

Imelda's Flat

by Vera Gajic

Imelda was cleaning under the sofa, she was down on her hands and knees trying to get to the very back with her floor spray and cloth, it had been some time since she'd got this far under the sofa.

She wanted the place to be spotless of course but she didn't want it to look like she had OCD, which she didn't think she had despite her mother making digs at her, she just liked things to be clean, nothing wrong with that, particularly since she bought her own place six years ago. Her Mum had helped her with a deposit when she realised how unhappy Imelda was renting a room in a shared house.

She rarely had visitors but today was special, she'd been seeing Barney for nine months and decided that now was the right time to let him visit and see her in her home surroundings. She loved her flat and she really needed to know if Barney loved it too. It was important that they felt the same about their surroundings if they were ever going to have a chance of living in the same space.

Barney lived with his mother. He'd moved back after his divorce a decade earlier and never left. His mother secretly loved him living at home, he helped keep the loneliness at bay since his father Harry had died. Imelda had been to his place a few times but she couldn't see any of him in the house. At least she hoped she couldn't. There was his mother's collection of Dalton pottery in the display cabinet, the disturbing painting of small children with enormous eyes over the gas fireplace, the plastic flowers in a vase sitting on a crocheted doily on the polished teak sideboard. It reminded Imelda of her own mother's place and made her feel faintly sick but it was at least reasonably clean.

So this was going to be a big deal Barney coming over. The last person to visit her flat (apart from her mother) was Peter, her only previous boyfriend. She'd invited him for dinner after three months of dating. She thought it had gone well but she never saw again and she ended up feeling violated that he'd entered her sanctuary which she loved beyond anything else and then been rejected by him. She made sure to wait longer this time, hopefully nine months was long enough.

Imelda had taken a week off from her job as a dental practise receptionist to prepare. Of course the flat was clean, she spent most Saturdays cleaning it but she was going to give it a deep clean for Barney's visit. She'd taken her time at Waitrose seeing if there were any new cleaning products. She surreptitiously opened the unsealed bottles to check their scent. She loved lemony cleaners the best though she was quite partial to pine, not so keen on lavender. She decided on the pine for the toilet and the lemon for the kitchen and a honey for the living room furniture. A lily of the valley scent for the living room air cleanser and she treated herself to a new fabric softener despite having a cupboard full.

When she got home she opened the containers and lined them up on her kitchen table. She slowly breathed them in, enjoying the slightly different tang she got on the back of her throat with each one. Some years ago she'd been tempted to taste one that smelt particularly good but that was a mistake, they didn't taste anything like they smelt.

She started the week in the bathroom, getting into every bend and crease. Amazed at what she missed on her weekly cleans. The shower cable now looked better than when she bought it. By Tuesday she was pleased with the bathroom and she rewarded herself with a small glass of gin and tonic with lemon which smelt nearly as good as the kitchen worktop cleaner and definitely tasted better. By Saturday morning she was exhausted but happy, her sense of satisfaction so strong she went from room to room admiring the spotless minimalist scenes accompanied by matching perfumes of cleanliness.

Barney was due at 7pm. They had agreed to get a take-away as there wouldn't be time for her to cook and she didn't want ruin her spotless kitchen.

By six she'd showered, cleaned the bathroom again and dressed. She sat and waited with her third gin and tonic and surveyed her living room with its black wall unit, the gleaming glass dining table the grey sofa which looked as good as new. There was nothing on the walls as that would attract dust but they were painted a cool grey, very fashionable she hoped.

Barney arrived at the front door at seven clutching a bunch of flowers. He wasn't sure how he felt about Imelda but he was grateful that someone wanted to go out with him and she seemed to have a plan, he must have passed a test to be invited to her flat though he had no idea which one. Nonetheless he was here; he'd made sure to wear his only suit, get a hair cut and wash before the visit, just in case it was another test, he patted down his jacket and rang the doorbell.

Imelda opened the door, smiled, took the flowers and showed Barney where to put his shoes and gave him foot covers to put on, then led him to the living room. He was immediately struck by the smell, a barrage of different pungent cloying artificial scents mixing in his nostrils, he loosened his tie, started gasping for air and asked to sit down.

“Are you Ok?” asked Imelda, not expecting this reaction to her days of toil.

“I think I’m allergic to something” said Barney starting to cough. Imelda got him a glass of water and stood over him as he continued to cough and gasp. She had no idea what to do.

“I think I’m going to have to leave,” said Barney between coughing fits, “can go somewhere else?”

“You go,” said Imelda, “I’ve been working on preparing the place all week, I’m going to stay and enjoy it.”

Barney spluttered his way out of the flat and realised he’d failed the test, maybe for the best.