

# THE CACTUS PLOT

Murder in the  
High Desert

**Vicky  
Ramakka**

# **The Cactus Plot**

ISBN: 9781932926835 (paperback)  
9781932926842 (e-book)  
LCCN: 2019942116

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Cover photograph by Jim Ramakka  
Chapter cactus drawings by Trudy Thompson Farrell  
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Artemesia Publishing  
9 Mockingbird Hill Rd  
Tijeras, New Mexico 87059  
info@artemesiapublishing.com  
www.apbooks.net

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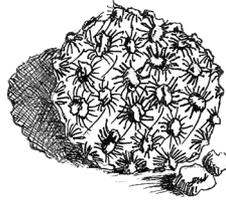
**By  
Vicky Ramakka**



**Artemesia Publishing  
Albuquerque**



For all those individuals throughout my life, whether they knew they were teaching or telling stories or just saying out loud what they know, thank you for sharing your knowledge. I have learned so much.



## 1. High Desert

In the Southwestern outback, women were expected to shed the prissy helplessness acceptable back east and pull their own weight, whether on top of a horse or alongside it, through dust storms, thunder, lightning, pouring rain, pounding hail, burning heat, or howling snowstorms at high noon or in the dead dark of night.

—Lesley Poling-Kempes, *Ladies Of The Canyons*

Desert sun glowed red through Millie Whitehall's closed eyelids. She pushed herself upright in the seat of her beat-up Ford Explorer and opened her eyes. A huge red and yellow sign, Welcome to the Land of Enchantment, stood at the edge of the truck stop parking lot along Interstate 40.

She fumbled for the day-old coffee in the cup-holder, took a big gulp and opened the door. Stepping out, Millie breathed in New Mexico's cool, morning air. A clump of cholla grew in the sand just beyond the parking lot. "Wow, cholla, genuine cholla cactus." Millie grinned. "I made it."

She hit the restaurant for a trucker's breakfast and a coffee refill. Back on I-40, Millie pushed the old Ford to just a little over the 75 mile per hour speed limit. Every few miles, exit ramps dropped onto empty roads that disappeared into distant blue hills. A cluster of signs sent

tourists toward Santa Fe, the “City Different,” according to her New Mexico guidebook. A few miles before entering the yellow haze hanging over Albuquerque, New Mexico’s largest city, the GPS spoke a command to take the next exit. Millie veered off the interstate and followed arrows guiding travelers toward the Four Corners. “No more polluted city air for me. I feel like a pioneer heading to unknown territory. At least it’s all new for me.”

She saw another sign that added to her anticipation—Rio Grande River. Muddy water fanned out across the sandy bottom. It was no wider than the Lawrence Brook that flowed through Milltown, New Jersey, which had been her whole world until three days ago.

Siri’s voice broke in, “Continue on route for one-hundred and sixty miles.” She was gaining on her destination—Wellstown, New Mexico—where she would inventory threatened and endangered plants. Her first real job. She’d be working in the southeast portion of the Colorado Plateau, in high desert, the area’s plant species remarkable for their adaptation to extreme temperatures ranging from above 100 degrees in summer to below zero in winter. She’d be among those unique plants, adapted to survive on ten inches, or less, of moisture a year, and most of that coming from winter rain and snow.

Near noon, Millie tapped her phone awake and asked for directions to the nearest gas station. Twenty miles. A quick glance at the state highway map at her elbow showed Cuba as the next town. “Cuba? Siri, are you pulling my leg?”

Approaching the edge of town, Millie leaned over the steering wheel and twisted to peer up at the steep hills edging the east side of the community. Even though it was late March, patches of snow shaded by tall ponderosa pines still covered much of the ground. She bypassed

struggling businesses lining both sides of the highway: a Dollar Store, feed store, and a soft serve ice cream place in what appeared to be a former gas station. Half were boarded up, the remainder surviving on providing essentials to local residents who could not or did not want to drive sixty miles to the next closest town.

Finally, something familiar. The golden arches pulled her like a magnet. The combination fast food, convenience store, and gas station was jammed with cars, pickups, motor homes, and tractor-trailer trucks. She maneuvered to the first available gas pump and stepped out into a cold breeze. She shivered and reached for a windbreaker. *High desert, all right.*

Millie watched the pump's gauge roll to astronomical numbers to feed the Explorer's tank and deplete her credit card. She clasped her hands over her head and stretched upward until her heels left the ground. Her lanky 5' 10" body ached from being cooped up for three days on the road. She pulled off the elastic band at the nape of her neck, letting her shoulder-length hair swing back and forth.

The gas hose clunked to a stop. Millie twisted the gas cap back on and patted the Explorer's roof. "Hang on, Rust Bucket. You and I have a lot of exploring to do." She hoped the trusty vehicle would hold up for a little while longer, until she could earn enough to get a newer model with better gas mileage, maybe even something a little sporty. When Millie received her acceptance letter to Rutgers University, the rusted 2010 Explorer was the best choice on the used car lot. It was the most "practical," her father assured her. It would get her back and forth to Rutgers for classes. It was a route he knew well, having worked the night shift in the university's mail room for nearly 32 years. The real selling point for her father was that it had

plenty of room for loading supplies for the family's custodial business. *Practical* was always the overriding consideration in Millie's family. At least, its sangria red color made it stand out from the other mediocre choices.

Little did Millie know at the time that she and Rust Bucket would become explorers together, traveling west 2,000 miles. The day after she finished graduate school, she had the vehicle packed and ready to leave. Tears rolled down her cheeks when she waved goodbye to the family and pulled away from the home where she grew up. The tired, conflicted look on her mother's face hurt even more.

Millie shook her head, trying to push away that scene which kept surfacing at least once for every state line she had passed. *They were so proud at graduation. They'd both worked so hard to put Bobby, then me, through college. They had to know I was going to leave.*

There had been few words spoken among them after Millie's announcement that she planned to take a job with the Bureau of Land Management in New Mexico. "That's crazy," her mother said, "how am I supposed to take on cleaning for that new office complex if you run off and study plants at the edge of civilization." *They never said a word about Bobby joining the Army after he graduated. Being the oldest, I guess, made it okay for him.*

She moved Rust Bucket to a parking spot next to the store. The mini-mecca for travelers offered a stunning array of junk food choices. Next to the drink dispensers, desiccated hot dogs rolled endlessly under a heat lamp. Millie grabbed two granola bars, filled her coffee mug, and went to the counter.

The woman at the cash register shifted her eyes from her cell phone just long enough to take in Millie's purchases, and mumbled, "Two thirty-seven."

A newspaper rack next to the counter offered the *Cuba*

*News*, the *Wellstown Chronicle*, and *Navajo Times*. Millie placed two more quarters on the counter and picked up the Wellstown edition. She said “thanks,” and backed out the door with purchases in each hand.

A headline on the bottom of the front page caught her eye. “Body Found On BLM Piñon Resource Area Still A Mystery.” *Wait a minute—that’s where I’ll be working.* She skimmed the three-paragraph article. An archaeologist employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs fell to his death from a cliff. His body was found by an oil and gas field hand. To date no additional information was being provided by the Medical Investigator’s Office.

Millie stopped in mid-stride and read the article again. *That was just a week ago.* She jumped at the beep of a car horn and hustled out of the way. She tossed the newspaper onto the back seat. *I may be a city kid, but at least I know enough not to walk off a cliff.*

Back on the highway, Millie sang out, “Happy Trails to me, happy trails to meeee.” Would they be happy trails? Had it been foolish to respond to that flyer on the bulletin board in the Plant Sciences Building about seasonal jobs in federal agencies? The flyer’s words flashed in her mind, “Get real world experience in your chosen career.” Chosen career—that was the question. Following her heart into botanical research as her professors assumed she would do, or being the good daughter trapped into managing the family’s custodial business, like her mother expected. She stepped on the gas pedal, distancing herself from making that decision.

Not a wisp of cloud marred the crystal-clear sky. The landscape sometimes ran for ten miles with little evidence of human occupation except for the dilapidated barbed wire fences to discourage cattle from wandering onto the highway. She marveled at rock cliffs of red, orange, and

gray layers and rubbernecked from side to side to take in the sparse vegetation leading to hills dotted with juniper trees and sagebrush.

Finally, the road dropped down into the San Juan River valley. Millie heaved a tired sigh. "Well, here it is, my future lies below." Wellstown's streetlights outlined the strip of homes and businesses along the river. She drove along Main Street, both sides bordered by fast-food restaurants and auto dealerships, their lots mainly featuring gleaming new pick-up trucks. Siri's voice guided her left and right until she reached the small rental house on Rio Camino Lane.

She had picked it from a list of rentals on the internet and scraped together a two-month deposit. All the rentals sounded pretty much alike, "two-bedroom, one-bath, eat-in kitchen," but she liked this one's picture showing an inviting front porch shaded by a giant cottonwood tree.

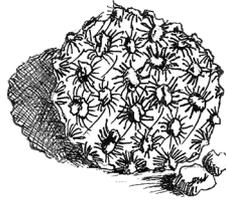
She spotted the big cottonwood, confirmed the street number and pulled into the driveway. Millie looked up and down the quiet street and gave her back a good stretch after the long drive. She found the front door unlocked, just as the landlord had e-mailed it would be. She surveyed the drab living room, with its worn furniture and ratty shag carpet. *Looks like this place hasn't been updated since before I was born.* Millie nodded. *It'll do.* She was on her own at last, away from peering into microscopes in chemical-smelling labs, away from lugging mop buckets and working until midnight. *I'll be outdoors, doing what I love.*

On Sunday morning, Millie drove to a grocery store to stock up on granola bars and quick-fix meal supplies. In daylight, she determined that the sprawling community was nothing like the images on the state's tourism website. There were no charming adobe casitas with dogs

sleeping in the street. Instead, Wellstown's residential neighborhoods mingled with businesses related to oil and gas extraction—machine shops, pipe yards, welding supply stores, and heavy equipment dealers. Big-box stores were prominent—Wellstown being the primary shopping center in a 100-mile radius. She drove past SAM's Club, Walmart, Target and a half dozen dollar stores.

"OMG, how can anybody live here? Milltown may be an old industrial town, but at least people had grass lawns and trees." Millie's gut twisted with an urge to turn around, pack up, and head back East, leaving the unappealing town and scummy little rental house behind. She grasped the steering wheel tighter; that's what her mother expected—that she would retreat back into the family fold. "One season, a few months, I can stick it out."

She steered west and found the Bureau of Land Management office, a boxy, nondescript cinder block building. Millie pulled into the empty parking lot and stopped to read the hours of operation stenciled on the front door. She would be ready to report Monday morning for her new job. She had to know if there was a future for her as Millie-the-botanist, instead of just one of the invisible night workers cleaning other people's fancy offices.



## 2. Be Careful Out There

Next to the federal government as a whole, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the nation's largest landlord.  
—James R. Skillen, *The Nation's Largest Landlord*

Millie arrived at the BLM office a half hour before opening time. Two cars and a pickup truck already occupied the choice spots closest to the front door. Millie lined her SUV up next to them, ensuring it was parallel to the dividing lines.

“Well, you must be the new seasonal botanist,” a portly woman with short, wavy hair called out when Millie came through the door. Wiggling out of a heavy sweater and muttering about cold spring weather, the woman maneuvered out from behind the reception area counter. She wrapped an arm around Millie's shoulders, “Welcome to Piñon Resource Area. My name's Agrippina, but everybody calls me Momma Agnes. Let's get you settled into your office.”

“I'm Millie Whitehall. Thanks for the welcome, I'm glad to be here.” Millie felt so relieved, she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. A hug and a friendly welcome. And an office. They wanted her here.

Momma Agnes walked with a seesawing gait that nearly filled the hallway. Millie followed through a maze

of office cubicles, labeled with the names and titles of the occupants of each workspace—archaeologist, geologist, recreation specialist, range conservationist, civil engineer—specialists doing work in professions that she had only heard of as majors in college.

Her guide pointed to the last cubicle. “This is where you’ll be for the summer. Herb Thompson was the botanist here before. He retired four months ago. He celebrated with a trip along the West Coast, said he wanted to swim in the ocean and see real trees. He called his office the ‘Herbarium.’ Get it?” She winked. “If you wanted to see Herb, just go to the herbarium. That position probably won’t be filled until next fall, so make yourself at home.”

She looked at her watch. “Ay, *dios mio*, time to get ready for the meeting. It’s the All Employees monthly meeting. Be there at 8:30 sharp. The area manager always starts on time. If you need anything at all, hon, you come see Momma Agnes.” She gave Millie a quick hug and walked back down the hall.

Millie turned to look at what was not really an office, but a cubicle indistinguishable from all the others she just passed, except this one had no name attached. She took a step back, dumbfounded by the disarray she faced. The desk was barely visible under stacks of maps, manuals, and memos. Posters of wildflowers and pictures of flowering cactus, tacked up with pushpins, crowded the cubicle’s cloth walls. Plant presses, field guides, more manuals, and a few dried-out plants, roots and all, were stacked willy-nilly on the waist-high metal shelves.

She felt a tap on her shoulder. Millie turned to see a short woman in jeans and a tan T-shirt. At nearly six feet tall, Millie perceived almost all other women as short.

“Hi. I’m Linda. I’m a range con. Come on, the meeting’s in the warehouse.”

Other resource specialists emerged from their cubicles. Millie kept pace with Linda, not wanting to get lost among these strangers. Linda said, "You'll get to know all these guys in no time. And get ready to be introduced at the meeting today." They left the main office building and entered the nearby warehouse. Metal folding chairs were already set up, enough to accommodate the hundred or so BLM Piñon Resource Area staff.

A man in his mid-forties stepped to the front. The crisp brown trousers and tan button-down shirt conveyed that this individual was in charge. His self-assured composure riveted the employees' attention.

"Morning, all. Before we get to the announcements, here's this month's safety video." The lights dimmed. A muffled groan went up as a sonorous voice on the video announced, "*Skin Cancer, Everybody's Enemy.*"

Linda leaned over and whispered, "That's the Area Manager, Wirt Hernshaw."

Half watching the video and half looking around, Millie felt out of place in twill slacks, a white, long-sleeve oxford blouse, and corduroy jacket. She thought dressing in what, back East, is considered Friday casual would be appropriate. Instead, her cleaning scrubs would have fit in better. Jeans appeared to be the norm for this crowd.

When the safety video ended, Wirt Hernshaw stepped back into view. Announcements included names of three new summer staffers. Millie slid out of her preppie-looking jacket seconds before Wirt called her name. "Miss Millicent Whitehall is here for the season filling in for Herb Thompson. She's from back East." Millie stood at her name, but was already collapsed back in her chair by the time he got to the back East part. *Why did I think wearing this bright white blouse today was a good idea.*

"Momma Agnes is next on the agenda. She has an

announcement.” He motioned to Momma Agnes, who hustled to the front.

“We’re having a potluck this Friday and I’m going to make tamales.” This brought cheers and whistles from all parts of the cavernous room. “But, it’s going to cost you—seven dollars. It’s for Harrison Howdy’s funeral expenses, so you’d better cough up.” This last part brought dead silence.

Millie gave Linda a quizzical look. Linda signaled with finger to her lips that Wirt was about to speak. Millie settled back and turned her attention to the area manager. *Something happened here that disturbs everybody. Maybe this is who the news article was about in that Wellstown Chronicle I picked up in Cuba.*

Hernshaw took over. “You’ve all heard how Harrison died. Awful way to go, fell off that cliff, stone cold on the road when the field hand found him. He wasn’t BLM, but most of you worked with him on BIA archeology consultations. He was like one of our own, and we’ll miss him.”

The area manager paused, then said, “So be careful out there.” Millie rolled her eyes at the hackneyed expression but snapped back to attention when he continued. “The ‘bagos are out, snowbirds from Phoenix going back north, retirees creeping along at five miles an hour. Be patient, don’t pass ‘em if you can’t see around them. And keep an eye out for mares sneaking into sagebrush away from wild horse herds to drop their foals. Remember—rattlers will be starting to move around and you know how crabby they are this time of year.” This last received quiet nods of agreement.

The area manager went on to cover several more items, most of which seemed to be a mix of names, terms, and acronyms that made little sense to Millie. Metal chairs scraping over the concrete floor signaled the end of the

meeting. Momma Agnes motioned to Millie. “Hon, Wirt wants to meet with you after lunch. Come by my desk at 1:30. His office is just off the reception area.”

\* \* \*

By the appointed meeting time, Millie had the cubicle organized to her satisfaction. Only a computer, pens, and a yellow pad remained on the desk. Books on shelves were upright and arranged by category. The plant specimens were relegated to a bottom shelf.

Linda walked by and blurted out, “Holy cow. Hard to believe this was Herb’s office. Bet you’ll have it messed up in no time, just like the rest of us.”

“Unh, unh. This is my first real office. I’m going to keep it this way. Besides, my folks have an office cleaning business. I know how to make a place look neat, even if it isn’t.”

On the way to her meeting, Millie skimmed an office directory to familiarize herself with names of people at the morning’s meeting. She stopped at the unusual name, Agrippina Martinez, Front Office Supervisor. Millie smiled. *Her title ought to be mother hen and social coordinator.*

When Millie got to the visitor’s area, Momma Agnes nodded in her direction and continued speaking into the phone. “Yes, sir, I understand your concern. I’m going to transfer you to Law Enforcement Officer Ramirez. Miss Ramirez will take down the location where the drip gas was stolen.” Momma Agnes pushed a button on the phone, pushed another, and said into the line, “Robby, I’ve got another one for you.”

Uninviting leatherette chairs lined one beige wall of the reception area. A brochure rack beside the front door displayed pamphlets on topics ranging from horseback trails to leave-no-trace hiking. Millie cocked her head at an arrangement of poster-size photographs showing a herd

of galloping wild horses, a drilling rig, and a canyon sunset scene. A plaque on the wall indicated the photos were taken on the Piñon Resource Area. She couldn't resist. She stepped over and straightened the galloping wild horses, aligning it exactly level with the other photographs.

The office matriarch waved Millie over. "The area manager is on the phone right now. I'll let you know when you can go in. How's your first day on the job, Miss Millie?"

"It's not what I expected, Mrs. Martinez, but I didn't really know what to expect." She certainly never envisioned meetings in a warehouse, the prospect of rattlesnakes, or the casualness of her new office.

"One thing you need to learn right off the bat, you call me Momma Agnes, like everybody else does." She tapped a plaque on the counter. Glittering blue letters spelled out MOMMA AGNES. "Navajos make these sand paintings from colored sand or ground up rocks, like this turquoise here. Sand paintings used to be made only for ceremonial purposes. Now-a-days, you can get sand painted nametags, Christmas ornaments, most anything. Want a nameplate? I can put out an order for you."

Millie shook her head. "I'm only a temp. I don't want BLM to spend money on something I'd only need for the summer."

"Oh, hon, these aren't government issue. Each one is special made. See, this one has a corn plant and a stack of tamales by my name, that's because I make the best tamales of anybody in this office. Harrison Howdy gave it to me the first year I was here. He said Agrippina Maria Galleagos-Martinez was too much of a mouthful. So he started calling me Momma Agnes. God rest his soul."

"That's who Mr. Hernshaw talked about this morning? The Friday potluck is raising funds to cover his funeral expenses."

Momma Agnes touched fingertips to her forehead, heart, and each shoulder. "Harrison was the archaeologist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He was in here a lot, doing consultations on projects that cross over BLM and BIA land. That don't make sense to me, him falling off a cliff. He was strong as an ox and everybody said he knew the backcountry better than most." She leaned closer and whispered, "I still think there's something fishy about it, the way it happened."

Momma Agnes picked up the nameplate and turned it over, so Millie could read the maker's name written in pencil on the back. "Want one? I can put an order out."

Millie's eyes fixed on the turquoise blue letters, and the corn plant rendered in soft shades of sand. In her mind, the colors shouted, "I'm in New Mexico." She wanted one. "Sure, I'll pay for it," she said, without even asking the cost.

Momma Agnes ripped off a telephone message note and on the back side, printed a big M. "Millicent has two l's in it, right?"

"Oh, no, make it read Millie, that's M-i-l-l-i-e."

"I'll tell Ray Yazzie to make you one, next time he comes by."

"When's that?"

"No telling. I'll put word out on the moccasin telegraph that we want one, and it'll probably show up in a couple of weeks."

"But, when...?" Millie started to ask.

"I'll tell him to put plants on it. You like plants, right?"

"Okay, but no tamales." Millie hadn't ever tasted tamales, but considering the woman's girth, they certainly were not a diet food.

Momma Agnes glanced at the row of lights on her phone. "There, he just hung up." She called across the visitors' area toward an open office door, "Hey, Wirt, that new

botanist is here to see you.”

\* \* \*

Wirt Hernshaw came around his desk, extending a hand. “Welcome, Miss Whitehall. We’re glad to have someone with your qualifications with us for the field season.” He motioned her to a chair and stepped back behind his desk. It was loaded with stacks of documents, framing the 5’ 6” man in bureaucracy. Her new boss wasted no time in getting down to business.

“There’s a half dozen federally listed threatened or endangered plants known to occur on the Piñon Resource Area. We got that pinned down in the early 1990s. You’re going to be monitoring these for any significant changes.

“Also, be on the lookout for any of the sensitive species that occur in northwest New Mexico or could even be close by on our borders with Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. Sensitive plant species are those with limited distribution or special habitat requirements that could become endangered if impacted by development.” He spread a large map across the paper mounds on his desk. “Here’s what our GIS folks came up with for you. It overlays geologic formations, soil types, vegetation communities, roads, and well sites.

“We get a half-dozen or so APDs in here a month. Companies need to know which locations are excluded from drilling because of archeological sites, T and E species, wildlife habitat, and such. Having critical areas already identified saves headaches for everybody.”

Millie shook her head. She had reviewed the BLM’s official website that the agency oversees more public land than any other federal agency. But she did not understand the alphabet soup of acronyms that Wirt was rattling off.

“Wait a minute, can I borrow something to write on?”

GIS, I know—Geographic Information System—it’s great for looking at landscapes as a whole, but...”

Wirt stopped, seeing the baffled look on Millie’s face. “Uh, APD, that’s an Application for Permit to Drill, and we use T and E as shorthand for threatened and endangered.”

He leaned back and ran tanned fingers through sandy hair. “APDs, wild horse round-ups, shoot—we’re even getting movie studios wanting to film zombie scenes in some of our most remote areas. So, the idea is, we want to have a good handle ahead of time where sensitive species occur or might occur on this RA—this Resource Area.

“Did you know they used to call BLM the ‘land nobody wanted’? When the West was settled and public lands divided up, the National Forest Service got places that had timber of any value, the National Park Service got the most scenic areas, and BLM got the left-over land that nobody wanted. Well, that isn’t so anymore.” He gave a wry laugh “Now it’s the land EVERYBODY wants.”

He rolled up the map, handed it to Millie, and moved over to bookshelves along one wall. “This will help you get started.” He handed her a massive, spiral-bound document. Millie read the title, *Piñon Resource Area Management Plan*.

“That’s an *Astragalus* on the cover, right?”

“*Mancos milkvetch*. That’s one of the endangered species on our Resource Area. Ugly little weed, don’t you think?”

“All plants are beautiful to a botanist,” Millie shot back.

He grinned at her, revealing sun-etched crinkles around his eyes.

He pulled out Volume II, another enormous document. “Say, this is a good one, too,” and piled on a smaller, soft cover book, *New Mexico Vegetation, Past, Present, and Future*.

“This Wednesday, I’m going to the north unit, where there’s a proposed drill site I want to check. I’m meeting with the company rep there. I’ll show you some of the country you’ll be working in. It’s mostly P-J, uh, piñon-juniper, in that area, but I’ll show you the few ponderosa stands still left on the RA.”

He stood and held the door open for her. “One more thing, go see TJ in the Motor Pool tomorrow. He’ll set you up with a vehicle to use.”

Millie staggered out of the office, with the rolled-up map under one arm and hands clasped beneath the documents balanced against her chest.

\* \* \*

That evening back in her rental house, Millie created two folders on her laptop computer. While taking a Plant Biology Methods course as a sophomore in college, Millie had adopted the habit of making field notes of two types, one couched in scientific language and a second set with personal reflections.

She labeled the first folder “Notes BLM T&E Inventory” and proceeded to list citations for the stack of references she’d brought home to look over. The second folder, she labeled “Notes A Season in the High Desert,” and typed: *Good grief, what have I gotten myself into!*

Millie closed the laptop but sat staring at the pile of references. I can do this. Can I do this? I’ve got to. Anything beats carrying mop buckets.