

## Airing Dirty Laundry

Fall had come early to East Grand Rapids and a draft inside Hosni's Dry Cleaning establishment sent a chill down Celia Womack's arms. Rain tapped on the front window, freckling the tinted glass behind her.

Celia stood patiently while the man ahead of her patted the pockets of his shirt for a dry cleaning ticket. She took a step back to allow room for his elbows as the younger man fished for the missing slip in first his right and then his left pocket.

"My wife's gonna kill me if I don't bring her clothes home. We've got a wedding to leave for in the morning."

The flummoxed husband opened his wallet to search harder for the ticket, but to his good fortune Mr. Hosni stood behind the counter ready to assist.

"Not to worry, sir. What's your wife's name?"

"Lila Graham."

"Ah, Miz Graham. Yes, it's no problem," the little dry cleaner smiled.

Hosni tapped the keys of his computer to access the Graham's account, then stepped on a foot pedal to trigger the mechanical delivery of Mrs. Graham's clothing to her waiting husband.

A parade of garments hanging high above them swayed to a gentle start, then moved along the ceiling in a downward march toward the threesome. At a certain interval, Hosni halted the procession and reached between the bundles to locate Mrs. Graham's things.

"Yes, this is correct," he said and hung her cleaning on a rack next to his counter.  
"That will be thirty-two dollars, and fifty cents, please."

While Mr. Graham counted money to pay the bill, Celia gazed at the clothes that belonged to Mrs. Graham with an appreciative eye. A cocktail dress in a soft orchid hue hung in front of the other items. Bugle beads dangled from its capped sleeves, and the short hem was edged in a sheer georgette, which added length but no modesty to the daring cut. Behind the dress there appeared to be a matching jacket with cut velvet cuffs and collar. Celia stared at the pretty things, wondering what the ensemble cost.

"Excuse me," Mr. Graham interrupted her thoughts, sweeping passed Celia with the bagged clothing slung over a thick forearm. Stopping at the shop door he turned to Hosni and added, "Thanks again for your help. You saved my hide!"

Mr. Graham flashed a handsome smile and waved goodbye, but didn't wait for Hosni's reply before darting out into the late afternoon drizzle.

"Poor man," Hosni said, and shook his head.

"Why poor man? You saved his hide after all," Celia laughed.

"No, I mean poor man for having that wife. Always showing off her body, always working out that one, and for what? She's married and has three children. Why not act her age?"

Celia was taken back by the lack of discretion in Mr. Hosni's comments. She had been doing business with him for at least ten years, and it had never occurred to her that he might have opinions about his customers one way or another.

"At least she has good taste," Celia said, trying to divert the conversation.

"If you say so," Hosni grunted.

"He seemed to be in good shape. Maybe they exercise together?"

"He builds swimming pools, what else? She doesn't work at all. What a frivolous woman, really. Not like you, Mrs. Womack. So hard working."

"Oh, I can't really say I work that hard," Celia said, wishing Mr. Hosni wouldn't opine any further. "It's a lot easier to work with kids when you don't have any to go home to."

"Nevertheless," Hosni wagged a stubby finger. "You tutor all those students, and watch your grandchildren. Being with young people takes energy, am I right?"

"Which reminds me, Mr. Hosni. I'm picking up the blouse I brought in Saturday with the bloodstain. My grandson and his nosebleeds!"

Hosni pondered a moment.

"I think that may still be in back. Excuse me a moment Mrs. Womack while I check, will you?"

He turned and left Celia alone at the front counter to retrieve her item and she began thinking about Mr. Hosni's comments.

It wasn't as if he were a doctor or priest by any means, but somehow she felt that a dry cleaner ought not be so judgmental about his customers.

Celia had nothing to worry about, of course. She had come to think of Mr. Hosni as a sort of friend over the years. And what could he really tell anyone about her anyway? That her blacks never matched and she cut the sizes out of her clothes? She was hardly someone Mr. Hosni or anyone else would gossip about.

A rustling in the back of the store caught Celia's attention, and Hosni came into sight holding her blouse up for inspection.

He laid the plain beige shell across his counter and pointed to a spot.

"Bad news. We didn't get the stain out. You could take it home today, or we could try to treat the spot again, but it might take the color out. Which do you prefer?"

Celia deliberated a long while.

"I know it's probably ruined, but can you try again and see what happens?"

"Certainly. You could pick it up any time after 5:00 tomorrow," Hosni bowed.

"Tomorrow would be fine. See you then."

Turning to leave, Celia was disappointed to find that the light drizzle Mr. Graham encountered shortly before had evolved into a downpour. She pulled an inadequate little umbrella from her bag and extended it overhead, hurrying to her car while furious raindrops splattered across the back of her skirt and legs. Thunder broke overhead and she leapt in, slamming the car door on the hem of her good, pleated skirt.

Celia put a key in the ignition expecting the engine to turn over, but there was a coughing hesitancy in the machinery followed by some sputtering, and she held her breath fearing the car wouldn't start.

The engine finally came to life after several tries and began to idle normally, but the drive home in the aging sedan was an exercise in windshield wiper adjustments and temperature control. By the time Celia arrived home and parked in the garage, she was tired, annoyed and uncomfortably damp.

A familiar call greeted her as Celia came into the house through the kitchen door. "Hello?"

"Hello," she sighed, making her way to the family room. After thirty-seven years of marriage Celia knew that she would most likely find her husband Gene either in front of

the refrigerator or the television. Today he was stretched across the couch watching the Golf Channel with his stocking feet propped over an armrest.

Celia leaned over to kiss the top of Gene's head.

"I'm glad your home," he smiled up at her.

"You and me both."

"No good today?"

"One of my students was a no-show and the car is acting up again."

"What's wrong with the car?"

"Same trouble getting it to start. Could you take it in this time?" Celia walked around the couch to sit down next to Gene.

"Good Lord, you're soaked," he said, sitting up.

Celia looked down at the limp pleats of her skirt, and fanned them out for a better view.

"I better get out of these things."

Gene rose and followed her to their bedroom, babbling away as they walked.

"Can you believe this rain? Burgess and I had to come off the course before noon, so we played Cribbage in the bar until lightening hit a generator behind the club house and the power went out. We tried to wait it out, but it got too dark."

Celia turned a bedside lamp on as she passed into the master bath to undress. Gene made himself comfortable on the bed watching his wife change.

"What'd you do to your skirt?" he called to her.

Celia twisted around both ways, sadly finding the hem on the left side soiled with mud and oil where it had braved the elements trapped outside her car door.

"Oh, good grief! One wear and it has to go back to the cleaners. Mr. Hosni's going to tell people I'm a slob!"

"Who?"

Celia pulled her skirt around to the front for closer inspection.

"You know, our dry cleaner," she said, unzipping the unfortunate garment and stepping out of it.

"You know what he said to me today? He told me about a customer with three children who goes to the gym to show off her body, and all about her poor overworked husband."

Celia came out of the bathroom pulling a chenille bathrobe over flannel pajamas.

"It makes you wonder what kind of things he says about other people. Everybody we know uses Mr. Hosni for their cleaning. I've been recommending him for years."

"Stop recommending him, then," Gene suggested firmly.

"It's too late. I think I should say something to him, though. It just seems so disloyal to gossip about paying customers."

Celia sat down on her side of the bed and reached under a pillow for a pair of socks to cover her cold feet.

"Plant a story with him and see if he passes it along. If it gets back to you, confront him."

Celia made a face at him. "You're full of vinegar today. Did you order a liquid lunch in the clubhouse?"

"I didn't have any lunch, and I'm starved. Can you make me some soup?"

"Honestly, Gene," Celia said, feeling the floor with her stocking feet for a pair of slippers. "Maybe you could heat your own soup for once? Or maybe serve soup to me?" She stood up in a huff, giving Gene a look.

He was reclined across their bed with his eyes closed, hands resting behind his head. Her gesture was entirely lost on him.

"Oh, I don't know why I bother," she gave in.

Gene heard the slap of Celia's slippers in the hallway heading away from him. He hopped off the bed and followed her to the kitchen, taking his usual seat at the counter. Celia opened the freezer to survey their dinner choices, moving the frozen contents around with more force than she meant to.

"What's the matter with you?" Gene asked.

"I guess you were awfully busy with golf and Cribbage today. I was only juggling the schedules of three mathematically-challenged teenagers and running errands in the rain. Could you maybe have had dinner waiting for me?"

Gene swiveled his barstool away from the counter, and retreated to the couch.

"I'm not a mind reader you know," he called over his shoulder.

"You're not very considerate either," Celia sighed.

Gene locked his gaze on the Golf Channel. "Let me know when you're done fussing and I'll order whatever you want."

Celia took a container of split pea soup out of the freezer and put it in the microwave. She pressed the defrost button and watched the block of soup orbit slowly inside the little oven, waiting for Gene to offer some words to smooth things over.

A long silence hung in the air between them while he flipped between the Golf Channel and ESPN.

"Could you at least get some bowls out or offer to help in some little way?" Celia prodded.

Gene left his television programs to retrieve took two bowls and spoons from the dishwasher. He stacked them on the kitchen counter and retreated back to his place on the couch in silence.

Celia stopped the microwave and stirred the frosty contents, resetting the timer to finish heating dinner.

"Do you want croutons?" she called to Gene, but her husband didn't answer. "Gene! Do you want croutons?"

"Is it safe to say I want croutons?"

Celia hit the stop button on the whirling microwave again.

"What did you say?"

"I don't know what you want me to say, Celia. It seems like all you want to do is pick a fight. I offered to get take out, but you ignored me."

A flush rose in her cheeks.

"You think I'm the problem?"

"All I know is that you came home in a bad mood. I was fine until then."

"Well, sure you were fine with nothing to do, just sitting around expecting to be waited on. But let me ask you this: do you think there will ever be a time when I can expect you to wait on me? Maybe you could start by taking the car in for repairs? Or fixing my dinner!"



Forgetting about her stomach, Celia stormed off to their bedroom angry and cold. She kicked her slippers off and leaped under the comforter as quickly as possible, but not before sweeping Gene's pillows to the floor.

She waited resentfully for him to come to bed, but Gene slept on the couch in the family room leaving Celia alone all night with her unhappy thoughts. For hours she simmered in the dark, stewing over Gene's inconsideration and reminding herself of long forgotten grievances, beating herself up for being his doormat and thinking of ways to straighten him out. Sleep finally overtook her near dawn.

By late morning the sun was out, the rain had cleared and so had Celia's thoughts. She rose and met Gene in the backyard where he was filling bird feeders from a waterproof bin, wearing the same clothes he'd had on the night before.

"I'm going shopping."

"Does that mean you're done fighting?" Gene asked without turning around.

"Don't worry Gene. I'll be home in time for dinner."

Celia left him pouting --she hoped, and returned to the house to grab her coat and purse. She said a prayer for the car to start and was rewarded for her trouble.

A short drive later brought Celia to a quaint downtown shopping district she favored. She parked under a canopy of bright, falling leaves, and made her way along storefronts and restaurants until she reached a little department store that catered to the well-heeled retirees of East Grand Rapids.

Celia entered the store and headed straight for the designer section, where a waif of a twenty-something sales girl appeared between the racks to greet her.

"Looking for anything special?" the young woman sparkled.

"Yes, a new look. Something fresh and pretty."

The clerk shook her head agreeably.

"How about I show you a few things and then you can tell me if I'm headed in the right direction, okay?"

Celia agreed, letting the personal shopper take over. She allowed herself to be directed to a fitting room filled with finely made clothes, and stripped down to her mismatched underwear to try them on.

Few of the garments the girl chose actually fit Celia well enough to satisfy her, but she finally settled on a lovely cashmere sweater with a low V-neck and a pair of gabardine slacks in matching aubergine. She deliberated a while longer whether to add lingerie to her purchase or not, and decided she was long overdue. The clerk was more than happy to add frilly nightgowns to Celia's collection.

"I'll take all of these," she told the girl waiting faithfully outside her dressing room door, and hurried to make the purchase.

Celia strolled out of the store carrying two full shopping bags, and headed straight for the shoe shops dotting both sides of the street. At an unappointed hour, she made a visit to a premiere hair salon to add a final flourish to her day.

It was just before 5:30 when Celia walked into Hosni's dry cleaning salon to pick up her blouse and leave her mud splattered skirt in its place. Mr. Hosni greeted Celia cheerfully at the counter.

"Ah, Mrs. Womack, you're looking... stylish. I think maybe you did something different to your hair?"

"Why yes, I did. It's been cut and colored. Do you like it Mr. Hosni?"

"Such a vivid color," he observed. "What brought this change on?"

"Didn't I tell you? About a month ago I took a job selling birdseed to specialty pet stores. I'm putting myself out there, so I want to fit in with all the younger working women. Of course I also want to stand out, so I thought, why not go red?"

"What does Mr. Womack think of your new look?"

"Gene? Well, the truth is Mr. Hosni... I've left him. There I said it! You're the first person I've been brave enough to tell, and frankly it's liberating!" Celia beamed.

"Mrs. Womack! It's so hard to understand how this could happen. After all this time and no hint of anything wrong until now?"

"Actually," she patted his hand, "it's been a long time coming."

Hosni's brow furrowed.

"But, is there money in birdseed? I mean, will you be able to support yourself?"

"I should say so," Celia said, leaning closer to him. "Why just last week I had to restrain a competitor who was trying to move in on one of my accounts. Unfortunately, I slipped while administering a kick to the seat of her pants and my skirt took the brunt of the encounter."

Celia spread her soiled, pleated skirt across the counter for Hosni's inspection.

"I'll trade you this poor skirt for my blouse".

Hosni cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid there was no luck in removing the blood from your blouse, but let me retrieve it for you."

"Don't bother," Celia winked. "Who needs that kind of evidence lying around, right? Just donate it someplace, or do whatever it is you do with unclaimed clothes. If the police call though, you never saw it before, okay?"

Hosni stared at Celia, his mouth unaccustomedly slack and his eyes fixed on hers.

"Do you think you can get oil out of wool?" she pointed to the stained skirt.

"We'll certainly try. Will next Thursday be soon enough for you?"

"Perfect. I leave for a birdseed convention in Billings next weekend and I'd like to take it with me. It's cold in the slaughter houses, but I'm so anxious to see how suet is combined with seeds to make our winter line. Isn't it fascinating? And don't get me started on the nectars! Do you know Mr. Hosni that hummingbird nectar has the same ingredients as Mai Tai mix?"

"Cheers to the hummingbirds!" Celia said, raising her hand in a pantomimed toast. "It sure beats drinking with those ungrateful kids I used to tutor!"

Hosni took a step back from the counter, his hands clasped tightly together.

"Mrs. Womack," he said softly, "maybe I should mention that I won't be here on Thursday, but my wife will be happy to help you."

"Then I'll see you when I return. Please tell Mrs. Hosni that I'll fetch my skirt Thursday morning."

Celia turned to leave, then stopped and pivoted on her heels to face the little dry cleaner again.

"Mr. Hosni," she said with exaggerated diction. "One more thing please. When you see Lila Graham next, can you tell her something for me? Please let her know that she's won. Gene Womack is all hers."

#

By the time Gene heard the garage door closing, Celia was already coming through the kitchen door.

"That you?" he called from his place at the kitchen counter working a crossword puzzle.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't."

"What do you mean?" Gene said, glancing Celia's way as she came around the corner, then fixing his stare after a double-take.

"Oh my God, you've got to be kidding! What have you done to your hair?"

"I had it colored and cut."

"It's so short! Please tell me that's a wig."

"I like it. It's young and fun, which you wouldn't know anything about."

Gene shook his head.

"Just let it go gray once and for all, for gosh sakes. You're not fooling anybody you know."

Celia tilted her chin up.

"I didn't do it for anyone else. This is just for me."

"It must be, because I won't be seen with you," Gene snorted and stomped out of the room.

"Mr. Hosni liked it," Celia called after him, brushing bangs away from her eyes. She redistributed her shopping bags from one hand to the other and followed Gene into the living room.

"You're hurting my feelings acting like this. It is my hair after all," Celia reminded him.

"What are your students going to think?"

"I really don't care what they think, Gene. They're children. I do care that you seem to only think about me when your stomach rumbles. Well, maybe you'll notice me now," she said, and spread the contents of her shopping bags across the couch. Gene frowned harder.

"Where do you plan on wearing this stuff? You'll hurt yourself in those shoes."

"It's the new me Gene. And take a look at this." Celia held a filmy nightgown up by its straps and pulled it across her hips to show it off.

"The first time you wash that thing it's just going to fall apart."

"It's silk, Gene. It has to be dry cleaned." She twisted gently from side to side to watch the hem float.

"More dry cleaning. Good Lord you'd think we were made of money!"

"Speaking of dry cleaning, Mr. Hosni thinks you're having an affair, and that I've left you."

Gene stood motionless, reassembling in his brain the words that had come out of her mouth.

"Why would he think that, Celia?"

"Because I told him so," she said, picking up a second nightgown for comparison.

Gene swallowed hard.

"You told him I am having an affair and you left me. Why?"

"You said to start a rumor. So I did."

Gene's face turned red.

"I said that? Why, I never said anything of the sort!"

"Gene Womack, you most certainly did!" Celia's voice began to rise. "Your exact words were 'plant a story and if he passes it along confront him.'"

"I meant tell him we won the lottery, or that you wrote a cook book and it's being published. How could you spread those kinds of stories?"

Celia paused to ponder the question, but there was really no good reason she could think of.

"I guess because it felt good to say them."

Gene's expression froze.

"Are you thinking of leaving me Celia?"

She looked at his ashen face and slumped shoulders and burst out laughing.

"Don't be ridiculous, Gene. Not everything is about you."

"Whatever it is you're planning, think how it will affect your grandchildren."

"Take me to dinner, Gene. Take me someplace where you can see my new sweater by candlelight."

"You think I won't make a scene if you break bad news to me in public? I'm no quitter Celia!"

"Just say yes, Gene. I'll tell you about the job I invented selling birdseed."

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Come on, now. Get in the shower while I change clothes. We'll have a nice dinner and I'll take you through everything I did today."

"I'm afraid to hear any more."

"I'm serious Gene, we're going out. Please don't forget to shave," Celia said, gathering up her new wardrobe.

Gene walked reluctantly down the hall and into their bedroom, with Celia trailing behind. He closed the door to the master bath and soon enough Celia heard water running in the shower. When she thought certain her husband wouldn't be coming out she moved a reading lamp closer to the mirror on the bureau and raised her eyes slowly to see her reflection. Appraising her new makeup and the cut and brilliant color of her hair, Celia was pleased to find a picture that wasn't half bad, maybe even fetching.

The phone beside the bed rang and Celia answered it with contentment flowing from her voice.

"Womack residence."

"Celia, this is Bruce Burgess."

"Bruce! Sorry, but Gene can't take your call. He's in the shower."

"No Celia, I need to talk with you," he corrected her.

Celia turned the reading lamp off and moved away from the mirror.

"Me? Sure, what's up, Bruce?"

"I don't really know how to ask you this, so I'm just going to ask: Did you give alcohol to my niece Skipper? Tell the truth now."

Celia held the phone away from her ear and looked at the receiver as if translation was needed.

"Bruce Burgess if you're still at the clubhouse you need to go home and sleep it off," she snapped, preparing to hang up on him.

"Don't be evasive Celia. I heard from a reliable source that you drink with your students. I can have this conversation with the district office if you prefer, but I'm asking you first, did you give alcohol to our little Skipper?"



Celia started to protest her innocence until her last conversation with Hosni surfaced in her thoughts.

"Bruce, it's not what you think," she laughed, but her accuser wasn't interested in listening.

"Save it for your employers, Celia, I'll be talking to them next," he said, and hung up abruptly.

Gene cracked the bathroom door open, letting steam escape around him.

"Who was that?" he asked, rubbing a towel against his head.

"Your lunatic golf partner, that's who. Honestly, he knows I don't drink!"

Gene opened the door wider.

"Did you tell him something crazy too?"

"Me? I told him nothing. It's what he heard that's the problem."

Gene gave her a pained look.

"Did he hear that you're leaving me? I won't be able to stand it if you tell me he did."

Celia sat stiffly on the edge of their bed turning her face away from Gene.

"Well, the thing is, I made a joke in front of Mr. Hosni about drinking with my students, and it seems that it got back to Burgess."

Gene sighed and joined her on the bed.

"You really went to town today didn't you?"

"Don't get mad when I tell you this, but do you remember that I tutored Bruce's niece last year? I guess he thinks I gave her alcohol and he said he's going to the school about it."

"Good Lord, didn't you think something like this could happen? Or were you trying to make a mess of everything?" Gene demanded to know.

Oh, how she wished for a scathing retort! Some snappy comeback to send him thinking, but embarrassment got the better of her, and she burst into tears.

"No, Gene, I didn't think it all through. All I wanted was for someone to notice me. I wanted strangers at the dry cleaner's to look at my clothes and try to imagine what kind of life I lead. I'm tired of just being someone in the background waiting on you. Do you ever wonder Gene if I'm still happy with you?"

Gene stared at his wife, watching Inky circles of mascara spread beneath her eyes. She looked tired and very small.

He stood up slowly and touched her hair, rolling a loose, fluorescent curl between his thumb and finger. Finally he walked away leaving Celia hunched over the end of their bed crying.

"If you're going into the bathroom will you please bring me some tissue?" she called miserably after him.

Celia heard dresser drawers opening and muffled noises in their closet.

Gene did not appear for many minutes and when he did, he passed by her fully dressed and silent. Celia held her breath waiting for Gene to say goodbye, but the only sound was his thudding footfall in the hall.

*If you leave Gene I'll never forgive you!* she sniveled miserably, lifting the end of the bedspread to wipe her eyes and nose. *You should have paid more attention to me. You should have called Bruce to defend me, but no! Good old Celia can deal with everything. Well deal with a life without me if you think you can, Gene Womack!*

She cried like a child, miserably and completely, sobbing from the diaphragm and choking on air.

A clatter in the kitchen brought Celia to her feet.

"Don't go, Gene!"

She flew down the hall and into the kitchen, prepared to say anything to keep her husband from leaving her. Gene was at the kitchen island with a knife in his hand. A tub of frozen soup turned inside the microwave and two candles glowed atop the kitchen table.

"I thought... maybe you might want to eat at home instead of going out?" He set the knife aside and pushed a round of bread toward her. "I don't know how to make croutons though. Can you eat buttered bread?"

"Candles?" she wiped her eyes with a paper napkin.

"To see your new sweater by. See, Red? I was listening."

Celia put a hand to her hair.

"I know you don't like this color, but do you think you could get used to it?"

Gene inhaled deeply.

"No, probably not. But I don't want to give anyone else the opportunity to get used to it either."

Celia's lips trembled and Gene came around the counter. He opened his arms to pull her in and she welcomed his embrace, resting her head in the curve of his neck like sweethearts.

They held each other tenderly, enjoying the warmth and familiar fit of one and other's body. Affections sparked, inspiring the intimate evening that followed and making the

couple feel closer and more happy with each other than they had been in a long time. By morning any grievances Celia had harbored seemed far away. Truly, until Gene's spiteful mistress called her to expose his rumored affair with Lila Graham, it was one of the most memorable evenings of Celia's married life.