

DUTY

an original short story by Rachel Caine

Miz Grainger had trouble fitting the key in the lock, not because of any problem with either one. Her hands were shaking so bad that Olida had to stop herself from reaching out and grabbing the big brass keying away from her. Miz Grainger had some kind of a silver bell on the ring that chimed and kept chiming like Santa's sleigh, which did not lessen the heat of the midsummer day or make any of them believe for a second it was Christmas. Miz Grainger bit her lip with enough force to drag tooth-furrows through the field of her shiny peach-colored lipstick, muffled the bell with her palm, and finally got the brass key into the hole.

Olida and Rita-Mae breathed a sigh of relief. Zenobia just rolled her eyes in their racoon-holes of dark green shadow. Miz Grainger hesitated a second, long enough to make Olida tense up again, then turned the key. They all heard the oiled snick as the deadbolt slid back.

"Mary Mother of God," Miz Grainger whispered shakily, and turned the doorknob. It was a new one, shiny brass. Her fingers left damp prints on it as she released it and the door opened with a soft shhh of weatherstripping. "Oh. Oh. Oh, I can't go in there, I can't."

The three of them looked at each other. Olida felt the weight of responsibility settle and stepped forward to tap Miz Grainger on the shoulder; she jumped with enough of a snap to dislodge stiff strands of hair from her carefully sprayed-together beehive.

"Land!" the woman blurted, face as pale and gray as a corpse's. Her eyes glittered with panic. "I told you, I can't go in there. You go on, go do what I'm paying you to do. I'll just wait here by my car. I'll have your money ready when you're done."

"Ma'am," Olida said patiently, "It'll be some hours. There's a lot of work to things like this. Lotta cleaning. Now, we all done this before, and our new one didn't show, so you don't worry none and just go get yourself a cold drink. Sit and rest. You come on back in three hours or so and I'll come out and tell you what we've done. That fair?"

Miz Grainger, Olida knew, was not about to disagree with a five-foot-ten black woman. It only helped that Olida was about ten shades darker than any other black woman in Parker County, Nebraska, and therefore ten shades more frightening. Olida didn't mind that at all.

Miz Grainger nodded at her, a convulsive jerk that let loose some more of her beehived silver hair. She nearly backed off the steps until Olida caught her elbow and steadied her.

That sent the woman immediately and hurriedly down the driveway to her Bonneville and peeling rubber out onto Monrain Street. Olida grinned. Rita-Mae and Zenobia grinned back.

"Well, lay-dies, we gonna sit around and steal Miz Grainger's money or we gonna do some work?" Olida asked. Rita-Mae promptly set her white trash butt down on the steps and lit up a Camel. Zenobia checked her eye makeup in a little cracked hand mirror. "You two are just as useless as ever. Rita-Mae, suck that thing and get in here. You, Miss War Paint, pick up that box."

It was really just a game to loosen them up. Olida, Rita-Mae and Zenobia had been doing this for more years than any of them wanted to think about. Olida thought about quitting it, knew the others did too, but something kept pulling them back in, and it wasn't just the good money.

It was duty. They had a skill, and they had to use it the way God intended, or at least that was Olida's thought. She had no idea what the other two thought, and didn't care. For her, it was duty.

And cash.

"Well, thank Jesus, somebody left the air on," Zenobia said as she set her box down in the shadowy living room. "Won't be so bad when it's cool, will it, Lid?"

"Yeah," Olida said absently, and flicked on a light. The carpeting blared to life, an orange-red that had probably seen the seventies in its middle age. She bent closer to look at it and noticed something odd. It was clean. Really clean. Somebody had taken the time and toil to shampoo it a lot, and rake it with one of them plastic rakes to get the shag to stand up. She'd left footprints in the deep pile. She looked at the furniture more closely, thinking again about her first impression of Salvation Army. It was all good furniture, not fancy but perfectly well-kept. The coffee table had a fine veneer of dust, residue of a couple of days of summer, but it still gleamed the kind of red-brown that only came from careful polish. The books lined up in the shelves were all carefully arranged, neatly ordered. Everything in the living room, from the little china dolls on the mantle to the shiny fireplace irons, had been placed there deliberately by somebody who liked everything just so.

Olida felt a sudden chill. Her house looked the same. Oh, the furniture was different, the carpet green instead of orange, but she took care with her home.

So had --

"Lid, shit, we gonna work or sightsee?" Zenobia asked crossly. Olida snapped herself together and turned toward the kitchen.

The smell coming from that direction was what had made Miz Grainger turn her beehive around and run. It was dark and sickly-sweet, with a faint undertaste of old copper. Olida breathed it in and sighed it out, feeling it spread through her pores like a second skin. No getting around it, this was going to be a long one.

"Jesu Maria," Zenobia breathed as she peered over Olida's shoulder. Olida snapped on the light switch and felt Zen's muscles twitch in response.

The kitchen screamed.

The rust-brown stains splashed up from the baseboards, over faded chintz curtains, spidered across shiny white cabinets. There were splatters on the ceiling, looming over them like little red stars. The floor was a clotted lake, extending from the corner by the stained breakfast table to disappear under the refrigerator and puddle unevenly where the gold-flecked linoleum had buckled.

Olida's eyes fixed on the cheery country wallpaper over the breakfast table, and her breath stopped.

There was no mistaking the fragments clinging to the wall. They were gray and gelatinous, filmed with red. They'd dried to look like bits of salted slug. Olida looked at them for a long time, then hitched her

weight from her right hip to her left, easing a slight cramp along her calf.

"Gonnabe a bitch scraping her off the wallpaper," Zenobia observed unhappily.

"Has to come down. We're gonna have to move that damn refrigerator, too, probably bits of her under there, too," Olida said, and let herself look at the rest of the kitchen. It was small and, where the blood and brains hadn't spattered, incredibly scrubbed. The woman had collected little salt and pepper shakers. They were neatly arranged on the windowsill, tiny windmills, a pair shaped like sunflowers, two in the back of kneeling angels, their hands folded in prayer, their yellow wings outstretched. There was one long string of blood jagged along the salt angel. The pepper angel was untouched.

Olida collected spoons. All kinds of spoons. She had them displayed in a handmade rack and polished them every other day to keep the silver shiny.

The burners on the stove were free of burnt residue. They were lined with clean foil. Olida swung open the oven door and saw what she knew she'd see, a crystal-clean inside that could have done for an oven cleaner commercial. There wasn't even any dirt at the corners of the baseboards.

"Neat," she murmured with a frown. For some reason, it made her deeply uneasy to be standing in the woman's kitchen, seeing her brains on the wall, when the woman herself had been so neat. It hadn't mattered so much in the house on Jackson Street, where she and Rita-Mae had worn masks to keep out the stench and Zenobia had worked with two of her sons to haul out about six months worth of garbage rotting in various rooms in that pig-wallow of a place. Murder in a place like that didn't bother her near as much as it did here in this painfully clean house.

"Mop," Zenobia said, and shoved the stick into Olida's hand without expression. "I'll work on the goddamn wall."

Olida dipped the mop into the bucket of steaming water and Pine Sol Zenobia had filled. The first drops of hot water gave the old blood new life. She dragged the sponge through a patch of rust and left bitter red smeared behind.

"Gonnatake forever," Olida murmured. Zenobia sighed and snapped her rubber gloves into place. She paid no attention to the blood sticking to the soles of her running shoes; she had Olida had stood in worse. Her sponge made the blood spatters drip dark red, as if they were freshly wounded.

"Rita-Mae!" Olida yelled, leaning into the mop. She rinsed it in the hot water and scrubbed harder; it was hard as hell to get the stuff out of the cracks in the floor, and if she knew Miz Grainger she'd be checking every nook once the smell was gone. "Rita-Mae, get your cracker ass in here, or--"

But the woman who stepped into the kitchen wasn't Rita-Mae. She was small, shorter than even Zenobia, and as slight as a willow. She'd worn a plain faded smock over her blue jeans and tied her dark hair back with a matching scarf. Like Zenobia and Olida, she wore tennis shoes.

"What--" Zenobia started. Olida held up her hand.

"You Carmen?" Olida demanded. The younger woman nodded, eyes taking in the carnage of the kitchen. "You're late. Supposed to be here at ten o'clock sharp. Ever done this work before?"

"No," Carmen said softly, her voice nearly a whisper. "No, but I done plenty of cleaning. Used to work at a nursing home."

"Well, then, you've cleaned plenty of shit," Olida nodded, satisfied. "Here, you grab a mop and help me here. Don't be too fancy right now, just try to get the worst of it up. We'll do fine work later."

Carmen took the mop leaning in the corner. Olida blinked.

"Not that one, that was --" Olida's voice faded. Hers. Why the hell not? "Never mind, that's fine. Just get to work."

Carmen dipped her mop and started up. Zenobia cursed under her breath in Spanish, a running litany that Olida only slightly understood. When most of the stain was mopped away, Olida took a large sponge and rubber gloves and got down on her knees to clean under the cabinet edges.

Carmen joined her. With strong, competent swipes she erased streamers of blood. Where it had soaked into the raw edges of wood she paused to scrub hard, ruining one sponge and using another almost to rags. Olida, cleaning the cracks with a damp toothbrush, smiled at her.

"You're doing good," she encouraged. Carmen's dark eyes flashed at her.

"She died hard, didn't she?" Carmen asked so softly even Zenobia cursing a few feet away couldn't have heard her. "Don't you think?"

"I think," Olida said very slowly, "that it ain't good to think about it. You get crazy thinkin'."

Carmen stared at her a minute, then looked away at the wallpaper. She had no expression on her face at all, just the blankness of someone who looked for a memory she couldn't quite find. Olida sighed and bent back to her work. Her spine gave a warning twinge, reminding her she wasn't twenty any more, and she kept working anyway. Old age only wins when you let it, her momma used to say, gap-toothed and grinning. Olida wasn't ready to lose.

She looked up finally to see Carmen standing at the country-papered wall, sponge in hand. With the slowness of a dreamer, the woman wiped. Dried gray pieces sounded like dried macaroni when they hit the breakfast table.

Olida flinched.

"Isn't this supposed to be done?" Carmen asked without turning around, just like she could feel Olida's stare. "We got to wet down the wallpaper, right?"

"Right," Zenobia said firmly, and shrugged. "Might as well do it now, let you and Rita-Mae pull it down."

But there was a glitter of fear in Zenobia's eyes, too. She wouldn't have been the first to touch the wall. That would have been Olida's responsibility, when Olida was ready.

"Rita-Mae!" Olida yelled, and it felt good. There was a muffled thud from the living room. "You better be working, girl!"

"I'm working, I'm working, there ain't room for all of us in there!" Rita-Mae shouted back. "Gettin' the dust off in here, then I'll do the bathroom. Okay, boss?"

"Okay," she answered, scrubbed at a bloodstain until her gloved fingers ached.

Carmen, dreamlike, continued to wet down the brain-smeared wallpaper until it wrinkled like drowned skin.

"Watch it! Watch it!" Zenobia yelled, and moved her feet out of the way. The refrigerator slid with a linoleum-scratching shriek the last few inches. "Look at that, Lid. Clean under there, 'cept for the blood."

"Yeah," Olida said, and puffed a breath in and out to ease the tightness in her lungs. The woman had cleaned under her refrigerator.

Jesus God, so did Olida.

The three of them knelt in silence on the floor, mopping up the last of the blood. The remains of the wallpaper lay in neatly tied plastic sacks, and there was no trace of blood on the walls, windows, floor or cabinets. Olida had even wiped off the salt angel.

The room smelled of afternoon sun and Pine-Sol and the sweat of three women. Rita-Mae was off cussing in some other room, her voice muffled by walls but echoing through doors. Carmen had worked harder than Zenobia, harder than Olida. Harder, Olida thought, than anybody she'd ever had before.

The thought, strangely, made her nervous.

"Who was he, you think?" Zenobia asked, a nervous blurt that wasn't like her at all. "The guy, I mean? Some crazy guy, to bust the door open and come in here and beat her all to hell like that. Shit, he splashed her brains all over the wall, he must have been crazy, you know? The cops ever get him? Lid?"

"Don't matter," Olida said steadily. "He ain't comin' back here. He got what he wanted."

Carmen's hands had stopped moving. For the first time Olida noticed that she wasn't wearing gloves, that the blood flecks were clinging to her smooth brown skin and making dark half-moons under her fingernails.

"He was her husband," Carmen said. Olida's hands stopped, too, sweating inside their rubber prisons. "Supposed to be in jail. Got out."

Her daughter's husband Rupert was in jail, god damn his soul. Olida felt a chill slide down her aching back along with a drop of sweat. She'd sworn to him she'd chop him into fillets if he ever touched her girl again, and she remembered the murderous hate in his eyes. If he got out --

"Fucking courts," Zenobia said, voice shaking. She blinked hard and wiped at her face with her forearm. "Can't count on nothing' no more. Not even the jail. Shit, they stuck Mano in the pen for not paying his taxes, you believe that shit? And they let this crazy out. Ain't safe. We ain't safe."

The words hung over all of them, like the smell of Pine-Sol and sweat. Carmen finally wrung out her sponge and continued wiping, though the floor was long since cleaned. Olida gave up and threw her sponge in the pail. When she stripped off her gloves the touch of cool air on her hands was enough to make her shiver with relief.

Rita-Mae appeared in the door, red-cheeked and shiny with sweat.

"Hey, I'm done, what about --" She paused, staring. "Who's that?"

She was staring at Carmen.

Olida pushed past Rita-Mae to the neat little living room. Chinadoos, gleaming. Books neatly ordered. Carpet showing the footprints that had passed.

On a shelf by the window was a photograph. Olida stared at it for a second, then turned to Rita-Mae. Her eyes felt hot and painful, as if she'd been crying.

"Go on out, Rita." She felt Zenobia's bulk behind her, hot with nervousness. "You too, Zen. I'll be out directly. You go get your money from Miz Grainger."

The two of them bustled out, banging pails and mop-handles in their haste. Olida shut the door behind them and turned around.

Carmen stood in the shadow of the doorway, afternoon sun lighting her from behind. She reached up and pulled the scarf off of her head, and dark hair fell forward over her shoulders.

"Don't come in here," Olida said very quietly. "I don't want to see."

"Why?" Carmen asked just as softly. There was a long pause, and the air conditioner clicked on with a hum. Olida shivered as the cool air passed over her damp skin.

"Rita-Mae didn't see you come in."

"No."

"She was out there on the steps, smokin'. She would've seen you."

"Yes," Carmen agreed. There was something wrong with her head. It looked mashed. Olida closed her eyes and mouthed silently, Oh Jesus, Oh Jesus.

"We didn't mean to disrespect," Olida said finally, tears burning the inside of her eyelids. She felt Carmen move, flinched when she heard the shuffled of feet over shag carpet. Her eyes flew open. Better to know than not.

Carmen walked past her, whole and alive, and touched the picture frame by the window. Her fingernails were still dark with blood.

"She was pretty, wasn't she?" Carmen asked wistfully. Olida's heart lurched.

"She?"

"My mother." Carmen sighed, and for the first time Olida saw the tears glittering in her dark eyes, running down her smooth brown cheeks. "I came in the back door. I had a key."

"You-- " You ain't a ghost, Olida almost blurted, and felt herself warm up with embarrassment. "My God, girl, you didn't have to be here, to see that. We would've cleaned it up. You didn't have to-- "

She remembered Carmen's sponge gliding down the wall, knocking bits of her mother's brain loose. Her mouth just dried up with sorrow and shock, and Carmen blinked back tears and smiled.

"It was my duty," she said.

Olida tried to speak, couldn't. She picked up her pail with a shaking hand and opened the front door. There, with the sun warm on her face and clean outside air in her lungs, she looked back at the other woman. Carmen was touching the picture again, fingertips trembling on the perfectly duplicated face there.

"You can come with us," Olida offered awkwardly. "We're gonna go getsomethin' to drink. Come."

Carmen shook her head, and turned her back. As Olida swung the door shut, she saw the girl had gone away, somewhere else, somewhere sad and quiet.

Somewhere Olida couldn't follow.

Miz Grainger wasn't pleased to be waiting in the hot sun. She fanned her face with a fat magazine while Olida came down the steps and squinted at the sun.

"Lord, what kept you?" she asked crossly, and held out an envelope. "There's a bonus there, too, for doing it so quick."

"Shouldn't take it," Olida grunted and shoved it in her pocket without counting. "That girl did a lot of it."

"Girl?" Miz Grainger asked, and reached up to pat her shellacked hair. The whole beehive shook when she touched it. "What girl?"

"Carmen -- you know, the daughter."

Miz Grainger's magazine hit the ground in a puff of dust and a blizzard of fluttering pages. Her mouth worked in its shell of peach-colored lipstick, and her face went gray-green. Olida took a step backward.

"Carmen didn't have no daughter," Miz Grainger said weakly.

Olida turned slowly to face the house. A curtain stirred, and fell, with the breath of the air conditioner.

Miz Grainger joined them for a drink.

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