Lily
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Abstract

Lily knelt on her hands and knees in the center of the master bedroom, working a yellowed rag up and down along the boards of the oak floor...
LILY knelt on her hands and knees in the center of the master bedroom, working a yellowed rag up and down along the boards of the oak floor. The wood shone with newly buffed wax, reflecting the mellow tone of age and the smooth grain of constant care. She balanced the full heaviness of her body on three limbs, freeing one arm to rub the sticky wax into the floor. And she rubbed and rubbed, monotonously pushing and dragging the cloth over the rich surface. Her muscles quivered with the weight of her frame, and her back throbbed with the deep ache of tedious work.

A strand of coarse hair slipped over her ear and trailed along the side of her face. The vigor of irritation too demanding for her tired body, she wearily brushed the straggler back into place. And she thought, heavy bitter thoughts, of the drudgery that labeled itself survival; of the wonderful money that bought the wonderful floor; of the rough, dirty skin she could not hide; of her own black sweat, drained into the shining luxuriousness of another woman’s room—a white woman’s room.

The dull throb in her back sharpened to a severe pain. Lily dropped her body back onto her heels and slowly straightened the stiff spine. She closed her eyes, blotting out the gleam of the floor. Her mannish nostrils tingled with a
mixed scent. The odor of the room invaded her senses, warn-
ing her of the wretched toil of her life, and stimulating her
awareness of expensive quality. It enveloped her in a mood
of resentment and longing—hate for what she had, and
desire for what she could never have. She opened her eyes.
The escape of darkness was gone, and the light of the room
flashed her back to reality.

Straight ahead of her a mirrored wall pictured the miser-
able irony of her setting. Cold silver reflected a great black
bug, cowering in the brightness of polished wood and lus-
trous ornament. She stared at the homely dress, printed with
garish pink flowers and spotted with yellow wax and smudges
of dirt. The sleeves bound her arms tightly above the elbow,
and a missing button plunged the neckline below a border
of pink slip. The thin cotton stretched tightly across her
heavy bosom and fell straight to ponderous hips, again
drawing tight and wrinkling at the bend of her thighs. The
brown skin of her face was pitted with the scars of a child-
hood disease. An irregular nose and full, fleshy lips over-
powered the other features. The only flicker of vibrance in
the static face was told in her white eyes, embedded in burn-
ish ed sockets and glazed with the bitterness her expressionless
body fostered.

She stared hypnotically at the fragments of expensive
panorama, shining in the mirror. Heavy silk draperies hung
from the ceiling, framing an expansive picture window.
Thick, green foliage twisted from a three-legged planter up
a brass pole before the window. Rich wood paneling, pat-
tered with oils of muted hue, covered the opposite wall.
About the room, the mirror caught a glass-topped, mahogany
coffee table, a ceramic lamp, a leather jewel case, a glittering
composite of perfume bottles and toiletry articles, and an
open door.

Lily's gaze again focused upon the crumpled figure in
the center, and the resentment in her eyes softened to a dull
hurt. Resignation was not enough to temper the injustice
of her existence. She could not accept blankly the discrep-
ancy between the height of living and the baseness of her
kind.

Suddenly, the stilled reflection was disrupted by the
figure of a tall woman. Lily turned toward her employer, her
gaze quickly gliding the length of the slim body — the pale legs, the hem of her dress just brushing the knee, the soft drape of silk over a graceful body, the luster of pearl circling a pallid throat, and finally, the perfect arrangement of delicate features, set against a light-toned complexion and enhanced by a sweep of black hair. Oriental perfume drifted from the woman to Lily and mingled with the fragrance of the room, hanging, a scent of elegance on the still air. She swished across the floor to the staccato rhythm of her spiked heels, and stood before the cleaning woman, smiling. "My, but the room looks superb. We are doing a good job, aren't we?"

"Yes'm."

"Now, don't you work too hard, and if you feel weary, just stop and rest for awhile, won't you?"

"Yes'm. I ain't tired."

"Fine, fine. Yes. Well, I am leaving now for Mrs. Hardt's. I'll be back about five. Don't you worry about your bus. I'll be back in time to drive you to the station. Don't you worry now. And if you get tired, you be sure to rest awhile."

"Yes'm."

"The room does look superb. Mr. Mader will be pleased. There may be a bonus for you this week, Lillian."

"Yes'm."

The woman turned to go. "And, Lillian, don't forget to polish the fireplace tile and refill the cigarette tray. You won't forget, will you now?"

"No, I'll do it."

"Fine, fine." The woman clicked across the room, the rustle of silk and the musky odor fading as she disappeared through the doorway.

Lily stared at the tiny scars, etched in the fresh wax by the woman's stiletto heels. Sunlight poured in through the window, heightening the brilliance all around. The glare overpowered her; heat emanated from every side of the beautiful, the glorious room, crushing her black ugliness, her pitiful ugliness. She clasped a crude, swollen hand over her eyes and felt warm moisture, soaking her lashes. Her face stung with the shame of her color and the humiliation of the woman's sweet consideration. A cry struggled to her open lips, and she sobbed, "You bitch! I wish you was a
nigger. I wish you was the blackest nigger.”

With sudden force, she attacked the cherished floor, scratching into the luster with her fingers. She scraped her nails again and again across the wood, grinding the violent hate of her being into the soft wax. She inflicted the scars of twisted agony upon the tormenting beauty. The ends of her fingers burned with raw flesh. The distorted claw tore at the wood.

And the floor glowed with inherent, untouchable richness, the futile scratches of destruction barely visible against the flecks of grain. And the room glowed, and the sun poured through the window, and the cigarette tray was empty.

Lily sank back on her heels and buried her face in the yellowed rag. Her hot tears and her black sweat could not destroy the world that had defeated her, could not earn the world that denied her.

And the cigarette tray was empty.