

Not a Piece of Furniture

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On the first day of the first job I got after Javier was deported, I tried to ignore the couple's fighting.

"Sarah, Sarah! Honey!" Mr. Belmont shouted at his wife. But it didn't stop her. She stomped upstairs, her stilettos slapping each step. The glimmer of her sequined cocktail dress reflected the setting sunlight in the stairwell behind her, shooting out rays of color like a burning disco ball. "Don't you walk away from me!" he said. "Don't do it. Not now!"

I was young. Afraid and alone. I stood aside, thinking about my daughter. She was with Rosa, the kindly old woman in the apartment across the hall from mine. Rosa lived alone. A widow. I met her while moving in after I had to leave the two-bedroom I'd shared with Javier because I couldn't afford it anymore. I worried that my daughter missed me. But she was with Rosa, and I knew everything would be okay.

"Sarah!" Mr. Belmont shouted. His voice rose as he emphasized the second syllable of her name.

The Belmonts' townhome was nearly the size of my entire apartment building. It had three floors plus a basement for storage and was located just one neighborhood to the northeast of my building. I walked there, but it was a world away. Everything was new. The floors. The paint on the walls. The appliances were state-of-the-art. My job was to clean the entire home twice a week. The cleaning company dispatcher allotted me five hours each shift. The company had given me the job to cover for the Belmonts' usual cleaning lady who'd left to visit family in Guadalajara for two months. It was a temporary assignment, but it proved just enough time for me to become a valuable employee.

I flipped on the Hoover and vacuumed the rug under the glass coffee table. I pressed the bumper of the vacuum up against the front skirt of the Victorian-style couch. I raked it back and forth over the living room rug, hoping that the hum of the machine would drown out their arguing. Maybe even help calm them down. It was making me uncomfortable. It didn't work. They acted as though I were invisible.

“Don’t you walk away from me now,” the husband repeated, louder now because of the vacuum. His voice carried like a foghorn.

“I don’t care about the benefit,” she finally replied, turning around on her heel. “What does it matter now, Charlie? Why pretend?”

Mrs. Belmont spoke with tears in her voice. But I could hear the anger there too. “You can’t deny it, Charlie. I caught you.”

“I am not denying it,” he said. “But it was a mistake. A stupid thing. It meant nothing. She was no one to me. Can we just move on?”

“Oooh,” Mrs. Belmont groaned as if she’d been stabbed.

I kept vacuuming when Mr. Belmont ran upstairs. They rushed me out soon after that.

“But I didn’t even get to the kitchen,” I objected.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mrs. Belmont said, a mascara streak on her cheek. “The cooks will just mess it up anyway.” She thrust a wad of money at me. I didn’t count it until I got to the car. It was twice what I was owed.

That first day of work taught me a lot. The Belmonts didn’t expect me to partake in their squabbles. I’m divorced from their daily lives, their problems. In a way, I do become part of the house for the clients. A piece of furniture. They value privacy and want to be able to live without worrying about a nosy housekeeper. So I let them, and I got paid for every word I did not speak.

After my first shift at the Belmonts’, I couldn’t wait to get back to Maya. I walked home clutching my purse, which carried the cash payment. The sun was setting in front of me. I had to squint and cover my eyes it was so bright.

I remember the first time I met Rosa. Maya had been crying the entire day we moved. She hadn’t wanted to leave our other apartment and was too young to understand what had happened to her father and why we suddenly had to move across town. She was four.

I must have climbed the stairs up and down a dozen times moving our clothes and Maya’s toys into the new place. Rosa’s door had been shut throughout, but on my final trip upstairs, she was standing in the doorframe of her rental. “What a gorgeous child,” I remember Rosa saying. A floral scent wafted out of her open door. The rosy smell was

bright and welcoming, like springtime in a bottle. Maya pressed into my sweatpants. She wiped her tears and snot on my leg and reached for the hem of my t-shirt, signaling to me that she wanted to be picked up.

“Don’t be shy, little one. I won’t bite,” Rosa said.

Rosa seemed to almost always be home and would greet us whenever she’d hear me struggling with Maya on our way in or out. She’d smile and cheerfully call to my daughter in Spanish, *Hola, chula*. It took Maya some time, but soon she warmed up to the old woman. Now, whenever Maya saw Rosa, she’d leave me and run to Rosa, calling her *Abue!* Maya would wrap her thin, hairless brown arms around Rosa’s leg and press her cheek to her thigh with a toothy smile on her face.

One week after I’d moved into the apartment and still hadn’t found a job, Rosa invited me over for tea. Rosa’s apartment was decorated with a mix of colorful Mexican art and photos of her sisters and their children. The black and white photos were from Rosa’s childhood. In one, she and her sisters posed with gloomy expressions in front of an adobe wall in her Mexican hometown. The ground was dirt, but the girls were dressed fine in buckle shoes, cotton dresses, and bows tied in their pigtails. She’d never had little ones of her own but played the role of granny about as well as any true *abuela*. After I landed my job with the cleaning company, Rosa offered to watch Maya, saving me hundreds in childcare. She refused payment, claiming that playtime with Maya was payment enough. But I knew that wasn’t entirely true. Maya could be a handful. I believe Rosa wanted to help a young mother struggling to survive the cruelty of American life. To pay it forward and lift another person up.

Over the next few years, I worked hard. I cleaned all sorts of homes across town. Although none were as extravagant as the Belmonts’. And while many just wanted me to clean and get out, I had a few clients who’d rather I listen to them talk than do the cleaning I was hired for. They were always married, and they always talked about their relationships. Their husband. Their wife. Their in-laws.

“I just don’t know what to do,” the young father confided in me. He blocked the bottom of the stairs, preventing me from continuing my work on the first floor. It wasn’t

aggressive or anything. He wasn't trying to intimidate me. I felt for him, but he had me stuck on the stairs carrying a mop and bucket. "She's just not the same since her mother died. When I talk to her, it's like she's not there."

The clients who wanted to talk never wanted my advice. I nodded along as the man spoke, because he would have stared blankly at me if I'd offered more than a reply acknowledging his predicament. He just needed his words to go into a pair of human ears and settle in another person's brain. It was a type of test, a trial run, before he used similar words to speak to his wife. That was fine with me. I learned that I'd get paid whether I cleaned or listened. Occasionally, more for the latter.

But I never had any client quite like Maria. I was assigned to her home years later when Maya was an adult. Maria was young, much too young for what she needed to face. And she worked hard. She was a single mother of two young twin girls. Their father died in a car accident a year before I started with her. Four months after the crash, Maria received the check from the life insurance company. I never knew the exact amount, perhaps \$100,000, perhaps \$250,000, but it wasn't much considering her responsibilities. A large chunk of the payout paid for her husband's funeral expenses, which had gone on her credit cards. She used the money to move into an upscale neighborhood with a good public school system and prepaid two years of rent. The rest she saved for an emergency. I came into her life after she found work at an office twenty minutes away in downtown and could no longer raise her daughters and care for a house and work a full-time job all by herself. Her job was very demanding, and Maria had to work twice as hard as the white people at the firm.

I never felt right taking her money. They were a beautiful family. Broken but beautiful nonetheless. Life can be so unfair. Their situation was just so sad.

"Maria, please. You can't afford this," I said. Over the years, I'd gotten very good at what I did, very efficient and thorough, and my services weren't cheap. I was almost old enough to be her mother and knew she was struggling. At one point, I even offered to clean her house at half my usual rate. But she refused.

“Don’t be stubborn,” I said. But she’d continue to give me the sealed white envelope each week with the full amount in cash.

“What would I do without you?” Maria told me. There was truth to that. Her house would be a disaster. Her twins loved to play. They got into everything. Toys would be everywhere. Pots were pulled out of the cabinets and left on the kitchen floor. They spilled their drinks and spread sticky messes and dropped crumbs everywhere. But they were sweet. So sweet. They reminded me of Maya when she was their age.

On days when work kept Maria later than usual, I pretended to be slow as though I hadn’t yet gotten around to cleaning everything yet. I would make up some excuse for the extra time and refuse to take more than my usual rate. I wanted to keep her daughters company until their mom came home. It was important to me. Her life as a single mother was in precarious balance. I understood. I wanted to be there, to be a steadying force for her. I knew her girls never saw the hardship that made their mother squirm. Maria wanted it that way. I did what I could to make it easier for them like Rosa had for me.

Every Thursday I came to clean Maria’s house. I worked four hours. I made sure her two bathrooms, the two bedrooms, the living room, dining room, and the kitchen were spotless. That meant I vacuumed and dusted and deep-cleaned whatever needed it. I would sometimes do the laundry and the dishes if they’d gotten backed up. I always made sure I was in the living room when the bus was scheduled to drop Maria’s girls off. From the living room, I could see the street. It made me feel better knowing that I could watch to make sure they made it into the house safely. When they got off the bus, Maria’s two girls would see me in the window and start waving their arms and run to the door.

“Hello, girls,” I said when they got inside. I’d bend my stiff knees and wrap the pair in a hug. I loved feeling their four small hands on my arms and back.

“Janis, guess what we learned in school?” It was a thing we did. I’d offer some paltry guess, then they’d correct me and tell me something new they learned. Usually, it was something in math class or history. Today it was science.

“Some bugs can walk on water. The bugs use the surface tension of the water to glide along it.”

“And they keep their feet dry,” the other girl added.

“Very interesting,” I said. “You girls are very smart.”

We’d go in the kitchen where I’d make them a snack. Then I’d set them up to do their homework, without letting on that that was what I was up to. Remember, I was there to clean the house, not watch the girls. It was kind of a game for me, and I knew that Maria would appreciate all the little things I did without being asked. Not that I was seeking her gratitude. I wasn’t. I just wanted to help.

By the time Maria got home, the girls would be all hers. They wouldn’t have any chores to do or any more homework left. I wanted Maria to have as much time with them as she could. These years were so important. And every time, she would be smiling when she slid me my envelope.

A few weeks later, Maria called me on her way home from the office. She was running late.

“Can you stay with the girls for an extra half hour tonight? I’ll bring pizza.”

I loved how she tried to bribe me with food. But I would have stayed anyway.

“That was your mom. She’s bringing pizza.” The twins were exuberant.

I could tell something was on Maria’s mind when she pulled up forty-five minutes later. She had a smile on her face, a pizza box balanced on the palm of one hand, and her work laptop carrying case slung over her shoulder. She was more frazzled than usual. It wasn’t like her.

That Friday, she called me.

“There’s been some movement at work, Janis. I don’t know who else to call.”

“Is everything all right?” I looked at the clock. It was after eight. I was in bed, home alone. My daughter had moved out years before.

“Nothing like that,” she said. “It’s just,” she paused. “There is talk in the office.”

“Yes?”

“A new position is opening up. There’s talk that I’m being considered.”

“That’s wonderful! They’d be fools not to hire you.”

She didn’t feed into my excitement. Instead, she was silent on the other line.

"It's good news, Maria," I said reassuringly. "Right? Or is something wrong?"

I heard a crack on the other end of the line. It took me a moment to realize the sound was her crying.

"It's just... my girls," she said. "It's not how I wanted it to go."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You're doing a wonderful job with your daughters."

"I work so hard," she said, sobbing. "But what for? I feel I don't get to see them enough as it is. I just know that if I get the promotion, I'll have to work even later some days."

"I'll help," I said without thinking it through.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll help. I'll come by every afternoon and be with the girls until you get home."

"That's crazy. I can't make you do that."

"Why not? My daughter's moved out. She's got her own life now."

"But you have a life. You have other clients. You have..." Maria trailed off.

"It's okay. I like you. Let me help." And I wanted to help. After what she'd been through, I felt it was my duty to help. "You deserve this. You've earned it. You'll take home more money. You'll give your daughters an even better life. I won't charge you much. I love your girls."

I heard another crack on the line. Maria cleared her throat. "You're my hero. Thank you."

A month later, I showed up at Maria's on Monday afternoon. I let myself in with the key she'd given me and made a pair of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the girls. When the bus arrived, I was in the living room watching Maria's twins as they ran to the door.

"Janis," they cried. "Mommy started her new job today."

"I heard. You must be so proud."

They nodded vigorously.

"I made you snacks." They followed me into the kitchen. Their sandwiches were cut in halves and plated and waiting for them on the counter. I grabbed two glasses from the cabinet, loaded them with ice cubes from the fridge, and then filled them with filtered water.

“Guess what we learned today?”

“That atoms make up molecules?”

“No, we learned that last month. Remember?”

“Then what?” I asked.

Maria’s daughters took turns explaining the math, finishing each other’s sentences like only twins can. It was familiar. Perhaps, it was a lesson I’d learned in my childhood town’s hobbled, multicolored schoolhouse along the dusty road. This was years before Maya, years before Javier even. The other girls would pick on me for my curly hair. My mother wanted me to straighten my hair while my abuela taught me ways to deal with the other children’s taunts. But I handled it my way. I would focus on my future escape. In those days, I knew without an ounce of doubt that one day I’d leave my dusty hometown for a better life in America. Now, my childhood naivety nearly made me laugh.

After the twins ate most of their sandwiches, leaving the jelly-stained crusts they’d scalloped with their teeth, I helped them with their homework. I loved watching their identical small round faces fill with focus as they completed their assignments. I sat back on the couch feeling enveloped in its soft cushions as I gazed at them. When they were done with their homework, the girls drew shapes and practiced their handwriting. Words and diagrams filled up the colored construction paper I’d taken from the bookshelf. I felt warm, and my eyelids started to get heavy. The girls were in their own world, speaking with one another in efficient bursts of communication as their crayons scratched across the rough paper. They reached for more sheets and filled those, too.

My eyes fluttered closed. I saw a flash of Rosa. She was seated in her apartment – the very one I’d spent many hours in after Javier was deported. She was laughing and had my daughter on her lap. Then, just as suddenly, she was gone, and my mind filled with the noise of the Belmonts shouting. I felt like cringing and saw myself cowering around their couch. Bright colors and geometric shapes bombarded my mind’s eye. My eyes shot open. A bead of sweat ran down my forehead. Maria’s girls were still quietly playing with the paper and hadn’t noticed my restless snooze. Their mother would be home in an hour.

“Your mom said she’d be coming home with pizza.”

The girls both looked up from their doodling, eagerness all over their faces. "Cheese?"

"Yes." I removed two fresh sheets of construction paper from the bundle. One was pink and the other red. I held them out to the girls. Each took a sheet.

"Why don't you each make your mom a card for her first day on the new job?"

"Okay," the girls replied. They folded the papers in half and started drawing different colored hearts on the front of their cards. Two minutes later, the fronts were filled with dozens of hearts. Then they wrote sweet notes inside.

I let my eyelids turn to lead, and my head fell onto the couch's back cushions. But rest eluded me. The girls kept vying for my attention, yanking me back from the ethereal world I kept drifting to, showing me their cards and reading me what they'd written to their mother.

When they finished, I assured them that their cards were beautiful and stood up from the couch. The girls filled my vacancy, settling into the warm dent I'd made. I turned on the television and found some cartoons I knew the girls liked. I tossed the uneaten ends of their sandwiches into the trash and loaded the plates into the dishwasher. Maria should be home any moment now.

The girls called for me, begging me to "Come look!" at something on the television.

"Be right there," I called from the kitchen.

I washed a smear of jelly off my finger, smiling to myself. I dried my hands on the kitchen towel and then went to be with the girls in the living room. I took a seat on the armchair. The girls vigorously pointed at the cartoon, highlighting the predicament of the main cartoon character. I smiled and nodded, enjoying my role in this small, lovely family. I heard the key in the lock.

"Mommy's home!" the girls cried. They bounded from the couch, dashing to the front door.

Maria stepped through the door, carrying the large pizza. The girls each took an end of the box and brought it to the kitchen table. I rose from the chair and gave Maria a hug. □