

The Cleaning Lady

Short Story

by B. E. Scott

The cleaning woman was late. She was new and I had to delay leaving for the office until she arrived. I soon heard her voice out in the hallway, inquiring for my apartment, and noted that it sounded pleasant enough. Judging from the voice, I figured a woman maybe in her late twenties. I wondered whether she would be attractive. Something in her voice made me think of it. Would an attractive woman clean apartments for a living? Such things happened.

The doorbell rang and I went to let her in. The woman who stood before me was maybe thirty but I could not take my eyes from her face. I tried not to do this, for others all her life must have treated her this way. It wasn't that she was unbelievably homely, it was more like simple, unredeemed ugliness. Except that unredeemed ugliness usually suggests something sinister and I didn't get that kind of feeling from her. She was certainly ugly but something about her seemed nice enough.

Ah, Miss Gramercy, I said. Or is it Mrs?

Oh, no, she said. Then she added, with a little laugh, Not yet! I decided she must be well under thirty. It was hard to tell with a face like that. Her face made your brain wince, but she really seemed decent enough. Her voice had a nice little ring to it.

I asked her to come in and began showing her around the place. It's a mess, I know, I said.

It's no different than other men like yourself, she said pleasantly.

Have you done other single guys? I asked, looking at my watch. I might still make that meeting.

Oh, I only do men's places, she answered, opening the door to my office. That was rather bold of her, I reflected, taking the door from her.

I keep this room closed, I said. Organized chaos. If you touched anything, I'm lost.

She picked a necktie of mine lying there on the floor, something I had ruined the other night at an Italian restaurant.

I meant to throw that out, I said, taking it from her and throwing it into the wastebasket. My Italian design tie, I said with half a laugh.

It's all right, she said. I understand.

She looked around her. Fifty dollars, she said.

Good, I said, you have yourself a client. I looked at my watch again.

When can you start? I asked her.

Whenever you like, she said. I can start tomorrow, Thursday.

Wonderful! Terrific! Thursdays. The key will be under the mat outside the door. Just leave it on the mantle when you go. I'm out of here by eight thirty so the place is yours anytime after that.

I like to start early, she said, poking her head in a closet.

No closets, I said. Just the open rooms, OK?

Of course, Mr... she hesitated.

Eastman, I said. I reached into my office for my briefcase.

Eastman, she repeated with that nice ring.

She preceded me down the hall towards the front door. From behind you would never think she was ugliness personified. I used to try to figure out what a woman looked like from what you could observe walking behind her, sort of the way paleontologists reconstruct an entire creature from nothing more than a hipbone. It works for everything but the face. The face is always a surprise. I noticed though that she had a nice light step, almost like a dancer's.

Well, Ms Gramercy, I said, opening the front door for her, if you have any questions or anything just leave me a note with the key. I'll leave the check there also. I'll make it out to cash. Guess that's everything, I said, stepping out into the hall with her. Yes, I'm leaving too, I said when she seemed surprised. I'd offer to drop you but I'm terribly late. Sorry.

I went ahead down the hall and as I turned towards the elevators, I thought I saw her still standing there looking at me. Strange ugly duck, I thought, and then put her out of my mind entirely. I was having Monica over for drinks tomorrow night and for once the place would look decent.

Let me tell you about Monica. She works for the same company I do, in marketing. Monica is what you would have to call together. She's got it all, and no bones about it, she knows it. A good looker, smart, confident, with a keen eye for whatever will do Monica some good. Monica is going places. Monica lets no moss grow under her nifty feet, with their slim ankles and you name it. Now don't get me wrong. She has a soft vulnerable side too, sort of. Yesterday she came into my office and broke into tears. Ted Boyers, marketing VP, had just met her in the hall and told her she ought to learn how to spell. Didn't she know the Brits uses s instead of z? The British Airways presentation was a disaster. The Brits were all smiles and condescension. It wasn't Monica's fault, of course. The double irony was that merchandise was misspelled with a z. Someone changed her charts. That's the trouble with groupware. And Monica was taking the rap. She didn't suffer such things gladly. That's why we're having drinks tomorrow night, or one of the reasons. I thought she could use some building up. We all need stroking from time to time, right?

I've had my eye on Monica ever since she came with the company. I like spunky women, up to a point anyway. And she's a trip to look at, like some model out of a glossy brochure for fancy luggage or something. Like I said, a woman going places.

We couldn't have dinner out because Monica went to school late on Thursday evenings. She's got a year left for her MBA in market chaos theory. But she came over right from class.

You hungry? I asked.

Famished, but I'm being good, she said, brushing her hair back from her face. She wore her hair loose and was always doing something with it. Whatcha got? she said flopping onto the sofa. I am really strung out, she said.

How about some smoked white fish? And a nice quiet Chablis.

Sold, she said, looking around. I could tell she saw at once the place had been straightened up. A guy would never notice something like that.

I got stuff out of the frig and set the Chablis and some glasses on the settee.

Monica had been to my place often enough before so there was no need to stand on formalities. Not that we were involved with each other but we weren't what you'd call at arms length either. Free spirits is probably the word. But the truth is I hardly knew Monica. I liked her, though, and was curious to know what she was like behind all that effort of hers.

I opened the wine bottle and half-filled the glasses. Cheers, I said holding up my glass. Monica glanced at her wine and went for the food instead.

I had a few words with Boyers today, she said, munching on some fish. Did you straighten him out? I asked.

Rath-er, she said, reaching for the wine. In my inimitable way, of course, she added.

Really? I said. You never had to lead Monica conversationally.

Really, she said, sweeping her hair back. I told him his spelling remark was uncalled for, for one thing, and counterfactual for another. He should know I used to cream my grade school spelling bees year after year. I was a state finalist one year, for God's sake.

No kidding, I said. The difficulties with her boss didn't interest me all of a sudden. How's grad school? I said after a pause.

Don't ask, she said. Unless you can tell me what the derivational coefficient of the epsilon decay factor is good for.

Got me, I said.

Me too, she said, and laughed.

We listened to some cool minimalist jazz after that. A new disk by a young black pianist named Chestnut, doing a riff with a Brazilian guitarist whose name I can't remember. Very nice stuff. Monica liked it too. I sat across from her and we just put our heads back, closed our eyes and forgot the world for a while.

This is nice, I said after a while, looking over at her.

Yes, she said. She was studying the far wall. Then she said, I notice you've changed your watercolors around.

I swung around to see what she meant. It was true. They were three watercolors I'd gotten on the Côte d'Azur two summers ago. One was a large

study of an old woman tending an immense rose bush. And two smaller ones showed some children playing with roses that had fallen at her feet. The roses were pure white. The cleaning woman must have re-hung them when she dusted them. Strange thing for her to do.

They work better that way, Monica said. I like that lady, she added wistfully, gesturing toward the picture. Reminds me of someone.

I was right there when the artist was painting it. The one on the right. Young guy. He was doing the petals. Just a flick of the brush and he had it. Talk about free.

She looked at her watch. Am I going home tonight? she asked.

Whatever you'd like, I said. I must have flushed a little. Monica was all business. Too cut and dry at times.

She studied me for a moment. Tell me, she said. Do you think I was too hard on Boyers? You've known him longer than I have.

Naw, I said. He's all right. He can take it, just like he can give it out. You don't have to worry.

I'm not worried, she corrected me. I just don't want to, you know, alienate anyone.

No problem, I said. Every day's a new day with Ted. He's already forgotten it.

There was a silence. Why not stay? I said. I have another CD...

Better not, not tonight, she said getting up. To tell you the truth, I'm really beat. She looked at me sweetly. Next time, OK? Come to my place. I'll even cook.

I saw her out to the elevators. We got in a quick kiss as the elevator arrived. Someone got off, and she got in. Bye, she said. She gave me a big smile as the elevator door closed.

Back in my place I stood before the watercolors. They did look better, come to think of it. But what a thing to do! I'd have to watch this cleaning woman. She was turning out to be quite an original.

I did not expect to be running into Ms. Gramercy anytime soon again so when she turned up next Thursday before I left for work I didn't know whether to be annoyed or amused. I was still in my T shirt. Original is

not the word for her. And I had forgotten how unmitigatedly ugly she was. Ugly is not the right word either but it's close.

She had brought some bagels and cream cheese. She went right for the kitchen and put them on the table. I noticed the cream cheese was veggie, and lowfat, exactly the kind I buy myself. That your lunch or what? I said.

I know you like whole-wheat, she said. And you're on a diet. She began cutting the bagel.

I didn't have to ask how she knew all that. I could just see her sticking that ugly puss of hers into my frig going through everything there, item by item. Was she some kind of creep?

Ms. Gramercy, I said, I've been meaning to ask you. Why did you change my watercolors around like that?

Should I make coffee? she asked. She went to the cupboard where I keep the decaffeinated beans.

Please answer my question, I said. That was a strange thing for you to do, don't you think? To change a guy's furnishings around like that.

You didn't like it? she asked, turning around to look at me.

Well, it's not that. I just want to know why did you do it?

You didn't like it, she repeated, her face showing alarm.

No, it's fine, I said. It's fine. I just felt it was unusual for you to do that. I mean...

She brushed her hair back. Sort of the way Monica does. I didn't mind, she said. I could see you hadn't thought much about how those pictures should go. She began grinding the beans.

I shrugged and went back to the bedroom to finish dressing. When I returned the coffee was perked and a single bagel, sliced with a modest layer of cream cheese, sat on the kitchen table next to my favorite coffee mug. The cleaning lady herself was in the guest bathroom. I could hear her flushing out the toilet bowl. At least she's not expecting to have breakfast with me, I realized with half-amused relief. I poured coffee and gobbled down half a bagel standing up. I grabbed my briefcase and made for the door. As I went out I caught the cleaning lady standing at the other end of the living room watching me. I saw something pass across that

incredible face of hers I'm not sure I can name. Nothing you'd expect in a cleaning lady for God's sake.

I ran into Ted Boyers later that morning. In the men's room. He and I had come into the company around the same time, at the same level. He'd gotten promoted twice since then but we were still pretty friendly.

Eastman, he said, I just had some interesting words with your comrade in arms. He looked under the stalls.

My comrade in arms, I repeated flatly. Now who could that mean? I grinned.

Come on, he said impatiently. He shook his head. I can't make her out.

I heard about it, I said with half a laugh.

You heard? Ted was staring right at me, a big frown pasted across his face.

Well, she mentioned something about the Brits. You know, the spelling.

Oh, that. I'm not talking about that. This is something else. She's a hot ticket, he said.

I smiled. She's got what it takes, I said.

Loaded for bear, he said. He looked under the stall doors again. He drew close and lowered his voice. She practically propositioned me, he said with a funny look. Just now, in the goddamn elevator.

I looked at him with eyes that must have grown twice their normal size.

You serious? I said. I find that hard to believe, I added quickly.

Thanks a lot, he said. I should report her. Reverse harassment. Somebody could make some money, he laughed.

We both laughed over that one. What'd she say, I asked.

Ted drew close and was about to drop his bombshell when someone came into the men's room.

I'll see you later about that Eastman, he said aloud as he left. Drop by my office.

I nodded and washed my hands. I never did go see Ted. I want to think he made a mistake. Maybe he doesn't appreciate Monica's ironic

streak. But you never know. Monica is the kind of dame that's capable of anything I suppose. Whatever it takes. Who knows? One thing is for sure, there were some things I'd just as soon stay ignorant of. Must have an old-fashion streak.

We had an interdepartmental meeting that afternoon and both Monica and Ted were there. Those two exchanged ideas like nothing in the world had gone on between them. We were all the perfect professionals. All business. Squeaky clean. People should know the things that go on. Maybe Monica's right. Irony's what keeps a dull world interesting. She's a trip all right.

Things went along in my life fairly smooth for a time. As it turned out the company got the British Airways account. Something else Monica had worked on drew favorable mention from the Brits so she was in seventh heaven for days on end. We had dinner twice over that, but always out. Monica wasn't exactly my girl friend and she had other guys she saw, so who was I to expect special treatment. But I liked her and I wouldn't mind if the relationship started to go somewhere. I brought it up during dinner out one night.

Everything good now between you and Boyers? I said stirring my coffee.

I can't figure him out, she said pushing her hair back with that sudden gesture of hers. I should tell you some of the things he says to me. Between the lines, she added with a quick glance in my direction. You wouldn't believe.

Yeah, Ted's a sketch, I said with a half-laugh. I suddenly realized that most of the time with Monica she doesn't look at you. And when she does, she's talking about herself and wants to get your reaction.

She leaned toward me and lowered her voice. He wants me to go to the Chicago convention with him.

With him? I repeated.

Well, you know, with his team, she said leaning back. Why would he ask me? I've never gone to this thing before.

Somebody's moving up, I said with an attempt at enthusiasm.

He took me aside last week to talk to me about it, she said. She was looking down at her wine glass and began to twirl it thoughtfully. I reached for the bottle and began to pour.

She put out her hand to signal enough. He told me he put me in for a merit raise, she said.

Hey, honey, I didn't come here to talk about Ted Boyers, I said with measured exasperation. Let's talk about us, I said.

You brought him up, she said.

Yeah, I said. He's probably got the hots for you.

I thought we were going to change the subject, Monica said looking around for the waiter. I'd like some more coffee, she said, looking back at me.

What's with us, do you think? I started. Are we going any place together?

She smiled. What do you mean?

You know what I'm saying, I said. She was looking at me like she saw me for the first time that night.

Come on, you know what I mean, I said.

What did you have in mind, she asked, laughing. Côte d'Azur?

I laughed a little too. Why not, I said. That's not a bad idea actually. We get away from the rat race. We get to know each other. Two weeks of unbroken bliss. Just you and me, perfect together. Then I added with mock gesture and bow, And a fresh white rose delivered every morning with breakfast. One for each of us. From the old woman on my wall.

You're such a dreamer, she said. Then she said, If I'm going to stay at your place tonight, I've got to have some strong black coffee. I need to put this headache to bed first. It's been that kind of day for me, believe me.

I woke up about seven-thirty the next morning. Monica was already in the bathroom. I could hear the hair blower. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks. It was Thursday and the cleaning lady was due to arrive in a half an hour, less even. She's been coming before eight. Half the time I'd get out of the house by then, have my breakfast in a coffee shop, just to avoid her. What can you say to a cleaning lady who keeps wanting to do

something nice for you? An ugly one at that. What does she want from me? It's all these little things she does. You hardly notice, but they're there. I keep pistachios in a dish by the TV, for example. I like pistachios. So do most of my friends. We can overdose on them during a good movie. I keep a supply in a tin on my kitchen shelf. Would you believe that in three months the level in that tin has never changed. Not since she started coming here. Just like that miraculous cruse of wine in Greek mythology, or the Bible or whatever. The goddamn thing is always where it was the day she came here. The whole thing is weird. I only pay her for half a day, mind you, but the doorman tells me she doesn't leave 'til just before I get home from work. She's here all day, every Thursday. Going through my stuff probably. Who knows what she knows about me by this time. She knows where things are better than I do. Last week I getting ready to leave for the office and I couldn't find my car keys. She knew where they were. That same morning when I was going out the door she spoke my name. When I turned around, there she was again at the far end of the living room, looking at me like a wife seeing her husband off. I hope you have a good day today, she said in that lilting voice of hers. Then her face brightened into this big smile, like she had gotten something off her chest. You know, the truth is she's nice actually, or tries to be. If only she had another face. One you could keep looking at without, you know, wishing it was different.

Monica came into the bedroom, still draped in a towel. Forget the white rose, she said. Coffee will do just fine. Then she put out her arms and said playfully, Oh don't get up. Allow me. She padded down the hall and I could soon hear her rattling things in the kitchen. Monica's about as undomesticated as you can get. I went into the shower. It was almost quarter to eight. Whatever happens about the cleaning lady would just have to happen.

The doorbell rang as I was stepping out of the shower. Monica, I called down the hall, it's the cleaning lady. Just let her in.

I heard the front door open and close, and a few second later Monica came down the hall. She was still draped in a towel, barefoot.

She's going to make the coffee, Monica said, heading back to the bathroom.

So there we were. The two women in my life. My would-be girl friend and my strange-duck cleaning lady. Monica and I sat down at the kitchen table with two place settings today. In the middle were some scones. I felt them to see that they were still warm. Some time ago I decided I liked warm scones for breakfast, right from the bakery. When I could get them that is. On Thursdays. The coffee too was all poured, waiting for us. The cleaning lady had gone to the back of the apartment. She was probably changing the bed. I had her doing that now too.

Where'd you get her? Monica asked, dipping a scone into her coffee.

Some agency, I said.

She's cute, Monica said.

Yeah, cute, I said.

No, I mean she's very nice, she said. It's hard to find someone good any more.

I felt depressed. Somehow I didn't relish having these two woman here at the same time. Some things you never mix, like pickles and cream or something.

It's late. We'd better go, I said.

I forgot my jacket, Monica said. She didn't have to go back to the bedroom for it. My cleaning lady suddenly appeared with it on her arm.

You'll want this, miss, she said.

Oh yeah, thanks, said Monica giving her a really big smile.

The cleaning lady just looked at her for a moment and said nothing. Then she turned to me. Mr. Eastman, she said, may I speak with you. I have to tell you something.

Is it important? I said. We're running late.

It will only take a minute, she said.

I'll meet you in the garage, Monica said as she moved toward the door.

I looked at the cleaning lady. She's a good friend, I said as Monica closed the door.

Yes, she said. I hope you and she will be happy, she added after a moment.

Well, thanks, I said. But it's not what you think.

Mr. Eastman, this will be my last day, she announced suddenly.

Hey, listen, I'm not leaving here. Did you think that . . . I began to explain but then I stopped. I didn't have to explain my life to her. If she leaves that her business.

Well, I'm a little shocked, I said. I really don't have time to talk to you about it. Is it the money?

No, she said. She saw that I was leaving and began to follow me. Something has changed in my life, she said.

Oh, God, I said. I forgot the check. I hesitated at the door. Listen, I said, I'll send it to you. Leave your address on the mantel with the key, OK?

I stopped in the doorway and looked back at her. She had turned her back to me. I had the feeling she was crying. Ms. Gramercy, I said. She heard me because she turned her head slightly, but she wouldn't look at me. Look, I said, I don't want you to leave. You know I'm very satisfied with your service. I'll give you an increase. Come back next Thursday and we can talk about it. Over scones, I said, trying a laugh. She just hung her head, her back still to me, and shook it from side to side ever so slowly.

I have to tell you that I sort of miss that woman. I didn't realize what she had been doing for me until I saw that I started running out of soap, nuts, you name it. Her name was MaryAnn. I found that out the next Thursday when I got, would you believe it, a white rose delivered with a note with just her name on it. MaryAnn Gramercy. The weirdest thing was that there was one for Monica too, labeled "for her." That woman must have had no life. I don't know. She was so ugly I guess no one paid her any attention.

But this isn't the way it ended. One morning a few months later, as I was waiting for the elevator, late for work as usual, the elevator doors open and some guy gets off carrying this little package. He looked around

like he wasn't sure where to go. Is that for Six? I asked. The guy shoved the package at me and grabbed the elevator back down. He was in even more of a hurry than I was. I looked at the sender's name. MaryAnn Parks. I didn't know any Parks. MaryAnn. The face of the cleaning lady popped into mind. Sure, and it was Thursday, her day.. And it was her handwriting. I was really late now so I just stuffed the package into my pocket. Whatever it was was soft. At this point I would normally be jogging in the garage to my Beamer but this whole thing really slowed me down. Parks was a Korean name. Some guy saw something in her after all. Curiosity got the best of me and I opened the package. There was no note or anything. Just that old Italian designer tie of mine I threw into the wastebasket that first morning she came. I couldn't believe my eyes. The spots were gone. She'd had the damn thing cleaned..



