was against the companies' best attempts), but here it's difficult to even pretend to do so.

At Wal-Mart, customers shop with shopping carts filled to the brim, often leaving about 90 percent rejected. Barbara and Melissa measure their workload in "carts." It takes her 45 minutes to return the rejected contents from a cart her first week, which she eventually gets down to 30. There's minimal human interaction, though sometimes Melissa and Barbara try to make up a task they can do together.

By describing her daily tasks down to the number of minutes it takes to clear a cart, Barbara gives the reader some insight into the monotony of the job. She and Melissa attempt to deal with this monotony by working together when they can, though the tasks are clearly not set up to facilitate relationships.

Barbara likes Ellie, who's polite and demure, though she doesn't like the assistant manager, Howard, who spends ten minutes taking attendance at the first meeting. He admonishes associates for loitering and talking to each other and for committing "time theft."

Howard seems like another one of those managers who've crossed to the "other side," obsessed with serving the corporation rather than representing the employees.

When Barbara arrives at the Clearview, the sewage has been backed up in her room and is all over the floor. She's moved into another room, which has a screen in tatters and, again, no fan. She only has a few possessions with her, the most expensive of which is her laptop, but with temperatures in the nineties she hesitates to leave it in the car trunk during the day.

As Barbara deals with monotony at work, her home life has its own difficulties, as even a motel beyond her budget fails to satisfy basic needs of cleanliness and safety. A small issue like where to leave her laptop grows complicated as a result.

That afternoon at Wal-Mart, Alyssa, another new orientee, had asked whether a clearanced $7 polo shirt might fall further. Barbara hadn't recalled that polos, not t-shirts, are required for employees, but at $7 an hour a $7 polo shirt is beyond her budget.

Another irony of low-wage work: Wal-Mart requires a uniform that its employees can't afford based on the salary that the company itself pays them.

That evening, Barbara scopes out the low-priced food options in Clearview—only a Chinese buffet or Kentucky Fried Chicken. She chooses the latter and eats in front of the TV, though it's tricky without a table, and wonders why the contestants on *Survivor* would ever volunteer for an artificially daunting task—before remembering her own situation.

Another example of how both price and proximity make it far easier for low-wage workers to eat fast food rather than venture out to distant produce markets. Of course, as the humorous Survivor *scene reminds us, Barbara is only a visitor to this world.*

Barbara notices that there's only one bed for the two African American men who live next door—she can see everything, and notices that they take turns sleeping in the bed and in the van outside. It seems that Clearview is full of working people who just don't have the capital for a regular apartment. She wakes up at night to hear a woman singing sadly against the sound of trucks on the highway.

The mention of a mournful song against the sound of trucks seems straight out of a movie, but Barbara uses it to make a point about the general atmosphere of quiet desperation that pervades a place like Clearview.

The next morning, Barbara buys hard-boiled eggs at a convenience store and takes out the trash. The owner's wife does clean the rooms, but she rarely remembers more than the bare basics. Barbara pictures the wife as a product of an arranged marriage and a move from her native village to Clearview, Minnesota, with a husband who may not even speak her language.

Barbara has been experiencing low-wage working life as an English-speaking American. Here she tries to imagine a different kind of struggle — in addition to economic difficulties, the need to adjust to a vastly different culture and language.

The next morning, Barbara tries to spruce herself up: she doesn't want to look homeless, though she essentially is. She's been stressed and getting stomachaches, so she hasn't been eating lunch – not ideal in a job where she's always on her feet.

Barbara attempts to cling to her dignity by looking presentable. Even though she's no longer vigorously scrubbing floors, much of low-wage labor is physically exhausting.

That day, though, Barbara arrives with bounce in her step to Wal-Mart, trying to think positively. She'd told Melissa she was living on fast food at a hotel, so Melissa has brought her a sandwich for lunch. Barbara is overwhelmed by this generosity, which counteracts the severe, penny-pinching corporate philosophy.

Barbara has often found that fellow workers who understand her financial situation have provided help and comfort—and that this solidarity could not be more different than the empty corporate rhetoric about company "families."

In Barbara's second week, her shift changes from 10-6 to 2-11, so an extra half hour and a dinner break. Her two 15-minute breaks are now vital, and she tries to juggle simultaneous needs of drinking, getting outside, and sitting down, especially when heading to the Radio Grill for an iced tea could waste four precious minutes. The post-Memorial Day weekend lull has ended, so there are always at least a dozen shoppers in ladies', and whole families in the evening.

One previously unexamined element of low-wage labor is the uncertainty of shift hours—companies can easily change an employee's shift from day to night or weekday to weekend, which complicates the ability to get a second job or ensure day care. Such sudden changes show how little the employer cares about its employees and just how much control the employer has over the employees' lives.

For the first half of the shift, Barbara manages to be helpful and cheery. But at 6 or 7, she starts to detest the shoppers—the toddlers who pull down everything in reach, the obese Caucasians—and consider them merely an interruption from how things should be, with every piece of clothing unsold and in its place.

Like at Jerry's, Barbara starts to become susceptible to the pressures and stress of the job, making her increasingly misanthropic—though, tellingly, no less likely to want to do a good job.

One evening, Barbara is exhausted when she returns from her last break to find a new employee folding T-shirts in one of "her" areas. The woman says Barbara has been putting certain T-shirts away in the wrong place. She chides Barbara not to forget to check the ten-digit UPC numbers. Barbara snaps back at her, saying their time is better spent putting things away from the carts. The woman says she only folds—she's too petite to reach the upper racks, which gives Barbara malicious glee. She worries that she's growing into a meaner, bitchier person. "Barb," which is on her ID tag and what she was called as a child, isn't Barbara. She wonders if this is who she would have become without her father's luck and hard work.

Throughout this scene, Barbara portrays her coworker as "the woman," or just "she," underlining Barbara's point about how the stress of the job makes her unwilling to see someone else as another human being, rather than as an interruption of the tasks she has to complete. It's interesting that this worrisome result of unpleasant labor seems to coexist with the solidarity often shown among coworkers, as when Melissa brings Barbara a sandwich, for instance.

The day Barbara moves to the Hopkins Park Plaza, there's a new woman there, who says Barbara misunderstood and the room won't be available until next week. Barbara is dismayed. But she knows that at $179 a week, even Hopkins Park would be too expensive without a second job. She's applied for a weekend job at the Rainbow supermarket for $8 an hour. With both jobs, she'd make about $320 a week after taxes, so that rent will be 55 percent of her income, or closer to "affordable." But then, Rainbow decides they need her five days a week, not just weekends, and Howard schedules a different day off for her every week.

Barbara's frantic calculations show just how little wiggle room she's left with when trying to reconcile income with expenses. Economists actually say that rent should be around 30 percent of income, but Barbara is obviously far from being able to follow ideal economic advice. This is also another example of how companies' power over employees can complicate their lives, as available and required shifts can quickly change.

In the long run, Barbara knows things will work out if she devotes her mornings to job hunting while waiting for a Hopkins Park opening or an apartment at $400 a month. But by then she'll really be broke. The YWCA refers her to Budget Lodging, which only has dorm beds for $19 a night. She's relieved to rule that out since it's on the other side of Minneapolis.

The problem with waiting for things to work on in the long run is that many low-wage workers simply can't save enough to wait out a difficult period, forced to resort even to the idea of staying in dorm beds.

Barbara calls Caroline for any insights, and Caroline invites Barbara to move in with her family. Though Barbara refuses, she's rejuvenated by the sense that she's not entirely alone. The Clearview now wants $55 a night for further nights, but the Comfort Inn has a room available for $49.95 a night. She reserves but feels defeated, though less so when she sees a front-page newspaper headline saying "Apartment rents skyrocket," while vacancy rates remain low. Prosperity, ironically, is increasing upward pressure on rents and further hurting low-wage workers.

Caroline's offer is another reminder of solidarity, especially since Barbara knows Caroline has gone through similar periods herself. Here, Barbara is able to tie her own apartment hunt into broader social and economic trends in Minneapolis, in which economic growth has proved unable to raise standard of living for its lowest-wage citizens.

When Barbara moves into the Comfort Inn, she thinks it'll only be for a night or two, but this turns out to be her moment of final defeat. In three weeks she's spent over $500 and discovers that she has earned only $42 from Wal-Mart for orientation. They've withheld her first week's pay, and when they do pay her it will come too late.

Barbara had decided to stay for a month at each place, but it doesn't take a full month for her to realize that her attempt to equate income with expenses in Minneapolis is doomed—a failure caused mainly by rent issues but exacerbated by Wal-Mart's payment policy.

Though Barbara never finds an apartment, her last attempt is to call the United Way of Minneapolis, through which she finally reaches the Community Emergency Assistance Program. A woman there suggests she moves into a homeless shelter to save up for a rent and deposit, and sends her to another office to apply for a housing subsidy. But there, she finds only an out-of-date list of affordable apartments.

Housing aid, like the food aid options in Portland, Maine, turns out to be far less helpful than Barbara might have hoped. The suggestion of moving into a shelter is extreme and seems hardly sustainable as a means of helping people move up out of poverty.

Back at the first office, the woman says she'll find some kind of emergency food aid: a bar of soap, lots of candy and cookies, and a one-pound can of ham. The woman mixes Barbara up several times with someone else who worked at Wal-Mart who came in a few days ago. Barbara had already realized that many of her coworkers are poor, but now knows that some of them are residents of shelters.

Once again, food aid for the poor is neither convenient (she has no fridge or freezer to put the ham) nor healthy. The fact that more than one employee of Wal-Mart has relied on emergency aid within the space of a few days is a damning indictment of the low wages paid.

Now, at the Comfort Inn, Barbara lives surreally in a business traveler's room before going out to her shabby "real" life. But she sleeps better, and improves from day to day at Wal-Mart. On one Saturday, a heavier shopping day, she arrives to clothes tossed inches deep on the floor, but reaches a kind of flow state in which all her tasks seem to complete themselves. She realizes, while picking things up, that what she does here is what most mothers do at home, picking up the toys and spills—so here the mothers get to behave like small children. She suggests her theory to her coworker Isabelle: that rates of child abuse would soar without them around to give mothers this break, and they should be getting paid like therapists as a result, and Isabelle just laughs.

The surrealism Barbara mentions stems from something she's already learned—that the working poor are often forced into wildly inefficient living situations simply because they're unable to save up enough to actually save money. As usual, she's able to draw some kind of humor from her surroundings and current work situation, here trying to make her coworker laugh with her comment about preventing abuse. But her thought is also a reminder that the people who shop at Wal-Mart are sometimes taking a brief respite from their own home and work struggles.

Barbara has to wonder why anyone puts up with the wages they're paid. Most of her fellow workers have other jobs or partners, but still, there's no signs of complaining or resentment. Maybe it's what happens when **drug tests** and personality "surveys" create a uniformly servile workplace, she thinks. But Wal-Mart is also a world within itself, a super-sized corporate entity directed from afar and against any form of local initiative.

Here Barbara ventures two hypotheses on a question she'll return to in the Evaluation chapter: if low wages like those Wal-Mart pays are so insufficient, why don't workers demand higher wages – especially in a tight labor market? Here, her hypotheses deal mainly with the success of corporate rhetoric.

Barbara asks Isabelle how she can afford to live on $7 an hour, and she says she lives with her grown daughter, who also works. She also now gets paid $7.75 an hour after two years, and tells Barbara to be patient. Melissa says she made twice as much when she was a waitress, but that place closed down. Barbara understands Melissa's unwillingness to start up again searching for another job, with the applications, interviews, and **drug tests**.

Isabelle's living situation seems to confirm Barbara's sense that extended families or artificial families are the only ways people can find housing stability. Melissa's experience, meanwhile, helps Barbara understand the difficulty of simply changing jobs to get a better salary – it's more complicated than that.

A few days later, Melissa is assigned to bras, a new section for her. She confides to Barbara that she doesn't like taking too long with a new task and wasting the company's money. Barbara can't imagine why Melissa worries about the Waltons' wasted labor.

Melissa's concern is, to Barbara, an example of how companies brainwash employees so that they feel both needed, but also unworthy enough that they can "waste" the company's time.

That day, Alyssa returns to check on the clearanced $7 polo and finds a stain on it. She is trying to negotiate a further reduction in the cost with the fitting room lady when Howard appears and says there are no employee discounts on clearance items. Barbara says to Alyssa later that it can't be right when Wal-Mart employees can't afford to buy a clearanced Wal-Mart shirt.

Barbara's comment to Alyssa makes it clear what she thinks about the wages Wal-Mart pays its employees, as well as its general treatment of people who work there—again, it's ironic that Alyssa can't afford to buy even a mandated uniform at the store.

At an employee meeting, Barbara is listening to another associate complain about how bad a deal the company health insurance is, when Barbara realizes they need a union. She corners other employees outside at cigarette breaks, and finds that no one gets paid overtime, and the health insurance is considered not worth paying for. A twenty-something named Stan is eager to talk to her about wages: he originally wanted to work while studying at a two-year technical school, but work cut into studying and he had to drop out. Another woman, Marlene, says that Wal-Mart would just rather keep hiring new people than treat the ones it has well—it's constantly bringing new people in for orientation.

Barbara's realization is probably not going to lead to union recognition for Wal-Mart employees: in terms of the book's plot, it allows her to learn more about the plight of her fellow workers by bonding around their equally low wages and lack of benefits like overtime and reasonable health insurance. She sees the results first-hand: Stan is unable to continue his education, for example, and Marlene feels insecure in her job even though there's a tight labor market which means there should be options for each worker.

Though Barbara thinks any union could help somewhat, she doesn't believe that unions are a cure-all. She really just wants to puncture the fantasy of the Wal-Mart "family," with the rhetoric of "servant leaders" and "guests." She's also discovering how monotonous a lot of low-wage work can be, which doesn't apply as much to waitressing or housecleaning. Instead there are just full carts, then empty ones. She looks at her gray, cranky coworkers and wonders how soon she would become like them.

Here Barbara admits that her push for unionization doesn't mean that she thinks the knotty problems she's uncovered could be undone simply through this one solution. However, unions do provide an opportunity to counter prevailing corporate rhetoric with another kind of rhetoric – and they'd also give workers a concrete means of fighting for better wages and benefits.

However, then something does happen: 1,450 unionized hotel workers strike at nine local hotels. That day, Barbara is supposed to call two lesser-priced motels as possible options for her to move to from the Comfort Inn, but has left the phone numbers in her car and wonders if she can get away with "time theft" by running to her car. But then Howard tells her she's behind on her Computer-Based Learning and tells her to get back to the computer area. She heads that way, then sneaks outside to her car, at one point having to dodge into shoes to avoid Howard. But neither of the motels has an opening – her Wal-Mart career is about to end abruptly.

This scene reveals the absurdity of Wal-Mart's rules against "time theft," as Barbara describes in detail her attempt to reach the car, which sounds like she was participating in a bank heist. Of course, we're reminded at the end of the scene that this has been, to an extent, an act – one which is about to end now that Barbara knows for certain that she won't be able to equal expenses to income for her time in Minneapolis.

That evening, Barbara tells Melissa she'll be quitting soon, and Melissa says she might do so too—Barbara knows Melissa might be saying this since it's so much more pleasant to work with someone you like. She tells Melissa about the book, and Melissa just nods and says she hopes she hasn't said too many negative things about Wal-Mart. Melissa also says she's been thinking that $7 an hour isn't nearly enough for how hard we work, and she's going to apply for a plastics factory where she can hopefully get $9.

Like many of Barbara's previous coworkers, Melissa is nonchalant about Barbara's big reveal – again, it's not as if Barbara hasn't been doing the work, just like her. Melissa still seems torn between her natural loyalty to the corporation and a growing sense that there's a disconnect between wages paid and the physical and emotional toll of the labor.

At Barbara's last break, she and one other woman are watching TV in the break room when the local news turns to the hotel strike. A senator is shaking hands with the son of a picketer and says he should be proud of his father. The other woman jumps up and waves her fist. She ends up telling Barbara about her daughter, her long hours, and her inability to save. Barbara says she still thinks they could have done something together if she could have afforded to work at Wal-Mart longer.

Barbara's last job ends on a hopeful note, as it seems that, at the very least, some of her Wal-Mart coworkers increasingly have some awareness of the unfair playing field, even if this knowledge isn't translated into action. The last sentence has Barbara ironically noting that, because of rent troubles, she literally cannot afford to continue working at Wal-Mart.

EVALUATION

Though one might think someone who has a Ph.D. could easily hold down a low-wage job, the first thing Barbara learned is that no job is "unskilled," and each required concentration and new terms, tools, and skills. In this world, she was only average.

We've seen this notion repeated again and again, as Barbara seeks to show a middle- or upper-class reader the complexities of low-wage labor.

In addition, Barbara notes, each job has its own hierarchy, customs, and standards, that required her to figure out who was in charge and who was good to work with. She also had to make sure she was fast and thorough, but not so fast and thorough that she made life difficult for the other workers. They knew that there are very few rewards for heroic performance.

Social relationships have been a key element of Barbara's work, even when camaraderie between coworkers is discouraged. Along with that comes a need for social adeptness, another skill a reader might not think would always apply to such labor.

All Barbara's jobs were physically demanding, even physically damaging, in the long-term, and she feels proud of having been able to manage her fatigue without collapsing or taking time off. She also knows she usually displayed punctuality, cheerfulness, and obedience, all traits that job-training programs encourage in post-welfare job candidates. She gives herself a B or B+ for her performance as a worker.

Throughout the book, Barbara has chronicled in detail just how much brutal physical labor is required in jobs like the ones she took: "work" in this world takes on its most basic definition of physical exertion, in addition to the various other qualities required.

In our society, it's assumed that a job is the way out of poverty and welfare recipients just need to get one in order to stay on their feet. To Barbara, her experience proves this is not the case. She spent no money on flashy clothes or going out and ate chopped meat, beans, and noodles, or fast food at $9 a day.

Barbara seeks to challenge the stereotype of the poor as lazy or spoiled, wasting their money on alcohol or other non-staples. The poor are poor, she argues, because once you are poor there is essentially no escape from it. The system is stacked against the poor.

However, in Key West, Barbara earned $1,039 in one month and spent $517 on food, gas, toiletries, laundry, phone, and utilities. She could have been able to pay the rent if she had stayed in her $500 efficiency with $22 left over (though sooner or later, she would have had to spend something on medical and dental care). But by moving to the trailer park in order to take a second job, she had to pay $625. She could have bought a used bike instead of using the car, but she still would have needed two jobs—and she learned she could not sustain two physically demanding jobs.

Here Barbara delves into line-by-line calculations of the economic realities of her experiment. At the start she'd noted that she could simply add up income and expenses from a desk, but now the reader can recall specific moments and choices that led to Barbara's struggles to pay the bills. In Key West, there was no ideal situation: even having a bike wouldn't have solved her financial troubles.

Barbara was most successful in Portland, though only from working seven days a week. She earned $300 a week after taxes and paid just $480 a month in rent. But if she had stayed until summer, the Blue Haven's summer rent would have kicked in. And she's not sure she could have kept up the 7-day-a-week regimen.

Barbara's success in Portland, she shows, stems less from her ability to find a stable living situation than from the vagaries of living in a tourist destination—both an advantage and disadvantage for her income bracket.

In Minneapolis, the only way Barbara can imagine having succeeded is if she had found a $400 a month apartment or made $440 a week after taxes at Menards (though she's not sure she could have stayed on her feet eleven hours a day). She knows she made mistakes—she should have stayed in the dormitory bed, worked somewhere better-paying than Wal-Mart, and not lived in motels for $200-300 a week. But she realizes it's wrong when a single person can barely support herself while working and owning a car.

Barbara has to introduce a lot of speculation in order to imagine how things could have worked out in Minneapolis. Her point is that low-income workers, like anyone else, are held to higher standards: they cannot make a single mistake, as she did, merely in order to survive off their income, and even while enjoying advantages like those she had.

Rents are too high and wages too low, Barbara concludes. With the rising numbers of the wealthy, the poor have been forced into more expensive and distant housing—even as the poor often have to work near the rich in service and retail jobs.

We've seen through the book how the poor are simultaneously vital and invisible, necessary for the well-being of the wealthy and nevertheless treated far worse.

The official poverty rate has remained low for the past several years, but only, Barbara argues, because the poverty level is calculated based on the cost of food. But food has remained relatively inflation-proof, while rent has skyrocketed (meaning that if the poverty rate were linked to the cost of housing, it would be much higher). The public sector, meanwhile, has retreated, as public housing spending has fallen since the 1980s.

Though Barbara did attempt to find food aid, her main problem with food was trying to eat cheaply and healthfully. The major issue in terms of expenses, she notes, is the rent — in each city she lived, it was searching for affordable housing that caused the most anxiety and, in several cases, forced her to call it quits.

While rents are sensitive to market forces, wages aren't. Every city Barbara worked in was experiencing a "labor shortage," yet wages at the low end of the labor market remained flat. Wages did rise, Barbara learned from various economists, between 1996 to 1999—however, they have not been able to bring low-wage workers up to the relative amounts they were earning in 1973. Barbara argues that employers resist wage increases however they possibly can. She recalls how Ted once griped to her about not being able to find enough workers. When she asked why he didn't just raise wages, he seemed surprised, saying he offered "mothers' hours," as if to say that no one could complain about wages with such a benefit. Many employers, Barbara has learned, will offer anything from free meals to subsidized transportation rather than raise wages, since these can be taken away more easily when the market changes.

Here, Barbara dives into the research in order to find an explanation for a phenomenon she's experienced first hand —the fact that a "labor shortage" can coexist with stagnant wages, at least for those making the least. The fact that wages did rise – just not enough as inflation – shows how society can become complacent and unwilling to closely examine "facts" such as rising wages. One of Barbara's hypotheses as to employers' ability to resist wage increases is simply their all-encompassing obsession about it – one that she's seen in action, from Ted's free breakfasts to Howard's obsession with "time theft."

Barbara asks why workers don't demand higher wages themselves. She was initially surprised that people didn't just leave underpaid, demanding jobs. But low-wage workers are not just "economic man." They're often dependent on relatives or friends with a car, or else use a bike, which limits range. Just filling out applications, being interviewed, and taking **drug tests** is a hassle and leads to more time without work.

Again, Barbara is able to question existing research and economics by drawing on her own experience, showing how low-wage workers are not merely free, rational agents, and instead are caught in a cycle that prevents them from saving up and establishing themselves in a position of stability.

In addition, for the laws of economics (including supply and demand) to work, people involved need to be well-informed. But most low-wage workers have no financial advisors, only help-wanted signs and ads, relying mainly on unreliable word of mouth. There's also what one analyst calls the "money taboo" preventing people talking about their earnings. Employers do their best to prevent any discussion or disclosure of wages as well.

Barbara pokes more holes in the classical free-market conception of labor by showing how low-wage workers are subject to misinformation or lack of information. The "money taboo" is encouraged by corporations' obsession with profits and the bottom line, but it also has broader cultural and social causes.

The question of why people don't demand better wages and conditions where they are is a huge one, but Barbara weighs in with her experience of the power of management in getting workers to feel like "associates" through profit-sharing plans, company patriotism, and meetings that function like pep rallies.

Barbara has seen how successfully corporations can construct an imaginary fantasy about symbiotic relationships between manager and worker, a fantasy which they then can exploit to get the most out of their employees.

Barbara was also shocked at how low-wage workers are made to surrender their basic civil rights: her purse could be searched at any time at the restaurant, and **drug testing** is a routine degrading act that has the function of keeping employees "in their place." Rules against "gossip" make it difficult for employees to band together, and low-wage workers without union contracts can be fired "at will," or without a reason. So she understands why low-wage workers don't behave in an economically rational way: they are not free agents and their sphere is neither free nor democratic. For Barbara, many of the indignities imposed on workers make them feel unworthy enough to accept how little they're being paid.

Drug testing has been a ubiquitous requirement (or threat) throughout the book, symbolizing the culture of suspicion and shame to which low-wage workers are often subject. Barbara goes further, arguing that their very civil rights are not respected in a variety of ways. She also ties this flouting of civil rights and imposition of shame to a concrete phenomenon, hoping to explain why workers don't rebel against their low wages and demand better treatment.

Barbara came across very few slackers, and in fact recognized that workers often consider management as an obstacle to getting the job done, whether it was waitresses challenging managers' stinginess toward the customers, or housecleaners resenting the time constraints that forced them to cut corners.

Barbara reiterates her challenge to existing stereotypes about low-wage workers, a stereotype that holds that worker's laziness forces management to treat them strictly. That's simply not the case according to her own experience.

Barbara claims that this cycle supports a culture of extreme inequality, in which corporate actors are far removed from their underpaid laborers, and because of class and sometimes racial prejudice, they tend to distrust these people and spend great amounts of money on things like **drug** and personality **testing**. Barbara identifies a broader parallel between this sort of corporate behavior and government (local, state, and federal) cutting services for the poor while investing heavily in prisons and the police.

Here, Barbara reveals a link between the low wages paid to workers and an entire atmosphere of suspicion – not just between workers and management, but between low-wage laborers and the rest of society. Low-wage workers are made to feel like lower-class citizens through various initiatives, from testing to mass incarceration.

A "living wage," according the Economic Policy Institute that Barbara cites, is on average $30,000 a year for a family of one adult and two children—about $14 an hour. That amount includes health insurance, a telephone, and childcare – but not restaurant meals, internet access, or alcohol. About 60 percent of American workers actually earn less than this. While some rely on a working spouse or relatives or government assistance, many rely on wages alone.

Barbara cites existing research showing that in order to have a "living wage," she'd need to be making about twice *what she'd made at Wal-Mart, for example – and this excludes many things other Americans view as essential. A substantial chunk of the 60 percent figure, then, has probably faced struggles similar to what Barbara did in her experiment.*

The non-poor often think of poverty as difficult but sustainable, but Barbara shows it is a situation of acute distress—a lunch of potato chips leading to dizziness, a "home" in a van, an illness that can't be treated. She suggests that we should understand poverty as a state of emergency.

Barbara has already shown that there are no "secret economies" for the poor, and here she underlines that fact, showing that the only way people survive is by treating each day as another emergency.

In the summer of 2000, Barbara returns to her "real life," eating at restaurants, sleeping in hotel rooms cleaned by someone else and shopping in stores tidied up by someone else. In the world of the top 20 percent, problems are solved without anyone seeming to do them. When people from this class speak, they are listened to, and when they complain, people below them will probably be punished. They have inordinate power over the lives of the poor, often determining the minimum wage and labor laws.

When she returns to her real life, Barbara can now view the comforts and amenities of her economic class from a new perspective, understanding how visible she is – and, by extension, how invisible the working poor are – as well as how seamlessly things are accomplished and problems solved.

Barbara is alarmed by how invisible the lives of the poor are to the affluent—which is certainly not the case the other way around. The wealthy are less and less likely to share schools, private clubs, taxis, and gated neighborhoods with the poor, and even the affluent young now prefer summer school and internships to working as a lifeguard or waitress.

Barbara further develops the theme of shame to which the poor are subjected by showing how invisible they are on a broader social level – increasingly, in addition to being looked down upon, they're entirely ignored.

Both political parties are eager to support welfare reform, even though the 1996 legislation didn't include any provision for monitoring people's post-welfare economic conditions. Only by very carefully combing newspapers can you find that food pantry demand is increasing or shelters are operating above capacity. Americans are used to thinking of poverty as tied to unemployment, which means there needs to be an increase in jobs, but Barbara shows that the problem goes deeper when there is nearly full employment. The welfare poor, she argues, were often condemned for their laziness and dependency, but now that the majority of the poor are working, the correct reaction is shame at our dependency on the underpaid labor of others. The working poor, in fact, she argues, make sacrifices so others can benefit. She predicts that one day they will tire of getting so little in return and demand to be paid what they're worth, but we will all be better off for this in the end.

Barbara wrote this book at a particular moment in history, one at which economic prosperity – according to national averages and economic research – made many politicians eager to pass welfare reform, essentially getting people off of welfare. Barbara once again attempts to puncture the stereotypes associated with welfare by arguing that simply having a job is no guarantee of economic stability. She turns around the theme of shame by suggesting that we (the reader, presumably those like her, but also Americans citizens in general) are the ones that should be ashamed of our simultaneous dependency on and mistreatment of the working poor.

AFTERWORD: NICKEL AND DIMED

While Barbara wrote this book in a moment of prosperity and growth, it was published in 2001 just as the dot-com bubble was about to burst. People seemed shocked by the book's revelation. It inspired a documentary and play, though it was also denounced as a "classic Marxist rant" by a group of conservative students at the University of North Carolina, which had assigned the book for freshmen, as well as by some North Carolina and state legislators. At the same time, housekeeping staff at the university was fighting for union recognition, and these employees invited her to campus.

In her afterword, written in 2008, Barbara seeks to situate the book's publication within a particular historical moment: given the prosperity and economic growth of the time, it's understandable that people would have been shocked at her portrayal of desperate low-wage working life. Barbara contrasts what she sees as a senseless critique with what she was really trying to accomplish – hence the example of the housekeeping staff.

If Barbara had to account for the book's success among middle-class people, she'd say that they can identify with and imagine themselves as the main character. In addition, the book has been read among low-wage workers, many of whom have written her to tell her their stories. Three months after the book was published, a policy report found that 29 percent of American families lived in poverty.

Throughout the book, Barbara addresses a reader who seems to be someone much like herself – middle-class, educated, well-intentioned but ultimately woefully ignorant about the real lives of the working poor. She seems pleasantly surprised by the strong reaction from this group itself.

Seven years later, Barbara's question is whether things have improved or worsened for people like those in the book. The former low-wage coworkers she's managed to reach have struggled, reflecting a general downward trajectory for low-wage workers. It was revealed that Wal-Mart, in the early 2000s, had been abusing its workers by falsifying time records and locking workers into stores at midnight. Organizations have arisen to combat these policies and counter the opening of new stores, and in 2007 the company finally broadened its health benefits (while also seeking to transform its workplace from 20 to 40 percent part-time). Meanwhile, the Bush administration has been cutting public programs.

What Barbara reports about Wal-Mart won't be surprising to the book's readers, who have learned through Barbara about the struggles of people who hadn't been paid for overtime or felt pressured into being highly flexible for shift times. At the same time, Barbara suggests that some progress has been made: the pressure groups combating Wal-Mart policies perhaps have provided a tool to counter the powerful corporate rhetoric that she's discussed throughout the book.

In addition, in the previous few years there was an expansion of easy credit for the poor, including furniture scams and dodgy mortgages, which stood in for good wages but also contributed to a global financial crisis. Meanwhile, prices in food and rent have increased. However, "living wage" campaigns have strengthened enough to become a movement, and are beginning to win broader public support.

Writing in 2008, Barbara briefly mentions the financial crisis, the Great Recession – the most significant news at the time – in order to draw connections with her subject. She may have been able to last longer in Minneapolis with easy credit, but only at the expense of future stability.

As she's traveled around lecturing, Barbara has tried to show that you don't have to go far to find the working poor—she's traveled to Harvard and Yale to speak at campus protests about underpaid janitors and lack of child care. Business interests still resist paying a living wage, but over a hundred cities have passed living wage ordinances, without any falling into economic ruin. Still, these increases aren't enough: in 2006 a worker had to earn on average $16.31 an hour to afford a 2-bedroom housing unit. Affordable housing is growing scarcer and transportation costs are increasing: Barbara argues that these issues will require action from the public sector.

In 2015, living wage laws were passed in major cities like Seattle and New York. At the time Barbara was writing the afterword, this was a nascent movement – clearly, it's taken years to develop. She continues to stress, however, that economic and financial realities of wages are simply stacked against low-wage workers, something that she argues won't change without public intervention.

To answer readers' questions of "What can I do?" Barbara suggests joining a community living wage campaign, volunteering for a shelter or food bank, or supporting certain political candidates. But she argues that there is no one quick fix: our economic culture rewards the rich and punishes and insults the poor. Changing this will take at least a lifetime.

In the seven years after the book's publication, Barbara received a great deal of support and comments: here she answers readers directly, encouraging them to show solidarity in a different way while still emphasizing the entrenched, deep-rooted nature of economic inequality.

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