

FICTION JUNE 5 & 12, 2017 ISSUE

CLEAN, CLEANER, CLEANEST

By Sherman Alexie

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Photograph by Carlos Javier Ortiz for The New Yorker



Audio: Sherman Alexie reads.

The used condoms stopped bothering Marie after a while. At least the people were being safe during their motel sex. She was Catholic and didn't believe in abortion. But she was more flexibly Catholic than strictly Catholic, so she did believe in birth control—pills, devices, procedures. That's good science, she thought. And God created everything, including science. One of God's other names is Big Bang. Sometimes, when she prayed, she said "Dear Big Bang," and she was half certain that God enjoyed the inside joke. Nobody was allowed to be fully certain about God. And she'd never trusted anybody who claimed to be certain about God. You cannot be confident and faithful at the same time, she thought.

Marie's fear of used hypodermics had lessened over the years. She got needle-stuck once when she was pulling off a pillowcase. The next day, she went to the free clinic and got tested for H.I.V. For days, Marie prayed. Then her prayer received a response: negative is sometimes a good thing. She rarely saw a needle after crack and crystal meth became more popular and cheaper than any other drug. You could shoot up meth, but it seemed that most people snorted it. Or smoked it. And accidentally started fires in small motel rooms. But the needles were starting to reappear. She felt sorry for those addicts—for any addicts. They ended up looking like starving ravens. Like scarecrows after a brush fire. Like the babies born when starved ravens conceived with burned scarecrows.

After so many years, Marie didn't even mind cleaning up people's feces and urine. She had discovered that it was vital to say "feces" and "urine" instead of using cruder terms for the messes that people left in the toilet. Or on the toilet. Or in the general vicinity of the toilet. Or sometimes not even in the bathroom at all. "Feces" and "urine" were medical terms. She was a motel maid, but it helped to think like a doctor or a nurse. It helped to think that she was *helping* other people.

On a Tuesday morning, she knocked on the door of Room 213. A corner room. Larger than standard. With two big windows instead of one. Twenty dollars more a night. The guest had been there for a few nights and was supposed to check out by eleven. She knocked again.

“Housekeeping,” she said. Then she said it louder: “Housekeeping.”

There was no response, so she pass-keyed the door, pushed it open, and took a step back. That was a learned self-defense behavior. You didn’t enter the room until you had a clear idea of what was waiting for you. On TV, the cops acted the same way when they opened strange doors.

Check your corners, the TV cops always said to one another.

“Housekeeping,” Marie said again. There was no echo. The rooms were too small for echoes.

There was nobody in the living area. Nobody in the unmade bed. Nobody sat in the little wooden chairs at the wooden table. Nobody was squeezed into the doorless closet. But the bathroom door was shut, so there could be somebody in there. She listened for the sound of the shower or the toilet or the sink.

A few years earlier, in Room 122, a naked guest had walked out of the bathroom as she was making the bed. They’d both yelped in surprise. And then she’d laughed and laughed, because he had the biggest penis she had ever seen. She couldn’t stop laughing as she fled the room and hurried to the main office.

Blushing, she’d told the front-desk clerk, Evie, what had happened. Evie had been a maid for years before she got promoted.

“How big *was* it?” Evie had asked.

“I don’t know,” Marie had said. She knew she’d have to tell her priest, Father James, about that moment. She hadn’t sinned, not really, because she hadn’t wanted to do anything with that penis except laugh at its absurdity. But she’d wanted Father James to absolve her if she needed absolving.

“About fifteen years ago,” Evie had said, “I walked in on a guy with a huge one. It looked like a skateboard with two wheels missing.”

“Oh, Evie,” Marie had said. “You’ve got the Devil in you.”

“That I do,” Evie had agreed.

As she stood in the doorway of Room 213, Marie laughed at the memory. She missed Evie, who had quit one day and said she was moving to Arizona. She'd sent a postcard from Reno that said, "Halfway there!" But there'd been no word from her since. Marie kept that postcard in her purse. She saw it whenever she reached for her wallet or her keys.

"Housekeeping," Marie said for the fourth time. No response. So she knew there was nobody in the room. The guest was gone. He was a clean one. Almost all the garbage was in the wastebaskets. The toilet was flushed. The sink had been wiped down. The used wet towels were piled in the shower instead of tossed onto the floor. A one-dollar bill, folded into an origami crane, had been left on top of the TV. A small gratuity. There were no human or animal body fluids splashed on the floors, walls, or ceiling. None that were obvious, anyway.

But the guest had left takeout food in a Styrofoam container on the wooden table. A mostly eaten hamburger and fries.

More than anything, Marie hated to clean up food. That's why she had never worked at a restaurant. It's why she rarely ate at restaurants. A table full of greasy dishes and half-empty water glasses and coffee cups made her nauseated. In particular, she hated the smell of old cooked onions.

Dear Big Bang, she'd thought more than once, if I am going to Hell, then I hope Hell doesn't smell like old onions.

In her Bible-study group, she'd referred to Satan as Old Onions so much that some of her fellow-parishioners had started doing the same. She'd even heard Father James say it once or twice.

Old Onions. She hated Old Onions.

But she needed her job. She believed in her job. So she picked up the Styrofoam container, held her breath against the smell of the onions, and tossed it into the garbage bag hanging off the side of her cart, then sprayed disinfectant into the bag to kill some of the odor.

And then she cleaned the room.

First, she picked up the dirty towels and shoved them into the laundry bag hanging from her cart. She draped clean towels over the thin metal rod. The towels had been washed, yes, but they were so

old and threadbare that they'd forgotten how to be towels. Those towels had dementia. And that thin metal rod had been pulled out of the wall so often by clumsy guests that it barely supported the weight of the towels. But no matter—she still draped the towels with an eye-pleasing symmetry. Then she sprayed minty soap into the sink and the shower, did a quick wipe with her hand towel, and ran hot water to wash the soap down the drain. She sprayed the toilet bowl, flushed, and repeated the process. She didn't have to scrub at any stains because of the departed guest's good manners. She knew she'd only cleaned the surface of things, but the soap's strong minty smell would make it seem as if she'd cleaned more thoroughly.

The illusion of clean.

She'd once used that phrase when she'd been talking to Father James about her job, and he'd said that the phrase accurately described humans as well.

After she was done with the bathroom, she quickly dusted the small chest of drawers, TV, two nightstands, two lamps, and chairs and table, plus the chandelier hanging over the table.

That chandelier was only a paper-covered light bulb hanging on an electrical cord. But saying "chandelier" was almost like saying "feces" and "urine."

Then she dragged in the vacuum and quickly ran it over the carpet. A while back, she'd convinced the motel's owner, Naseem, to put the beds on wooden platforms. It was expensive, she knew, but it would save time and money for Naseem because the maids wouldn't have to vacuum under the beds. And it would save the maids from the inevitable horrors they found beneath those beds.

It took her only fifteen minutes to clean that room.

That was good, because a mother and father with four kids had checked out of Room 144. The youngest kid, a toddler in a polo shirt, had taken off his pants and underwear—had gone full Porky Pig—then squatted and pushed out a public feces on the sidewalk in front of the soda machine. So Marie was deathly afraid of what that family might have done in the privacy of their room. She dreaded the marathon of cleaning that likely awaited her.

In the beginning, there was Marie, Agnes, Rosa, and the other Rosa. Agnes was a drunk. She got fired for stealing from the guests. Rosa No. 1 married her high-school sweetheart and moved away; Rosa No. 2 was undocumented and quit after she heard rumors about an immigration sweep of local businesses. The sweep didn't happen. Not that time.

Then there was Olga, who'd come from Russia to marry an American. He'd claimed to be a millionaire, but it turned out he'd had only enough money to pay for Olga's visa and her plane tickets. She'd married him anyway, because she believed that American lies were a little better than Russian lies. But she had to take a job, any job, to help with expenses. She got pregnant. They couldn't afford to pay rent and take care of a baby, so they moved to Oregon to live with his parents.

Then there was Evie, who worked hard, was Marie's friend for many years, and vanished over the horizon.

There was a black woman and a white woman, their names lost to time, who started on the same day and both quit immediately after walking into a room and finding a dead bull snake sliced into thick pieces and arranged in weird patterns on the carpet.

There'd been five animal sacrifices in the motel over the years.

Seven people had died at the motel. Four from heart attacks, two from overdoses, and one when a woman drunkenly fell over the second-floor railing and landed head first on somebody else's minivan.

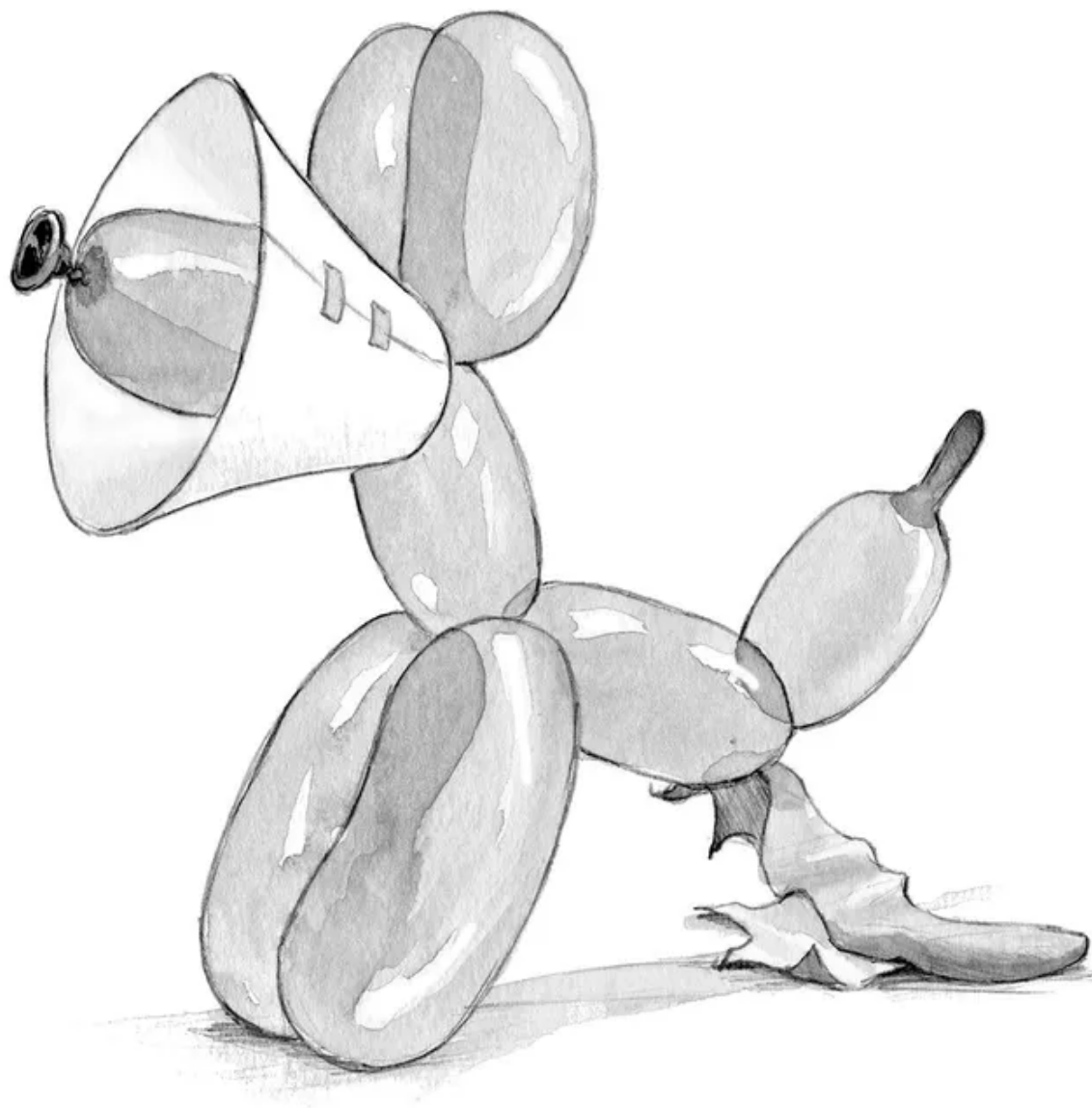
There had been ten or twelve or fifteen or twenty-three college students who'd worked there over the years. Most of them lasted only a few weeks. Some lasted a few months, and then quit the job and school at the same time, and walked away into sad lives. But two girls, Karen and Christine, kept working while they earned their bachelor's degrees—Karen in 1991 and Christine in 2000—and then moved on to better jobs in better cities. Marie had attended both of their graduation ceremonies. She never saw Karen again, but she'd bumped into Christine—home for Christmas with her parents—in the local mall one day, and they'd had a long visit over coffee. Christine had married a man, divorced him, and then married a woman named Ariel.

“She's my soul mate,” Christine said.

Marie was somewhat uncomfortable with Christine's new lesbian life. But she shrugged it off and congratulated her old friend. Marie believed that her own sins were exactly the same as everybody else's sins.

One of the maids was a man. Hector. He sang loudly and cleaned the rooms more slowly than any maid ever. He lasted for six years, then called one morning and quit without warning.

But at least he called.



W. M. Praid

Over the years, thirty or forty women had quit without saying a word. Many of them never bothered to return their maid uniforms or pick up their last paychecks. Marie feared that some of those women

might have been disappeared by the men in their lives. But most of them just didn't care about being responsible. Some of those women were as nocturnal and untrustworthy as rats. Marie had been slapped, punched, kicked, and bitten by former maids. Her purse had been stolen three times. And her car stolen once.

One of the crazier maids had robbed Naseem at gunpoint. She went to prison for four years.

One of the saddest maids had been assaulted and strangled by a serial killer. He was caught after thirty years of killing poor women and led police to undiscovered bodies so they wouldn't lethally inject him.

There were drug addicts and alcoholics and women who dowsed their cleaning rags with disinfectant and huffed those poisonous and intoxicating fumes into their lungs.

There were illegal and legal immigrants, though Marie didn't care about their status. Every refugee is a precious child, she thought.

There were maids of every race. Of every color. Of every religion.

At least a dozen women, Muslims, had worn head scarves while they worked.

Marie suspected that one maid, an Italian woman who had to be taught how to use a vacuum, was in the federal witness-protection program.

There were women who cried often but would never explain their tears.

There were women who never stopped talking about their aches and pains.

Over the decades, Marie had worked with two or three hundred women. She'd liked half of them, had hated at least fifty of them, and had truly loved maybe a dozen.

And then there was Evie, the most beloved, who had transubstantiated into a postcard from Reno. How does a friend, maybe your best friend, leave you like that?

"Father James," Marie had once confessed, "God is mysterious, sure, but sometimes I feel like people are even more mysterious."

During her second year at the motel, Marie had fallen in love with the owner's son, Amir, who was only twenty. He was Pakistani, and knew how to fix any machine.

Marie was fascinated by the thick black hair on the back of Amir's hands and fingers. One day, as they ate lunch together in the supply room, she impulsively reached out with both of her hands and softly stroked the hair on his.

They sneaked into Room 179, the only one whose door was not visible from the main office, and therefore the room that was rented out the least, and they kissed for a few heated minutes.

He tried to push her onto the bed. But she shook her head.

"I'm so sorry," Amir said, and backed toward the door. "I am sorry I kissed you. I am sorry if I have offended you. And your husband."

Amir was a kind man, so he remained kind even as he was being rejected. But she had not been clear about her reason for saying no, and he had misinterpreted her denial.

"It's O.K., it's O.K.," she said. "I meant I don't want to mess up the bed."

So she grabbed a towel from the bathroom and put it on a wooden chair. Then she quickly took off all her clothes. She had never been that bold. She'd had sex with three men in her life, but never in a bright room in the middle of the day. And she'd never stood so naked and exposed in front of any man, let alone one who was still fully dressed.

"Please," she said. "Take off your clothes and sit on the towel. On the chair."

He did as he was told. He sat and she straddled him.

They met like that for six consecutive days. Then Marie had her day off. When she returned to work, she learned that Amir had suddenly travelled back to Pakistan to live with his father's parents. She was relieved.

"This is unexpected," Naseem said. "My son's mother, she is a white American like you. We divorced after Amir was born. But she has always been good to me. And him. I thought Amir only wanted to be American. I am very sad that he left."

Marie worried that Naseem knew she'd been having sex with his son. But he probably didn't. After all, Amir was a very handsome man who'd always dated young and pretty brown women—Pakistanis, and also Muslims from other countries, and Asian and African women, too. Even a few Mexican girls, including other maids. But Marie was ten years older than Amir. And she was white and plain.

Later, when she'd finally confessed to Father James, he'd surmised that Amir had undertaken a religious journey.

"I think he was living completely inside his body," Father James said. "And now he wants to live inside his spirit."

"Amir and I committed adultery," Marie said. "Can I be forgiven?"

"Yes," Father James said.

So Marie performed her Act of Contrition. She received penance. She was pardoned and thus learned the amount of love required to pardon others. She nearly forgave herself and hoped that Amir had completely forgiven himself.

But Marie never told any of this to her husband, even though she'd promised Father James that she would admit to her betrayal.

Eventually, her silent guilt became flesh and blood and transformed into a new organ inside her body. At first, it caused her great and constant pain. But after fifteen years her pain had become as present but unnoticeable as her kidneys and her liver. And then, after Naseem had sold the motel and also moved back to Pakistan, her pain became vestigial.

The new owner kept Marie on as a maid. And she was never again unfaithful. But she had never congratulated herself on being her better self for all those years. She believed that she didn't deserve her own grace.

Marie's knees and ankles hurt because she had so often squatted and kneeled to clean the floors.

Her feet hurt because she stood for most of the day. And she'd never owned a good pair of work shoes. She'd always promised herself that she would buy a better pair of shoes with the next paycheck.

But "with the next paycheck" was like saying "Dear Big Bang."

Her lower back hurt because of all the times she had carried the vacuum and heavy bags of clean and dirty towels, and had thrown garbage and recycling and compost into the dumpsters in the alley behind the motel.

One day, she'd twisted her back so severely that she'd collapsed in pain on the sidewalk.

At the free clinic, she learned that "back spasms" was the fancy way to say "torn muscles."

Once or twice a year since then, she'd torn her back again. But she'd missed only a few days of work because of her bad back. She'd spend one day in bed, recovering, and then she'd force herself back to cleaning, because she'd read that an injured back heals best during activity.

She'd slowly gained weight, three or four pounds a year. Not much, until you add it all up one morning and discover that you're a two-hundred-pound woman.

Getting obese overnight, she thought. That's the great American magic trick.

The extra weight didn't help her back. She went on dozens of diets. She failed. That was O.K. She didn't look any bigger than most of the women and men she saw every day. She belonged.

Her hands hurt.

Arthritis.

Carpal-tunnel syndrome.

And the recurring rashes caused by the soaps and disinfectants and window cleaners.

Her skin itched and burned.

She tried wearing gloves at work, but that only made her rashes migrate from her hands to her wrists, forearms, and elbows.

Some mornings, she woke with hands so stiff that she could not make fists. She could not hold her coffee cup or toothbrush. She'd submerge her hands in hot water and flex and flex and flex until her fingers worked properly again.

"It's hard work," she'd said to Father James. "But it's not like working in a coal mine."

"Maybe it is," he'd said.

One slow day, as she filled in for the new owner at the front desk, Marie used the motel computer to search for Evie.

She typed in Evie's full name and "Reno, Nevada" and found nothing. She added the words "missing" and "obituary" and "death" and found nothing. Then she typed in Evie's name and "housekeeper" and "Arizona."

And there she was, smiling in an employee photo. She worked at a retirement home in Flagstaff.

It had been quite a few years, but Evie still looked exactly like Evie.

"You're alive," Marie said to Evie's photo.

Below Evie's photo was an e-mail address and a phone number.

"I could call you right now," Marie said to the photo.

Marie thought about distance and time. She remembered reading once that Cleopatra had lived closer in time to the building of the first Pizza Hut than to the building of the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Everything is temporary, Marie thought.

Then she wiped tears from her eyes, closed the browser window containing Evie's photo, and turned to greet the new guests who'd walked into the motel office.

On her last day of work, at age sixty-three, Marie was given a peculiar honor.

“You only have to clean one room,” the new owner said. Marie still thought of him as the new owner eleven years after Naseem had sold the motel.

“But I want the last full shift,” she said. Why? Because she needed that sense of completion. Because she wanted to use that last bit of money to buy herself a retirement gift. A new watch, perhaps, now that she didn’t have to worry about ruining it with soap or water or cleaning fluids.

“I’ll pay you full shift for cleaning one room,” the owner said. “That is my gift to you.”

So she took her time. Rummaged through the clean towels and sheets to find the newest and cleanest.

She scrubbed the toilet, sink, and shower with bleach. And then she picked a few wildflowers from a sidewalk crack, placed them in a plastic cup half filled with water, and set that on the bathroom windowsill.

Then she dusted, sprayed, and cleaned all the wooden furniture. She polished the wood. It was too cheap and old and battered to sparkle. But a dim star is more visible than a dark star.

Marie vacuumed the room, pushing hard until you could see the brush patterns in the carpet. It would be obvious to the next guest that the carpet had been thoroughly vacuumed.

There would be visual evidence.

She cleaned the windows. That took a long time, because the windows had rarely been cleaned. No guests had ever complained about the dirty windows, because this was the kind of motel where the curtains were rarely opened.

Marie wiped down the walls.

And, finally, after three hours of cleaning, she stood on a wooden chair and scrubbed a small stain off the ceiling.

Then Marie stepped out of the room and locked the door behind her.

In the employee bathroom, she changed out of her maid uniform and put on her favorite purple blouse and bluejeans.

The owner gave Marie her last paycheck in cash. Two weeks' worth of money. Six hundred dollars.

Then she got into her car. It started on the fourth try.

She drove home to her husband. He was sitting on their couch watching the midday news. He'd retired from his job at the hardware store a few months earlier.

With Social Security and Medicaid and Medicare and good luck, Marie and her husband would survive.

"Do you want a beer?" she asked her husband.

"Only if you're getting one for yourself," he said.

She grabbed two Budweisers from the fridge. Then she and her husband watched the weather report together.

October was on the way. It would be warm during the day and cold at night.

That makes perfect sense, Marie thought.

Then she kissed her husband on the cheek and waited for the rest of her life to happen. ♦

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