

Free Clothes

On a hill by the sea, a massive and extravagant house stood waiting. It rested in a flawless garden of blooming flowers, vibrant leaves and delicate lotus trees. The green grass made the coastal sand dunes around it look gray and lifeless. Everything about the house was purest white: snowy terraces, marble pillars and stone roof tiles. White curtains hung behind white painted window shutters, swaying against pale tile flooring. A white brick road carved up the side of the hill, leading through a white stone archway into the garden. Yet despite its perfection, not an inkling of life dared stray within its walls. The seagulls aborted their paths in the sky, and songbirds never sat in the lotus trees. Squirrels avoided the hill entirely. Even the wind rarely ventured to slither through the grass.

Two girls wandered near the house one brilliant, sunny day. They ducked under the fence of the schoolyard and followed the scent of salty air to the beach. Mida felt hesitant about being so far from their little town. She kept glancing over her shoulder, expecting her teacher to jump out of the tall grass with a meter stick. Antoinette danced across the sand, reveling in their stolen day of freedom. She splashed in the waves, pulling Mida farther down the beach, until suddenly she stopped.

Antoinette stared up at the hill, lips parted and eyes wide. “Do you see that?”

Mida staggered up behind her. “See what?”

“That house!” She waved her hands in emphasis. “I didn’t think anyone lived here. We should see who it is!”

“Are you sure?” Mida asked. “We wouldn’t want to bother them.”

She scoffed. “Look how lonely it looks up there. Whoever lives here probably wants company.”

Mida opened her mouth to argue, but Antoinette pulled her hand toward the hill. The pristine, white road appeared in their path, winding up the hill like a trail of daisies. Mida felt a prickle of curiosity. She followed Antoinette up the curving slope, feeling like the road had found them, instead of the other way around.

They entered the garden, marveling at the swirling, tumbling maze of foliage. When they saw the gilded front door, the allure of the mansion became so intoxicating that both girls sprinted to the steps. Antoinette knocked on the door. They waited a long moment before a young man in a black suit appeared. His black hair was oiled into short, sweeping curls.

“Welcome,” he said with a pleasing smile.

Mida opened her mouth, prepared to recite the niceties they had practiced, but he gestured grandly with his hand before either of them could speak. “My name is Silus. What are yours?”

“Mida.”

“Antoinette.”

“Lovely to make your acquaintance,” he said earnestly. “Please come in.”

The girls exchanged a secret smile. “Thank you.”

They entered onto a balcony with two marble staircases descending from either side into a grand ballroom. Hallways and doors lined the walls, leading to countless rooms full of mystery.

The man led them to a large restroom, his shiny shoes clicking on the marble tiles, and opened the door. Bright sunlight spilled out onto them. “You may refresh yourselves before meeting Mr. Lotus.”

Antoinette skipped inside. Mida looked around with a small crease in her brow. “Who?”

“The owner of the house,” he replied. “The man you came to see.”

She blinked. “Yes. Right.”

They washed their hands and faces in glistening white sinks and dried them with towels like cumulus clouds. Small bottles of scented lotion sat on a silver tray labeled “for guests.” They were tied with ribbon, so they each took one.

The man took them to a semicircular room with a wall of windows looking out at a golf course. A bar occupied one side of the room, with a marble bar top and white cushioned stools. A man in a pale gray suit sat at the bar, sipping a cocktail and gazing at the sea.

He spun around as they entered, his plastic-like face splitting with a wide smile. “Guests! What a welcome surprise.” He stood and shook their hands, while the girls stared up at him with wide eyes. “I am Mr. Lotus. What are your names?”

“I’m Antoinette,” she said. “It’s very nice to meet you. Your house is just wonderful.”

“Thank you, my dear. And you?”

“Mida.”

“A pleasure. What would you like to drink?”

Antoinette winked at Mida, smiling. “Two Shirley Temples, please.”

The butler appeared behind the bar, pouring soda over crackling ice. He topped each drink with a bright red cherry, sliding them across the table. Beverages in hand, the girls followed Mr. Lotus on a tour. They drank in the sight of ballrooms, indoor tennis courts and a private golf course. Their gasps of amazement echoed through a grand dining room and a velvet curtained theater. A flurry of chefs served them strawberry cream cake in a shining, industrial kitchen. Stray dollar bills floated from Mr. Lotus’ pockets, rippling through the air until the girls snatched them up with muffled giggles.

Mr. Lotus paused before an elevator. “How do you like my home, Miss Antoinette and Mida?”

“It’s wonderful,” Antoinette said.

Mida was in a daze. “It’s like a dream.”

His eyes twinkled, lips curling into a smile. “This is only the beginning. The lower level is where I keep my collection of precious gems, and where I manage my clothing company. There’s also a trampoline park, and six guest suites.”

Antoinette bounced on her toes. “May we see?”

“Of course! Follow me.”

Mr. Lotus let them gawk at displays of emeralds, sapphires and gold necklaces, drool condensing on their open lips. In his clothing design room, he showed them rows of all the most modern, desirable styles hanging on elegant mannequins. He let them choose whatever they wanted. When their arms were full, the butler offered to take the clothes to their rooms. They accepted this offer without question.

Mr. Lotus whisked them away to the glorious trampoline room. They bounced around laughing until their cheeks hurt and they collapsed in a heap. They forgot about everything that ever worried them. Thoughts of schoolwork, house chores and petty arguments melted from their minds. When they were sufficiently exhausted, the butler led them to a suite, where they found silk pajamas laid out on fluffy beds. They curled up together, asleep as soon as they closed their eyes.

In the dark of night, the spell broke.

Mida awoke in pitch darkness to a hum pulsing through her ears. The noise surrounded her with waves of undulating sound. Her heartbeat quickened with panic. She pulled herself

away from sleeping Antoinette, her bare feet landing on the cold, marble floor. Everything that looked so white and pure the day before turned grey and sickly in the darkness. The air clogged her throat. Her toe brushed against a cloth. As her eyes adjusted, she realized that clothes covered the entire floor. Blouses, dresses, pants and shoes formed a rolling mountain range around every square inch of the suite.

Revulsion rose in her gut. She stumbled over the clothes and into the hallway, leaning against the door. Her skin crawled. She started running without a destination in mind, eyes darting around the sea of murky walls. Every corner seemed unfamiliar. She felt like a sock tumbling around a hot dryer.

Mida whirled around a corner and stopped. Orange light glowed on the floor, coming from the open door of Mr. Lotus's office. A fist of fear closed around her heart. What was she doing in this house? Why had she trusted this man? She had to get out, but Antoinette still slept in that suffocating suite.

"Hello, Mida."

She froze in the act of turning around. "Hello, Mr. Lotus."

He emerged from the office, casting a dark shadow across the tiles. "Do you need something?"

She blinked. Had he always looked like he was carved of ghostly wax? "I would like some fresh air. I couldn't sleep."

"Well, go right ahead. I'm sure you can find the door."

She nodded slowly. "Yes. Thank you."

"Of course."

His eyes lingered on her face for a moment before he disappeared.

She sucked in a breath, stumbling backward and running down the hallway. She steeled herself from the stench of rotting fabric and burst into the suite, shaking Antoinette to wake her.

Antoinette groaned, slowly opening her eyes. “Mida?”

Mida clutched her arm, whispering. “We have to go. I don’t know how to get out, but we shouldn’t be here. It’s not safe.”

She creased her brow. “What do you mean? Mr. Lotus gave us so many gifts. Look at all our new clothes.”

Mida looked back and forth at the decaying garments and her friend. She didn’t know what to say.

“Come on. Please,” she said, forcing her voice to be gentle. “Our parents will be wondering where we are.”

Antoinette rubbed her eyes, sitting up. “Fine. But we should take all the stuff we got.”

Mida nodded, feeling more desperate the longer she breathed in the thick, milky air. “Sure. We can take the stuff, just get up.”

They gathered as much as they could carry, stuffing their pockets with Mr. Lotus’ stray cash. As they snuck through the halls, Mida carefully avoided the orange light, taking the opposite hall that led up the stairwell. They made their way through the house, gradually approaching the exit. Mida was appalled at the putrescent filth that coated everything. How had they not seen it before? The rooms smelled of sweat and dried blood. Grimy spots stained the carpet. Scraps of fabric and string lingered along the edge of the walkway. She wished she had a free hand to reach for Antoinette.

They entered the room with the bar and large windows looking out at the sea. A small woman almost ran into them, clutching a bundle of fabric and wearing a tattered apron.

Antoinette inhaled sharply.

The woman's sunken eyes widened in terror. Her skin clung to her bones, and her dark hair was slick with sweat. A bruise bloomed across one cheek. Bloody needle pricks dotted her shaking fingers. Her feet were bare and calloused. She bowed her head, moving to slip past them, but Mida stepped to the side to stop her.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What is this place?"

The woman shook her head, trying to move around her. Her voice was subdued to a whisper, and she avoided her eyes. "I'm not allowed to speak to guests."

Mida reached for her shoulder to stop her, dropping the clothes to the floor. "Please—what are you doing here?"

She stared resolutely at the floor a few feet away. "I make the clothes."

Mida's gut twisted. She dropped her hand, thinking of the night before, when she carelessly plucked clothes off the shelves. Her entire body felt infected with guilt.

Quick, heavy footsteps sounded somewhere near them. Mr. Lotus knew she hadn't gone back to bed.

Mida looked at the emaciated woman, not knowing what to do. "Are you—do you need help?"

The seamstress flinched and shuffled away, shaking her head. "No. No. I can't."

She hurried away. Mida looked at Antoinette, who shivered with a sob, a tear falling down her face. She dropped the stinking, wretched clothes and took Mida's hand. "We have to leave."

They ran past the butler and Mr. Lotus, even as they reached out with more clothes in their hands, begging them to stay. They ran all the way to the edge of the garden and down the cobbled road to the grassy hills before stopping.

Mida took a gasping breath, melting with relief at the taste of fresh, ocean air. Antoinette fell to her knees, shaking. “Nothing in that house was free.”

She looked back up the hill, where the white roof of Mr. Lotus’s house gleamed in the moonlight. They looked for the money in their pockets, but all the bills had turned to ash.