

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

*Kari Burroughs Kraakevik*  
**Carrying the Building**

“Who left the lights on?”

I walk into my business. Every single light is on. It looks like an electric forest of fluorescents. It’s also at least seventy-eight degrees.

In February.

Not outside. Inside.

Someone left the heat on.

I pull off my sweater and twist the thermostat down.

There’s something sticky on it.

Of course there is.

I grab spray and a cloth, wipe it down, and head for the trash.

Overflowing.

Monday. 9:00 a.m.

I know. It’s my business. My art center. My responsibility.

But haven’t they learned common courtesy?

Lights. Heat. Trash. Really?

My phone buzzes.

A video message.

Three of my employees, standing with the students from yesterday.

“Hey Kari! We miss you! Listen to our song!”

Then twenty middle schoolers, slightly out of tune, slightly crooked, launch into “Seasons of Love.”

It’s chaotic. It’s earnest. It’s adorable.

The kids are glowing.

The employees are fully there.

Everyone wants to share.

And I stand there, in a too-warm room, staring at an overflowing trash can, thinking:

How hard is it to take out the trash?

And then I realize—

They are employees.

They showed up for the children.

They did their job — and they did it well.

They just didn’t carry the building home in their bodies.

I do.

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I feel the lights when I'm trying to sleep.

I see the thermostat when I close my eyes.

I count the trash bags, the songs, the soap, in my head like an inventory of devotion.

This is the part no one tells you about owning something.

It's not the payroll.

It's not the marketing.

It's not even the risk.

It's that the room never leaves you.

Not because you're better.

Because you're responsible for the whole sky, not just the weather inside the room.

The day I stopped expecting employees and independent contractors to think like owners was the day I stopped being angry.

Ownership isn't about doing more tasks.

It's about absorbing the invisible ones.

Not everyone even sees those problems until you point them out.

And not everyone wants that weight.

That's not a flaw.

It's a wiring.

I stopped trying to rewire people.

Instead, I accepted that these are the same people who need to be told to turn off lights, keep an eye on the coffee and tea, take out the trash, and replace the toilet paper.

It isn't because they're "Gen Z" or "iPad kids."

It isn't because they're lazy.

They're just wired differently.

When contract season came around, I added things.

Take out the trash when needed.

Turn off lights and heat or A/C.

If we're out of soap, let someone know.

I felt ridiculous writing those lines.

But they were necessary.

Nearly every one of the nineteen people who work for me thanked me.

"That's such a good reminder."

I'm still in awe that it needs to be written.

It's like putting "Wash your hands" backward on the bathroom mirror.

Still—

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Contractually or not.

The heat was on.

The lights were on.

The trash was overflowing.

And what was that sticky substance on the thermostat? On the railing?

Leadership is not about assuming people will notice.

It's about building systems for what they won't.

Entrepreneurship isn't pretty.

It's repetitive.

It's taking out the trash and still believing in the song.

It's accepting people where they are and communicating in a way they understand.

It's putting reminders in contracts.

I pause and rewatch the video.

They are singing their hearts out, completely unaware of the mess created around them.

One teacher is comforting a kid in the corner. Who knows what drama happened. Her hand rests on his shoulder. He looks calmer now. It's sweet. Almost motherly.

The other two are rounding up the kids, conducting them, even dancing with them. They look ridiculous, full of energy and so loved.

They sing beautifully, I say out loud.

This is their safe space.

Then I see it.

The slime.

Of course.

A kid brought slime.

Note to self: add "no slime" to next season's contracts.

I grab a scrap of paper from the desk and a Sharpie.

NO SLIME.

I tape it to the inside of the door.

I laugh.

Then I turn off the lights.

Double-check the lock.

And walk out, carrying the building with me.