

Unclean

By Amanda Rodriguez

The way I see it, there are two kinds of people. The clean and the dirty, and I'm not talking metaphor here. I'm talking the kind of people who have shiny floors and the kind who always seem to have dirt and footprints all over their linoleum. Those with wrinkled and those with pressed shirts. Holes in the toe of the sock versus seams intact.

I work at a bourgie clothes store full-time. It's probably the only reason Justin was ever interested in me. They give me a hefty discount on the clothes there because, as an employee, I'm required to wear the store's products. If it were up to me, I'd wear jeans and a tank top to work every day. When Justin met me at one of Missy's parties, I'd just finished my shift, so I was wearing something ultra stylish and expensive so that I could fit in with Missy's crowd. He probably thought I was the kind of person who could actually afford up-scale garb like that.

Little did he know.

Little did he know that I'm no yachting gal. I'm a service industry gal. A wait-on-other-people kind of gal. Bitchy, rich other people who want everything just so. Of course, I told him on our first date what he was getting himself into.

He took me out to dinner at this oceanside restaurant where they don't have prices on the menu, so the whole time I kept telling him we could go somewhere else, while clenching and unclenching my skirt with sweaty palms. I had ironed the skirt before our date, but by the end, it was a wrinkled mess in just those two spots where my hands lay. Justin was so nonchalant about the obscure, exotic dishes, the bizarre tasting ritual of expensive wines, and the wait staff's groveling. It annoyed me that he was so comfortable in this posh environment, like a fish in a fishbowl.

The whole time I was praying to the Virgin Mary, who I hadn't prayed to since the fifth grade, that I wouldn't spill or break anything. Pretending not to care, I used random pieces of silverware.

I even said to Justin, "I don't care which fork I'm supposed to use." Then I brandished a fork in the air and said, "I like this one best."

He didn't correct me. He just smiled. His teeth were so white.

I went on the date because Justin asked me to, that's all. He was the first white boy I'd ever dated, so I wasn't sure what to expect. After dinner, he took me to an arcade. I whipped his ass at some wrestling video game. I actually liked him. He spoke a little Spanish (badly). He asked me a lot of questions, and we laughed a lot. It turned out that we both liked Julia Alvarez and Jose Marti. *Zelda* and Bogart. Flan and salted caramel ice cream. We ended the evening with my ice cream cold lips pressed to his.

He told me, "Marisol, you're the perfect girl."

Of course, I had to go and ruin the moment by ranting about how I was poor and too old to be working retail and lived in a dump of an apartment without heat in the winter and none of that was going to change.

He said it didn't matter, and I took him at his word. Shit. Maybe it doesn't matter to him.

When Justin invited me over his house for dinner, I tried not to touch anything. I make less than \$20,000 a year before taxes, so his place might as well be a mansion as far as I'm concerned. I sat on his sofa and was careful not to put my feet up even though I didn't have my shoes on. If they were stinky, the smell might seep into the cushions never to be removed. He gave me a glass

of red wine, and all I could think about was the mark my lips kept leaving behind on the glass's rim. I didn't even have gloss on, and you could still make out the crinkles of my mouth on the clear surface.

All through dinner, Justin kept asking me, "What's wrong with you today? Relax, Marisol." But I just couldn't. We had salmon and asparagus, but I only ate a bite or two because his dining room was so big. I could hear the layer of silence underneath the romantic jazz music he put on the stereo.

When I went to the bathroom, I was afraid to sit on the toilet because I might leave a sweaty ass cheek print that someone could later identify as mine. After I washed up, I managed to drip soap onto the sink and splash water onto the floor. Not only that, but the towel hung perfectly folded until I used it on my hands. No amount of re-folding could get it just right, and there was a big wet spot I'd left on it.

After that, I quickly excused myself and went home, leaving Justin with a stunned expression on his face. I guess he thought he was going to get some.

The first time I actually spent the night at his house I was so happy. We had great sex and gulped pricey champagne. His bed seemed big enough for a sultan to fit his whole harem, never mind one short sales clerk. We were falling asleep, our limbs coiled together, when I started to feel hot. Suddenly I couldn't stand the sweat from our bodies, drying on my skin under the air conditioning vent. I couldn't stand my slick inner thighs, the damp sheets or the chalky feel of my mouth. When I pried myself free from his sleep-weighted arms, he moaned a little but didn't wake up.

I took a quick shower in his huge bathroom. The water pressure was perfect, and there were so many different kinds of soap. I picked one that smelled like ground-up flowers. While toweling myself dry, I noticed some of my hair sprawled around the drain. They tried to slip away, but my wadded up toilet paper nabbed all those pesky strands. The bathroom had lost some of its luster. For a second, I thought about searching for Justin's cleaning supplies to restore the room to its original state, but that would be crazy, right?

I stood there staring at the bathroom like it was the scene of a crime, my crime. If I went back to bed, there was no way I could sleep. A picture of the chaotic bathroom would hang in my mind all night. I imagined Justin waking up in the morning and being too disgusted to shower after me. There'd be this contaminated phosphorescent glow around all the things I'd touched. He'd have to call Poison Control and wait while they cordoned it off. They'd have to detox it before he could shower upstairs again, but the memory would always haunt him.

I opened all the cabinets until I found the bleach. Then I set to work.

Wearing his bathrobe, I climbed (and I mean climbed) back into Justin's bed. He smiled and muttered some gibberish as he pulled me into a snuggly embrace. The bathroom was spotless. Exhausted, I fell asleep right away.

Every time I stayed over after that, I showered and then scrubbed the bathroom while he slept. I ran a batch of laundry with the towels I'd used, my clothes, and any sheets that had slipped to the floor. Each time I crept a little farther, first cleaning the hallway, then the banister. Eventually, I was mopping the kitchen floor and Windexing his glass coffee table. Every place I touched had to be sterilized. I got less and less sleep. The sun was usually on its way up when I finished sweeping the patio. Every time I got back in bed, I found myself itching to wipe down the passenger side of his Jaguar.

He never woke up. He never noticed.

As I lay beside him, it hit me. The ultimate question. How do people keep things so fucking clean all the time? If you were to look at the floor of my apartment, you'd find dust bunnies. Dust bunnies that had set up a colony and were sleeping on nests of tangled hair. Of course, all that hair's mine, fallen from my head. And of course I sweep it up, but there's always a mountain of dishes growing ever larger in my kitchen sink no matter how many times I wash them. That nasty ring of scum in the toilet bowl always reappears no matter how I scrub it away, and there's always a garbage bag refilling to stink up the place even though I'm always tying it up and taking it outside. So, why does it seem that I'm perpetually beating back the forces of grime and grunge, while people like Missy and Justin have pristine houses without a thing out of place ever? Why do I have superglued vases with dusty fake flowers in them all over my apartment, while *they* have shiny, expensive vases with fresh, real flowers that never seem to wilt? Why does each figurine I touch from the glass collection my mother left me when she died seem to break in my hands, while *they* have no glass collection at all because it's too tacky? Why are rich people better?

It was the red sweatshirt. When I was eleven, my favorite piece of clothing in all the world was that damn sweatshirt. I'd had a growth spurt that year, and my arms and legs were too long and gangly. My skinny ankles and wrists showed no matter what I wore. Papi kept promising to take me to the consignment shop, but he either worked at the newspaper printers during the day or slept because he worked at night.

There was nothing special about the red sweatshirt. It was just the only thing that fit, and it wasn't even mine. Tuesdays and Thursdays after school, I had basketball practice. I sucked at basketball, but at 5'3, I was the tallest girl on the team. That was as tall as I was going to get. For a six month window, though, I was an asset, until the others had growth spurts of their own. After that, I'd be thought of as the short brown girl who was slow getting up and down the court.

It was late fall, and I didn't have a jacket yet. My little sister, Vanessa, was wearing mine from the year before. Our shooting guard, Harmony, was the only teammate who didn't seem to mind my brown skin as much as the other girls. I never caught her giving me secretive looks or intentionally whispering about me whenever I walked in the locker room. One time she lent me her sweatshirt because it was so windy out.

I told her I forgot my jacket at home.

The sweatshirt had a small hole under the arm and a stain on the sleeve. The red had dulled from so much washing. Shrugging, she told me I could give it back to her next practice.

I didn't.

I kept it and never wore it on Tuesdays or Thursdays. Since we passed each other in the halls at school, there was a big risk I'd be caught in the sweatshirt, but I wore it anyway, sometimes twice a week. After I wasn't the team's star player anymore, she asked for it back. We were in the middle of the stairwell, surrounded by her friends. I looked out on a sea of white faces. Blondes and redheads glared at me, their arms crossed over their suddenly substantial chests.

I stuttered something like, "...Ah...um...I don't know what you're...this sweatshirt is mine...you must be...um...confusing it or something with another...shirt."

They laughed. It was the worst sound I'd ever heard.

"Oh, that's rich, Mari." They all called me that in middle school. At the time, I thought it was an endearing nickname they'd chosen for me, but now I think it was just easier for them to pronounce.

Harmony flipped her long, blonde hair over her shoulder. I wondered if she was starting to hang out with the popular girls, and this was the price of upward mobility.

“You know I let you *borrow* that ugly thing. This is America, you can’t just steal other people’s things because you feel like it.”

“I didn’t steal...” My voice was soft and croaky. I would never give it back, though. It was the best thing I had.

She sighed hugely. “Whatever. If you want that ratty hand-me-down that’s too beat up for my mom to take to the Goodwill, then you can have it.”

As she turned away, as they all turned away, she called me a spic under her breath.

Rich people have cleaner lives. That’s why Justin isn’t going to last. If we ever got married, I’d dirty up his condo and fart in his Jaguar. I try to tell him that we’re different kinds of people, but he doesn’t get it. That’s probably because he grew up with a nanny and a maid, and I didn’t have a mother at all. I just had Papi, with his stacks and stacks of newspapers all around the living room. He told us all the time that he wanted to read the product he helped make, that as first generation Americans, Vanessa and I should be proud and thankful for our opportunities in this free country. Every night, I cooked. A lot of canned food. A lot of rice. Even when I had him wash up before dinner, Papi’s fingers were always stained black with ink.

Justin doesn’t know about growing up with two dogs and three cats sharing your bedroom with you because your room is closest to the heater. About never, *ever* wearing fluffy, white socks because all the fleas are attracted to them and everyone will see and call you trash. Or about having to mop the floor the one time a week you have meat because the dogs drool in puddles. He doesn’t know about big, furry jumping spiders in the bathtub right before winter. He doesn’t know about riding the school bus and being called a dirty spic every fucking day of your life. He doesn’t know about being a twelve-year-old girl wishing she could wash her brown skin away to find white underneath.

Justin tells me that none of that matters anymore. That it’s behind me now. That he’ll take care of me. It sounds to me like he’s saying, “Get over it, Marisol, forget it, move on.” Maybe that’s the difference between him and me.

On our one year anniversary, after the carriage ride and the dancing, we were making out on his couch, and things were getting hot and heavy. There was some groping going on, and I ran my hand across his chest. When I looked at his pale skin, though, there was a dark smear right where I’d touched him. It was a thick grease. I jumped up and left him laying there with a stained chest and blue balls.

I went home. I noticed then how disgusting my walls are. Around light switches and on the doors above the knobs, there were smudged, almost-handprints on the white paint job. Justin had his buddies over his place all the time. They were all ex-frat boys, and that equals wild and filthy. Not once, though, did I ever see his walls in the shape that mine were in. So I got out a bucket, and I started cleaning. Scruba-dub-dub. Sure, they got a little bit cleaner. A whiter shade of off-white, but some of the damage was permanent.

Then I started worrying about my security deposit on the place. Would the landlord consider the scratch on the floor from when I dragged my couch into the living room “normal wear and tear?” How about the cabinet door in the kitchen that won’t open anymore? Or the peeled paint around the window frames from when I pulled off the duct tape securing the layers of plastic for the winter? If I ever moved out, would I get my money back? Then I started worrying about my shitty job. What if they cut my hours? Could I afford this apartment? On nine dollars an hour, how would I pay for a doctor if I ever got sick? Should I get that second job I’d been debating about?

After scouring the walls, I ended up moving on to the toilet and then the shower. When I splashed water onto the tiles, liquefied nastiness coursed into the tub. Elbow grease rid the white porcelain of a thick, persistent layer of pink around the drain. Me just living made it that way. Did I radiate dirt?

Then I felt all gross and sweaty, so I took a shower, basking in the sudden purity of my bathroom. It was nice for a minute until I noticed long hairs getting familiar with the lip of the tub and short stubble seeming to ingrain itself *into* the old porcelain. Every time I cleaned, I realized that same thing: it's temporary. This state of clean was not real. It never even lasted a full day. Every time I breathed, I mucked something up.

It made me wonder if people with money are constantly reminded of how they're really just animals? I eat, sleep, and shit just like an animal, and I make a mess like an animal, too. Sometimes it seems like that's all I do. Why should I clean, why should I care if that's all I am?

Of course, I wasn't done with the cleaning extravaganza there. I still had laundry to do. You'd think that having the epiphany that we're all just animals and nothing is permanent would have had a profound effect on me. Maybe make me give up the whole obsessiveness and live like the slob I am. Accept my fate and revel in it. Nope. Instead, I ran off to the Laundromat to further defy reality.

While I drove, my car was filled with this awful, chemical smell. I got this throbbing sensation right at the base of my neck. I'd been living with this stench for weeks. It was probably some kind of leaking fluid that organic matter should never come in contact with. My brain kept butting up against that smell, though, which was probably why my eyes feel like they were going to bump, bump, bump right out of my head. A gray layer of dirt had bonded with the clearness of the windshield. There were filthy pennies collecting at my feet and half-drunk, moldy coffee in-to-go cups in my cupholders.

I work. I'm busy. How do people find time to keep their cars looking new? I found it impossible to imagine some of the people that come into my work, getting down on their hands and knees and vacuuming out their Mercedes SUVs.

Once I got to the Laundromat, I sat there forever waiting for my clothes to come out all warm and fresh. Luckily, I'd been to this place hundreds of times, so I knew which machines to avoid. Which ones didn't dry so well, which ones left everything soapy, and which ones flat out didn't work at all. I tried to be helpful by pointing this out to people as they started shoveling their stuff into one of them.

After what seemed like hours under these florescent lights, thumbing through some kid's forgotten comic book called *Bone*, I pulled my clothes out, and they had wide, black streaks down them. My shirts, my skirts, and even my underwear were ruined. I stood there for a minute with my mouth open, dumbstruck. It was my own fault for being too cheap to take them to the drycleaners.

Then I took action. I started scrubbing. I had some stain remover and a toothbrush that I always brought with me just in case, and I set to. After that, there was more waiting while I ran them through different machines. When they were done, I had to scrape that toothbrush over them again because I could still see the faded, grey marks. Once the same batch of clothes were in the dryer for the third time, I cried a little, but nothing dramatic. Just some wet eyes, no blubbering. I was always washing these same clothes over and over again at these same shitty Laundromats, and I couldn't imagine Justin sitting in here with me under the bright lights with the incessant banging of washers and dryers. I couldn't see him sitting next to tired, single moms with kids screaming

and running all around. I couldn't see him sitting in the same building with the homeless people who wander in here for a warm place to sleep for a bit.

It just wouldn't happen. Was it possible that every facet of some people's lives, every bit of their cleaning, was done by somebody else? Or *somebodies* else, would more accurate. Was it possible that they'd never known what it was like to reek of bleach and BO? Or to dread having people coming over because they'd think and talk about your disgusting pigsty later?

Maybe I wasn't giving rich people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe some of them had a secret vinegar solution handed down from generation to generation that they used to keep their homes and their second homes and their vacation homes spotless. I'd seen *Mommie Dearest*, so I bet some rich people could be obsessed with cleaning. Shit, what did I know? Maybe once they made enough money, they were granted a chain-smoking fairy godmother who did all the work and left bits of ash in her wake that turned into sunbeams when it hit the plush carpets.

I needed to stop being crazy. Easier said than done. I was terrified that I'd always feel this way. That I'd always be this inadequate. That I'd always feel and be dirty.

So here I am, standing at Justin's front door with its elaborate glass paneling. I don't knock. I just stand there, staring inside at the warm lighting and the tactful, but clearly expensive décor. Eventually, he crosses the hallway for the kitchen. He's walking around in white socks. On his way back to the living room, he spots me. I can only imagine what I look like behind the glass, gawking in the dark. He grins, and his smile is big and sweet. Then I'm being asked to come inside, and I'm tracking mud onto his white tiling.

I tell him, "Justin, I can't come in. There's just something I need to ask you."

He looks all mischievous for a second like I'm going to ask him some kinky sex question, and I feel bad. "I'm waiting," he grins.

After I ask him this, all bets are off. I'm standing in his hallway, and that's probably the furthest I'll ever get into his house again. I'll probably never parade around in just his suit shirts again. Never go sailing with him. Never hold his hand again.

But I have to know. "Who cleans your house?"

"What?" He leans against the wall, sexy without even trying. "Sometimes I have to wonder about you, Marisol. You run off without a word *on our anniversary*, and now you're back to that cleaning craziness."

"Please just tell me. I need to know."

"Why don't you come inside? I've got Chinese on the way. I can call them back and add whatever you want to the order."

"Is she brown like me?" It comes out thick and timid. My eyes growing wet.

"Oh, Marisol," he says, reaching for me. I want to step back, but I don't. He pulls me to his chest, smelling of laundry detergent and cologne.

His voice is rueful, "You know, despite what you may think about me and what a spoiled little rich kid I am, I *do* work. You can't expect me to do everything."

"Why not?" I sob, "Everyone expects me to."

"Let me take care of you," he squeezes me tighter as my tears and snot dampen his shirt. "I'm in love with you, Marisol. Before you ran off, I was planning to ask you to marry me. I have the ring inside and everything."

My mind gets vertigo. My plans, my resolve are suddenly like broken glass fragments scattered across the floor. Hadn't I come here to end this?

“Come inside. Let’s work this out.” He gently tugs me into the house. “We love each other. We can figure this out.”

I shake my head a little, but my feet shuffle inside. I wipe my make-up-less eyes and my runny nose.

“Marry me, huh?” I croak.

He smiles and nods, taking me by the hand to lead me into the living room. When his back is turned, I close the front door behind us, using the corner of my skirt to wipe my grubby handprint off the doorknob.