

On Her Knees



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIM WINTON

Tim Winton spent his early life in Perth, Western Australia, before moving to the city of Albany at the age of 12. At 19, while studying at the Curtin University of Technology, he wrote his first novel *An Open Swimmer*, which won The Australian/Vogel Literary Award and launched his career as a writer. Winton met his wife Denise when they were in school together, and the two married when Winton was 21. While Winton has lived in Greece, France, and Ireland, he currently lives in Western Australia with his wife and their three children. In addition to a writing career that includes producing works of adult literature, children's literature, short stories, and nonfiction, Winton is actively involved in environmental advocacy in Australia as a patron of the Marine Conservation Society and the Native Australian Animals Trust. A private person, he rarely appears publicly unless promoting a book or advocating for environmental movements. Winton has won the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award four times and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for fiction twice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On Her Knees," published in 2005, reflects a prevalent issue of class tension in Australia. At the time of the story's publication, Australia had only one Act prohibiting discrimination due to social origin or class. *The Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* specifically outlaws class discrimination in employment and job terminations. However, despite the evidence of widespread class discrimination, very few legal cases in Australia have made use of the 1986 Act to combat it. In "On Her Knees," Carol's working-class status makes her vulnerable to her wealthy clients. Class discrimination causes her insistence of her innocence to mean less than the accusation of her client to other wealthy homeowners and, she assumes, to police. Carol's refusal to involve law enforcement in the issue of the missing earrings reflects the low numbers of cases of class discrimination brought to trial in Australia.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Tim Winton's book of short stories *The Turning*, in which "On Her Knees" was originally published, is full of similar and connected stories set in Western Australia. Each story deals with a kind of turn: a surprise, an accident, a change in perspective, or a new understanding. Many of Winton's short stories and novels, like "On Her Knees," explore the lives of ordinary working-class people in their everyday struggles. His

1991 novel *Cloudstreet* follows two working-class Australian families who share a house over a period of twenty years. In this way, Winton's work often fits into the genres of Proletarian and working-class literature that portray the lives of the working class, often as a provocation for social change. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is a notable example of this sort of work. In *Here Comes The Sun*, a 2016 debut novel by Nicole Dennis-Benn, Margot, a worker in a luxury Jamaican resort, struggles with her family and the effects of classism as she strives for financial security. Similarly, John Lanchester's 2012 novel *Capital* follows the residents of a gentrifying London neighborhood during the 2008 financial crisis as they go about their everyday lives. Both novels illuminate the tensions of class conflict through the struggles of individuals and the drama of ordinary days.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** On Her Knees
- **When Written:** 2004
- **Where Written:** Western Australia
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Suburban Australia
- **Climax:** Victor and Carol find the missing pair of earrings
- **Antagonist:** The client
- **Point of View:** First person through the narrator Victor

EXTRA CREDIT

A National Treasure. Tim Winton, as one of Australia's most respected writers, was named a 'National Living Treasure' by The National Trust of Australia for his contributions to society both through his writing and his conservation work.

Location is Everything. Winton said in a 2008 interview that he draws much of his inspiration for writing from a sense of place and landscape. He writes primarily about coastal Western Australia, where "On Her Knees" is also set.



PLOT SUMMARY

In "On Her Knees," Victor Lang's mother Carol Lang takes pride in her excellent reputation as a cleaner in the houses of a wealthy suburb. Victor, a law student, hates to think of his mother scrubbing the floors of strangers who patronize and underpay her, but still sometimes goes and helps her with jobs

when he doesn't have class.

One long-time client accuses Carol of stealing a pair of **earrings** and immediately fires her, but also asks Carol to return to clean the **apartment** for one final week while finding a replacement. Victor thinks it's unfair of the client to ask Carol to return and tries over a several-day-long argument to convince Carol not to go. Carol insists that she will return to clean the apartment because it's a matter of personal pride. Victor finally concedes and goes along to help her.

They continue their argument in the car on the way to the apartment. Victor finds it demeaning to clean the apartment of a client who accused Carol of theft. When he wonders why the client hasn't reported the missing earrings to the police, Carol theorizes that it's because the client already found the earrings and just didn't tell her. Carol resolves to show the client the mistake she's making in firing her by cleaning the apartment flawlessly.

In the apartment, Carol finds an envelope with money in it and a note from the client that upsets her. As Victor and Carol clean, Victor thinks about the carelessness of the clients who don't clean their own houses, and how arrogant they must be to not be bothered by the cleaners touching their belongings. Victor snoops around the client's possessions, hoping to discover something incriminating, but can't find anything. In the pictures above the client's desk, she looks decent and loved by her friends.

Victor wonders again why the client didn't go to the police about the missing earrings. It occurs to him suddenly that the client might have suspected *him* of being the thief rather than Carol and decided not to go to the police as a kindness to Carol. He asks Carol whether the client suspects him of the theft, and she tells him not to be silly. He asks why they don't just clean the place lightly and leave with the money, but Carol tells him that it would look like an admission of guilt. She won't go to the police herself, either, as Victor suggests, because she knows it would look bad to her other clients.

As Victor vacuums in the client's bedroom, something hard gets sucked into the vacuum. Victor has to open the vacuum to fish it out. Among all the hair and gunk, he finds one of the missing earrings. He searches the same area, and finds the other on the floor near the head of the bed. Carol realizes that the client must have accidentally brushed the earrings off the pillow and probably didn't look for them when they went missing.

Victor thinks that they have at least cleared Carol's name, but Carol knows they haven't. She explains that there's no way to truly clear Carol's name if the client thinks she's guilty. For instance, the client might just claim Carol brought the earrings back to save her job. Carol has no way to fight back and Victor feels sick at the thought.

Initially, Victor takes the earrings and throws them in the cat litter box for the client to find if she chooses to look for them.

But after Carol finishes cleaning the apartment and declares that she won't take the money that the client left her because she's worth more than that, Victor retrieves the earrings, cleans them off, and leaves them on the counter beside the money. He sees Carol framed angelically in sunlight in the doorway and leaves the apartment feeling calmer.



CHARACTERS

Victor Lang – Victor is a twenty-year-old law student. Victor is close with his mother Carol, who pays his tuition by cleaning houses, and occasionally helps her clean when he's not in class. Extremely protective of Carol, he hates the idea of her scrubbing the floors of strangers who mistreat, exploit, and underpay her. When one client accuses Carol of the theft of a pair of **earrings** and fires her, yet still asks Carol to return for a final week of work, Victor is outraged on her behalf and insistent that she not go. Victor is stubborn and drags out the argument for a full week. When he eventually goes with his mother to help clean the client's **apartment**, he is angered and confused as to what kind of person would treat his mother so poorly. Though he searches for incriminating evidence, he finds no answers in the house. He is both covetous of the wealth evident in the house and wary of it. When he discovers the missing earrings under the bed, he thinks he's cleared Carol's name. He is disheartened and sick when Carol explains that, in this case of the wealthy client's word against theirs, there is no real way to clear her name. Ultimately, though, he trusts and respects Carol more than he disdains the wealthy client. He takes heart in his mother's pride and optimism and decides to follow her example by leaving the earrings on the counter rather than throwing them in the cat litter box.

Carol Lang – Carol is Victor's mother and his sole provider after his father walked out on them when Victor was sixteen. To support them, Carol cleans houses in the wealthy suburb nearby. She takes great pride in her work and in her good reputation. Victor describes Carol as a stickler for order, with high standards and unimpeachable integrity. After she is accused by a client of stealing a pair of **earrings** and fired from a job (but also asked to clean for one more week), rather than taking petty revenge as Victor urges, she remains calm and dignified. Conscious of her delicate position, she takes care to not do anything that might look like an admission of guilt. She cleans the **apartment** meticulously one final time to show the client what she's losing and refuses to take anything from her—either money or cleaning supplies. Carol has a strong sense of self-worth, but, at the same time, is aware of her disadvantages as a working-class woman, unable to truly defend herself against the accusations of the rich. In her behavior, respectful and generous, she sets a good example for her son, prompting him to set aside his feelings of vengeful pettiness after he discovers the missing earrings so that he

leaves them on the counter for the client to find. By the end of the story, Victor fully sees Carol's strength and integrity, and she appears to him as being haloed in light almost like an angel.

The client – After losing a pair of **earrings**, the client accuses Carol of stealing them without evidence and fires her despite years of faithful service. Not only that, but the client then presumptuously asks Carol to come clean her **apartment** for one further week while she finds a replacement cleaner. As Victor cleans the apartment with his mother, he snoops around to try and figure out what kind of person would fire his mother and then ask her to return, but he can't find anything to explain it. Nor can he find anything incriminating about her. She has academic materials and feminist books. In the photos above her desk, she looks happy and loved by her friends. At the same time, Victor finds her apartment a little sad. Victor and Carol find the missing earrings beneath the head of the bed, proving the earrings must not have been very important to her, as she never mounted an exhausting search for them, yet she fired Carol over their disappearance. The client's failure to search her house thoroughly before accusing Carol implies that even as she seems like a decent or even good person to her family and friends of the same class, she's careless, lazy, unforgiving, and unjust toward Carol and, more broadly, people of the lower class.

portrayed as honorable, honest, and possessing a “stiff-necked working-class pride.” After the client's accusation of theft, Carol brings her own cleaning supplies (rather than using the client's) to the client's **apartment**, and leaves the money she's owed for her work, both as a statement of pride by refusing to take anything further from the client and as a statement of integrity by insisting that she wouldn't steal so much as a bottle of Windex. Victor characterizes the wealthy upper class as alien to working-class people like him. He can't imagine living as they do, arrogantly inviting strangers into their houses to clean up their mess. When Victor finds the earrings Carol was accused of stealing on the floor in the apartment, it reveals the client's carelessness and laziness. Rather than searching thoroughly for the **earrings**, she immediately assumed Carol stole them. In Victor's eyes, the wealthy are self-important, ignorant, and careless with both their possessions and the lives of the people they employ. Victor is suspicious of the wealthy in general and the client in particular, searching her house to find something incriminating about her. What he discovers, though, is that she's in many ways a perfectly normal person. Her pictures reveal that she's loved by her friends and family. This portrayal of the client as ultimately ordinary emphasizes the pervasiveness of wealthy people's disdain for the lives of the working class.

As made clear in Carol's inability to fight back against the accusations of her client, the money and social connections of the wealthy give them power over the working class. Carol has no real recourse to the false accusations of her client because she must stay on the good side of her clients to maintain her reputation, which would be easily destroyed by careless slander. She can't “force the issue” by bringing in the police to prove she did not take the earrings to clear her name, because in order to keep getting work from other clients she must be discrete and not cause trouble for their wealthy peers. Her very livelihood depends on her ability to be what her clients want her to be: convenient, relatively cheap, and close to invisible. Though she is skilled at fulfilling those requirements and excellent at her job, she lives with the risk of being replaced at the first sign of inconvenience. Even when Victor and Carol find the missing earrings, Carol understands that there is no way to clear her name because the client has the social power to make any claim against Carol that she wants. It would be all too easy for her to argue that Carol stole the earrings and then later brought them back. Carol has no power to act—only to *react* to the accusations placed on her by responding with dignity and being accommodating towards her accuser. She is helpless to publicly respond against the power of her clients to exploit, control, and eventually discard her.

Through Victor's perspective and the client's mistreatment of Carol, the story presents an almost entirely negative portrait of the wealthy. Carol is portrayed as a kind of working-class hero, a David valiantly and gracefully facing down the Goliath of



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CLASS, MONEY, AND POWER

In “On Her Knees” by Tim Winton, Victor Lang's mother Carol works as a cleaner in the homes of wealthy clients. By having the working-class Carol and her son Victor go into the homes of wealthier clients, the story sets up an exploration of the qualities of and relationship between these two different classes. Put simply, the story portrays the working-class Carol as dignified, trustworthy, decent, and industrious, while, in contrast, presenting the upper-class people whose homes Carol cleans as careless, lazy, and greedy in their actions with the working-class. By centering the story around an accusation of theft leveled by one wealthy client against Carol, the story captures how the upper-class is instinctively suspicious of the working-class people whom the wealthy assume to be their inferiors, and how the upper-class's money and social connections combine to give them the power to exploit and control working-class people such as Carol.

The working class, represented in the story by Carol, is

wealth simply by continuing to do her job. In contrast, the story presents the wealthy as holding themselves up as superior to the working class while emphasizing how this self-regard is in fact the root of the everyday evil of the upper class's moral deficiency.



INTEGRITY AND REPUTATION

In Tim Winton's "On Her Knees," Victor Lang's mother Carol, who works as a housecleaner for wealthy homeowners, is accused by one of her clients of the theft of a pair of **earrings**, fired, but requested to clean the **apartment** for one final week as the client finds a replacement. When Carol and Victor return for the final cleaning, they find the missing earrings beneath the client's bed. Through this situation, the story dramatizes the difference between reputation and integrity. While Victor believes the discovery of the earrings should clear Carol's reputation, Carol understands that it won't—the client might just argue that Carol returned the earrings and then claimed to have found them. This dynamic enrages Victor, who then seeks to take some sort of revenge on the client, whether by finding some incriminating evidence about the client or by leaving the found earrings in the kitty litter. But Carol takes an entirely different tack: she cleans the apartment thoroughly and perfectly, using her own tools rather than the client's, and refuses to take any money for doing the job. While Carol recognizes she can't make an outward show to manage her reputation—her wealthy client will always have more sway in public than Carol will—Carol insists instead on maintaining her own integrity, and as the story ends Victor sees her as a kind of hero for this insistence. Ultimately, the story portrays reputation as something external, subject to forces beyond a person's control, and part of a game that has to be played but isn't a measure of personal worth. In contrast, by showing Victor's growing understanding of the strength of his mother's integrity, the story presents integrity as inherent, entirely subject to one's own control, and the ultimate measure of personal worth regardless of class, wealth, reputation, or anything else.

When Victor discovers the missing earrings on the floor beneath the client's bed, he wants to aggressively and proactively clear Carol's name by involving the police or confronting the client with the evidence that "she was too lazy to look for." Carol, however, knows that such attempts will only backfire, harming her reputation rather than salvaging it. The client has the social power to "say anything" about Carol; she could easily claim that Carol stole the earrings and later brought them back to save her reputation. Taking direct action against the client will only prompt the client to further slander her and would likely alienate her other clients as well. Carol is adamant that her reputation—her "good name"—is all she really has. Clients care about her reputation more than anything, but the story makes clear that Carol doesn't have control over it—it

is subject to the whims of clients and the dangers of careless accusations. Any attempts to insist upon her innocence and salvage her reputation will only make her look guiltier because reputation is external, built by others and not truly hers to shape. Reputation is important—vital to her work—but it is not a true reflection of Carol or her worth.

When Victor understands their helplessness in protecting Carol's reputation, he responds by initially wanting revenge. He snoops around the apartment, hoping to destroy the client's reputation by finding something incriminating, but ultimately finds nothing to satisfy him. He also finds ways to pettily make the client suffer. He tries to convince Carol to take the money and leave without completing the job and cleans the cat litter box only halfheartedly before dropping the earrings into it. Carol's behavior, however, is dignified and respectful. She completes the work perfectly, using her own tools, and refuses payment. In doing so, she insists on her own integrity in a way that not even the client could deny. She can't control her reputation, but she can control her integrity and her response to adversity. Integrity, the story implies, arises solely from Carol's own actions and attitude—no client or "talk" can take it from her or deny it. Witnessing his mother's example, Victor recognizes that his actions work counter to her belief in personal integrity. He sets aside his plans for revenge, rescuing the earrings from the cat litter box and setting them on the counter next to the money Carol refused to take. In this quiet act, Carol asserts her integrity to the client in a private way that the client can't refute or respond to.

The final image of the story, Carol bathed in the light of the open doorway of the client's apartment, shows her through Victor's eyes as a kind of hero or even an angel. Her reputation remains beyond her control, and she doesn't force the client to publicly clear her name, but, more importantly, she passes every test of adversity in upholding her personal integrity. Though Victor acts through much of the story as the metaphorical devil on Carol's shoulder, urging her towards behavior that would prioritize her reputation at the cost of her integrity, he eventually recognizes that the measure of a person's true worth lies in integrity rather than reputation. There would be no satisfaction in an avenged reputation, but Victor finds contentment and pride in the knowledge that Carol's integrity shines through all the external debris.



PRIDE AND DIGNITY

Tim Winton's "On Her Knees" tells the story of Victor Lang and his mother Carol, who cleans houses for a living. Victor hates the idea of his mother scrubbing other people's floors, while Carol insists that there is more honor in cleaning someone else's house than in hiring someone to clean your own. Though Carol is beloved by her clients for her rigorous work ethic, the story focuses on the aftermath of a particular client's accusation that Carol stole a

pair of **earrings** while cleaning her apartment. The client fires Carol yet asks her to return to clean her **apartment** for one final week until she can find a replacement. Victor considers the client's accusations to be both unjust and demeaning, and thinks that returning to clean the apartment would be shameful. He tries to convince his mother not to go, or, if she must go back, to do a poor job of cleaning the apartment in retribution. However, rather than finding the work demeaning, Carol insists on returning to the apartment and cleaning it thoroughly as proof of her dignity and personal pride. Through Carol and Victor's initially differing understandings of pride and the way that Victor comes to see Carol's view as the correct one, the story suggests that true pride and dignity come from within and are unaffected by circumstance, mistreatment, or insults.

At the outset of the story, Victor understands pride as something that can be insulted, injured, and taken away by others. He doesn't see Carol's job as a house cleaner as something to find pride or honor in, but rather as a downgrade from her former profession as a receptionist. Since he already finds the profession undignified, he perceives the client's unjust accusation as a further attack against his mother's hard-won dignity and responds as if pride is a scarce resource or the product of a zero-sum game: to save his mother's pride he tries to find ways to injure the client's pride. Carol, too, perceives the situation through the concept of pride. But her understanding is opposite to Victor's. She sees pride as something that she naturally has, and so rather than respond to the client's slights by trying to tear the client down in turn, Carol instead simply asserts her own pride by not only returning to the apartment but also cleaning to the utmost of her ability.

The morning of the cleaning, Carol stands in Victor's doorway to "lecture [him] on the subject of personal pride." Though the lecture ends before they leave, the teaching experience continues through the day as Carol models her understanding of pride to Victor. Victor is frustrated by Carol's decision to return to clean the apartment and her lack of desire for retribution on her client. Carol's idea of getting back at the client, rather than embarrassing the client by snooping for evidence or taking the money without doing the job, is living well, completing her job in a way that brings her pride, and leaving the position as gracefully as possible. Her pride is not dependent on the actions of others, but, rather, reflects her judgement of herself and her performance. She takes pride in a job well done and knows that she has worked to the best of her ability for the client. The accusation has no effect on her personal pride.

As Victor realizes that no actions of his will affect the client or prove his mother's innocence, he comes also to better understand Carol's idea of pride as unassailable. He can't control the actions of others, only his own responses to them. He comes to see that there is no reason that the wrongs of the

client should reflect poorly on Carol—it is unfair and unjust. In the same way, it is unfair of him to insist her pride has been injured by something out of her control. As the day progresses, Victor himself finds no dignity or pride in his initial instinct to act pettily and seek revenge on the client. Rather, he discovers dignity in his mother's behavior and in his own behavior modeled after hers. Through Victor's change of heart, the story suggests that Carol's idea of pride is the correct one. The actions of others might affect her reputation, but they can't touch her dignity or her pride in her work. With the realization that Carol's dignity—and his own dignity—is uninjured by the client, Victor is content to leave the client behind.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE EARRINGS

The earrings in "On Her Knees" symbolize the power and carelessness of the wealthy, as they are the catalyst for the client's unwarranted mistreatment of Carol. When the earrings go missing, the client is quick to accuse Carol of their theft and fire her, despite a lack of evidence. Like the client herself, the earrings aren't actually present for most of the story, yet they dominate Carol and Victor's thoughts and conversation. The two of them spend all week arguing about the final day of cleaning the client's **apartment** and speculating about the client and the earrings. In this way, the earrings are an invisible but persistent reminder of the client's control over the situation and her power over Carol's good reputation.

When Victor accidentally discovers the missing earrings under the client's bed, it becomes clear just how easy it would have been for the client to find them if she'd only looked. Carol concludes that the earrings must not have been very important to the client, though they as things played out they became vitally important to Carol. A pair of earrings that, to the client, weren't even worth searching for, cost Carol a job and her spotless reputation. Once found, the earrings become a visible representation of how little the client cares—about her possessions, about searching for what she has lost, and about Carol or Carol's years of service.

Initially, Victor plans to be as careless with the earrings as the client and throw them in the cat litter box to remain either sullied or, perhaps, forever lost. Ultimately, however, he removes them and leaves them on the counter for the client to find. The client may, as Carol believes, assume that Carol stole the earrings and then brought them back. In putting them in plain sight next to the payment that Carol refuses to take for her last day of cleaning, however, Victor forces the client to face her own behavior. There is a chance that the sight of the

earnings along with the money will lead the client to the truth: that her carelessness lost her a good cleaner and her thoughtless power harmed an innocent woman.



THE CLIENT'S APARTMENT

The client's apartment is a symbol of Carol's personal pride. Carol cleans it thoroughly and cares for it to the best of her ability each week, taking pride in her work. When she is accused by the client of theft, Carol takes even more care than normal in cleaning the apartment, as a statement to both herself and the client that her pride is uninjured by the accusations. She ensures that she takes nothing from it, bringing her own cleaning supplies and leaving the money the client leaves as payment. Carol uses the cleanliness of the apartment as a personal verification of her innocence. By returning to clean, she asserts that she has nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. Once cleaned, the apartment is like her: neat, fastidious, and above reproach. She is proud of it, as she is proud of herself.

The client's house also functions as a representation of the arrogance of the wealthy client and the alienation of the wealthy in Australia from the working class. While cleaning the apartment, Victor recognizes the arrogance necessary to hire someone else to clean up your messes. The clients remain unaware of their own clutter and disorder since they never have to tidy it. As Victor describes it, the apartment itself is a symbol of the "annihilating self-assurance" the clients must feel to be able to bring strangers into their homes and into their messes. This sort of self-assurance is incomprehensible to Victor. As a working-class person, he can't imagine allowing someone into his home to touch all his possessions—a stark difference between himself and Carol's clients. Victor also notices the differences between the apartment and his own home. The apartment feels sad and "stale" to him, and as such implies a sadness and staleness to the lives of the upper class.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 404

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the beginning of the story as Victor, the narrator, describes his mother and her work. Here, Victor introduces the relationship between the upper class and the working class. First, by "passing her around like a hot tip," the wealthy clients treat Carol like commodity rather than like a person. They want to possess the value of her service, and to use their knowledge of her excellent service as a way to appear knowledgeable and powerful to each other. At the same time, Victor describes the clients, after they secure Carol's services, as quickly ceasing to actually value her work or her as a person.

While Carol understands her pride and integrity to be inherent to her—unassailable by the words and actions of others—Victor's description here shows how, early in the story, he feels insulted by Carol's clients on her behalf. Victor's perspective of his mother's wealthy clients—particularly the client that accuses Carol of theft—portrays them as careless, arrogant, and greedy, but also portrays Carol as someone whose worth can be marred by those clients' poor treatment of her.

This passage also introduces reputation as an important idea in the story. Carol depends on her good reputation for work. The connections of her wealthy clients enable them to get her more and better business by suggesting her service to friends. However, Carol's dependence on this network controlled by the wealthy clients also makes her vulnerable. After all, gossip, too, is easily "passed around" among Carol's wealthy clients. Carol has to manage her interactions with her clients in a way that ensures she doesn't lose business because of an angry client spreading negative feedback.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the publisher edition of *Stories of Ourselves Volume 1* published in 0.

On Her Knees Quotes

☝☝ She was proud of her good name and the way people bragged about her and passed her around like a hot tip, but I resented how quickly they took her for granted.



Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), Carol Lang

☝☝ Then, even while I took a shower, she stood in the bathroom doorway to lecture me about personal pride. It was as though I was not a twenty-year-old law student but a little boy who needed his neck scrubbed. [...]

But I was convinced that it was a mistake for her to go back. It was unfair, ludicrous, impossible, and while she packed the Corolla in the driveway I told her so.

Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), The client, Carol Lang

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 405

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Victor attempts to convince his mother not to return for the final cleaning of the client's apartment after the client accused her of the theft of a pair of earrings. He finds the client's request—for Carol to return for one more week after being fired—outrageous and insulting. He can't understand why Carol would actually go back to clean and do a service for a woman who had falsely accused her. Victor understands the insult against Carol as not only a blow to her reputation, but a blow to her dignity. Carol, however, realizes that she can manage her reputation—and minimize any negative chatter from the client if she behaves in a certain way—the way that is expected of her by her wealthy clients. Her return to the client's apartment is as much about managing the client so as to protect her own reputation as it is about her "personal pride" in completing a job well.

That said, Carol does also decide to return to clean the apartment for personal reasons. The act is a statement of her innocence to her clients, but also to herself. With it, she declares that her integrity and pride are intact and that she lives up to her former reputation and her own personal sense of pride. Neat, dedicated, and above reproach, she fulfills her promises and finishes her jobs.


Victor, extremely protective of his mother, feels adult enough and knowledgeable enough in navigating the alien world of the wealthy to advise her on how to act around them. Though he is no longer "a little boy who needed his neck scrubbed," this lecture sets up tension around whether it is Victor or Carol who needs an education in how to interact with the upper class. As the story progresses, it will become clear that it is in fact Victor who will learn and grow—his mother has more life experience than him and knows better than him how she must behave around her clients.

☝ It's demeaning, Mum! I blurted despite myself. Going back like this. The whole performance. It's demeaning.

To who?

Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), The client, Carol Lang

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 405

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, a dialogue between Victor and Carol, occurs in the car on the way to the client's apartment. Victor continues his argument from the previous week, which arises largely from his and his mother's differing understandings of the idea of personal pride. Victor finds "the whole performance" of Carol returning to do one more day of cleaning demeaning, but Carol does not feel demeaned. She is sad and resigned, but she is not humiliated or in any way degraded by the accusations or by the idea of cleaning the house of a woman who wronged her. Carol finds no shame in cleaning, but she rightfully recognizes that Victor, like many of her wealthy clients, does find it an undignified sort of profession. Just as Victor fails to understand how Carol finds honor in her job on a normal day, he fails also to see how she can be unbothered by, to his eyes, lowering herself to perform a service for this client.

Yet Carol does take pride in her work, no matter the circumstances. Her pride is unaffected by the actions and choices of others, built on an inner stability that Victor does not yet understand. As Carol sees it, there is no reason for the actions of a client to reflect poorly on Carol's view of herself. She has no power over the words and actions of a client, only over her own. Her pride, then, is unaffected by slander, and instead demands that she remain calm and dignified in the face of it. Victor, who still understands pride as something that can be injured by external attack, misunderstands Carol's self-assurance as complacency regarding her own degradation.


☝ Anyway, we'll show her.


How's that?

We'll clean that flat within an inch of its life.

Oh yeah, I muttered. That'll put her back in her box. Go, Mum.

Related Characters: Victor Lang, Carol Lang (speaker), The client

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, Carol and Victor continue their discussion about the client and the missing earrings while on the way to the client's apartment. The dialogue exemplifies Carol and Victor's initially differing understandings of pride and dignity. To Victor, simply doing what has been asked of them by cleaning the apartment is not a statement of dignity, but rather a show of submissiveness to the whims of the wealthy.



Victor does not understand, as Carol does, the extent of the power that her clients have over them because of their wealth and connections. Carol has decided to "show" the client what she'll lose by firing her because Carol recognizes that there is no other way to fight back against the wealthy upper class. Instead of starting a futile conflict with her client, Carol will instead kill her with kindness. She is content to maintain her integrity and assert her pride by doing her job to the best of her ability.

Carol, unlike Victor, doesn't waste energy being insulted about something she knows she can't change. Instead, she determines to live well, do her best, and react to the accusations with grace and dignity. Her pride is bolstered by the knowledge that she is in the right, morally superior to her accuser.

☝ I was curious. What kind of person would do this? After years of faultless service there was no discussion, just the accusation and the brusque termination in three scrawled lines.

Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), Carol Lang, The client

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 407

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Victor snoops around the client's apartment, looking for clues as to why the client would be so cruel to his mother. The client, as the story's primary representative of the upper class, is arrogant and careless in a way Victor finds almost unbelievable. He doesn't understand—he can't imagine treating someone in the way the client treats his mother. To him, the wealthy class is as

foreign and incomprehensible as it is exploitative.


This passage also emphasizes the power that the wealthy upper class has over people like Carol. Because of advantages of wealth and social connections, the client has power over Carol's employment and her reputation. Lacking any evidence, the client has the power to fire Carol without even the courtesy of a conversation. While employing her, wealthy clients have the power to control her and exploit her labor. Now, too, it is clear, they have the power to discard her at will.

With her baseless accusation of theft, the client also shows the power to destroy Carol's reputation, which is essential in Carol procuring other work. While the client seems to let Carol go quietly, without involving the police or spreading too much slander, she has the connections and the authority of her wealth to ruin Carol's other job opportunities in the neighborhood, either with an accidental slip or a purposeful smear campaign.

☝ I brushed and wiped and waxed the long shelves of books and tried to imagine having strangers in our place looking in our fridge, touching our stuff, ripping hanks of our hair from the plughole. You'd have to imagine they were some kind of sleepwalker, that they were blind, incurious, too stupid to notice intimate things about your life. You'd have to not think about them, to will these intruders away. Or just be confident. Yes, I thought. That's what it takes to be blasé about strangers in your house—a kind of annihilating self-assurance.

Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), Carol Lang, The client

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 407

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, while cleaning, Victor thinks again about the lives of the rich and how they differ from the working class in their carelessness, laziness, and arrogance. As Victor sees it, in order to not be embarrassed by the intrusion of strangers into their homes, the wealthy must have to treat the cleaners as something below them—less observant, less aware, less judgmental, and easily disregarded. Victor believes that only the wealthy class's sense of superiority could allow them to unabashedly invite cleaners in to deal


with the problems and messes they don't want to deal with themselves. Victor thinks the wealthy must see the working class as inferior—as even less than human, robots rather than people—in order to feel confident in allowing them to touch the intimate and hidden parts of the house. Implied in Victor's thoughts is that it is this same sense of superiority that allows the client to so easily accuse his mother of theft and fire her without any evidence.

Victor, having lived his life as a working-class person, can't achieve the same self-willed ignorance and “annihilating self-assurance” as his mother's clients. He knows that the working class people *are* people—because he is one! He has a self-awareness that the upper class lacks and a knowledge of social class that the wealthy have the privilege to be oblivious to.

☞ The lantern-jawed woman who appeared in so many—it was her. She looked decent, happy, loved by friends and family. Even as I clawed through her desk drawers, finding nothing more remarkable than a tiny twist of hash in a bit of tinfoil, I knew I wouldn't find anything that would satisfy me.

Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), Carol Lang, The client

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 408

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Victor finds photographs of the client while snooping around the house. Victor is looking both for an explanation for the client's behavior toward his mother and an opportunity for revenge: he hopes to find something incriminating that might destroy the client's reputation as a way to fight back for the client's treatment of Carol.

Victor's desire to enact retribution against the client continues to highlight his differences with Carol regarding the ideas of reputation and integrity, as well as his understanding of the relationship between the wealthy and working class. Victor believes that if he can just find some incriminating evidence, he and Carol can stand toe to toe with the client and make her back down in a way that saves Carol's dignity and reputation. Carol, as the rest of the story reveals, knows that this is not the case for a few reasons: that the client will always just be able to settle upon a

different story that still makes Carol look bad; that the client is hooked into a set of social connections in a way that will make her believed rather than Carol; but also Carol knows that integrity and reputation are not the same thing, and that she never lost her integrity while she can only ever manage her reputation.

Victor never actually finds anything incriminating about the client. From what he can see, she's not inherently malicious, and he doesn't find out anything about her to explain why she would treat Carol with such carelessness. Instead, her photos imply that she's a perfectly normal person. Yet this fact, that the client is average among the wealthy, rather than redeeming the client, emphasizes the arrogance of her entire social class. It is not an extraordinarily bad person who would accuse Carol of theft without proof and fire her without warning. Any one of the wealthy might, because any one of them has the power to do so and the lazy blindness to think of themselves as superior to the working class.

☞ Honestly, Mum, why didn't we just give the place a light go through? Or better, just take the dough and split.

Because it would look like an admission of guilt.

Shit.

Language.

But this won't convince her, Mum.


No, probably not.

You could report them missing yourself. Ask them to search our place. Force the issue. There's nothing that can come of it.

Except talk. Imagine the talk. I'd lose the rest of my jobs.

Related Characters: Carol Lang, Victor Lang (speaker), The client

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Victor and Carol occurs as they continue cleaning the client's apartment. Victor, in this passage, finally realizes that pettiness and retribution towards the client would, at this point, only make Carol look guiltier. In acting with dignity, Carol has not only been performing her work to her ordinarily high standards, but also protecting her reputation from further opportunities

for abuse.

Once again, Carol has a firm understanding of her helplessness against the upper class. She has no power to take action or initiative on her own—through reporting the earrings missing to the police, as Victor suggests—because Carol’s livelihood depends on her discretion. Involving the police would make gossip and would remind the wealthy neighborhood that, though they might prefer to pretend otherwise, Carol is someone who sees the intimate secrets of their homes. If Carol draws attention to the accusation of the theft by responding publicly, all she’ll do is harm her reputation in a way that threatens all of her other jobs.

Victory rightly understands that Carol’s assertion of her pride and integrity through the spotlessness of the apartment will not prove her innocence to the client. It is, rather, a final statement of integrity that the client is unable to respond to or refute, a statement to herself, and an example for Victor to follow.



☝ Well, you’ve cleared your name. That’s something.


She shook her head with a furious smile.

Why not? I asked. Show her what we found, what she was too lazy to look for. Show her where they were.

All she has to say is that she made me guilty enough to give them back. That I just wanted to keep the job. To save my good name. Vic, that’s all I’ve got—my good name. These people, they can say anything they like. You can’t fight back.

Related Characters: Carol Lang, Victor Lang (speaker), The client

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Victor and Carol occurs just after Victor discovers the missing earrings dropped beneath the client’s bed, evidence that the client didn’t care enough about either the earrings or Carol to thoroughly search for them when they went missing. Once again, Victor underestimates the power the upper class has over his mother and over the working class as a whole. Carol has no possible method of clearing her name. She’s trapped in a Catch-22 situation: presumed guilty when the earrings are

lost and presumed guilty when the earrings are found again.



The client’s careless word holds more weight than any defense Carol could muster because of the social and monetary power behind it. The client can make any baseless claim and say “anything she likes” and Carol has no way of contradicting it. All she can do is continue to work to the best of her ability and hope that her work speaks for her.


Paradoxically, Carol’s reputation, the only defense she has against her wealthy clients, is created by those same clients. They have the ultimate power to shape her only method of making a living. This client’s careless accusation, which means nothing more to her than finding a replacement cleaner, is everything to Carol. This time, Carol will be able to keep her old clients and carry on working, but it is a chilling reminder both of her powerlessness and the danger of the obliviousness and moral deficiency of the upper class.

☝ In the kitchen I put the earrings beside the unstrung key and the thin envelope of money.

My mother stood silhouetted in the open doorway. It seemed that the very light of day was pouring out through her limbs. I had my breath back. I followed her into the hot afternoon.

Related Characters: Victor Lang (speaker), The client, Carol Lang

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 410

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Victor decides not to leave the earrings in the cat litter box where he had previously thrown them in disgust after discovering them in the bedroom. Instead, he places them in plain sight next to the wages Carol refused to take. With this act, Victor puts aside his plans of revenge and instead conforms to his mother’s method of getting back at the client: acting with dignity and generosity despite the accusations. In leaving the earrings and the money, Carol and Victor once again assert Carol’s integrity in a manner that can’t be ignored by the client and forces her to face the possibility that she was wrong, whether or not she will be meaningfully moved by it.

In the final moments of the story, Victor realizes that, though Carol’s reputation is beyond their control, her integrity shines through everything else, evidenced by the light silhouetting her in the doorway. She appears to Victor

as a hero or an angel, her pride and her integrity inviolable and unaffected by her clients. In the realization that he finds no pride or reward in petty retribution, Victor recognizes

that Carol was right. Her dignity and pride come not from her profession or her reputation, but from within. Carol and Victor see her true worth, even if her clients don't.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ON HER KNEES

Victor is sixteen when his father leaves. His mother Carol Lang cleans houses to pay for Victor's college tuition and pay off his father's debts. Carol wants Victor to focus on his studies and won't let him get a part-time job. She tells Victor that there's more honor in cleaning a house than in having your house cleaned, but he's not convinced. Sometimes he helps her clean even though he hates it. Sometimes he stays home rather than help, and feels guilty.

After Victor's father left, Carol became a model of working-class pride. Her honesty, order, hygiene, and high expectations earn her an excellent reputation as a cleaner among the families of a wealthy riverside suburb. She is proud of her reputation, but Victor resents how her employers patronize her and take her for granted by being "the worst payers and the biggest slob." Over the years, despite everything, Carol maintains "her dignity and her hourly rate."

Carol is only ever fired from a job once, after she is accused of stealing a missing pair of **earrings**. She is given a week's notice. Victor tries to convince her not to return for the final week, and he and Carol have their first argument since Victor's father left. He thinks it's unfair of the client to ask her to return after accusing her of theft after so many years of spotless service.

Carol's profession indicates that she and Victor are working-class, and depend on the single income of Carol's cleaning job to pay the bills. Victor's desire to get a part-time job to help with their expenses is an indicator both of his protectiveness over his mother, especially after their abandonment by his father, and his distaste towards Carol's job. Cleaning up after others is not something Victor finds honor or dignity in. While Carol wants Victor to focus on his schoolwork to presumably allow him to enter a higher-paying career and a higher class himself, she is not ashamed of her working-class position or her job as a cleaner. Rather, she takes pride in her work. It is noteworthy that Victor and Carol have opposing opinions on what honor means and what is honorable from the outset of the story.



Carol's reputation is both vital to her work and important to her personally. Her reputation reflects her integrity, her work ethic, her dependability, and her success as a cleaner. Now, it becomes clear that Victor's dislike for his mother's profession stems not only from the work itself but also from how she is treated by her wealthy clients—she performs a service that they value and yet both underappreciate and underpay. Yet Carol maintains a firm and unyielding sense of self-worth by refusing to have her hourly rate negotiated down and also by refusing to allow external circumstance to affect her inherent dignity.



Carol's clients have the power to fire her on a whim—they don't need a good reason to do so, let alone hard evidence of theft. In addition, the client's request that Carol return for one final week of work even after firing her based on no evidence betrays both the client's arrogance and her disregard for Carol's feelings and long-time service. Victor perceives the request as an insult to Carol's dignity, and Carol's compliance with the request as a passive acceptance of an indignity that should instead be fought against. The fact that this is Victor and Carol's first real argument since the departure of Victor's father implies that they either often agree or usually work through disagreements more easily. The magnitude of this fight indicates the importance of the subject of pride for both of them.



They're still arguing the morning of Carol's last trip to the client's **apartment**. Carol lectures Victor about personal pride, which makes him feel like a child. He tells her he's not going to help, and she replies that she never asked him to. At the last minute, as Carol loads the car with cleaning supplies, Victor decides to go and help her. He thinks that she must have known before he did that he would come along.

Rather than see going back to the apartment as a simple indignity, Carol sees the job as an opportunity to actually display her pride by going back and finishing her job to the best of her ability. Victor remains unconvinced—he is still focused on the demeaning nature of the request, as opposed to the pride Carol sees in doing honest work. Even so, his own pride—and his desire to help and protect his mother—compels him to go with her to the cleaning job, despite his hatred of cleaning and his opposition towards the job as a whole. This passage, as well, introduces the idea that Carol knows Victor better than he knows himself, and implies that she probably knows best about the cleaning job as well.



Carol drives carefully. She tells Victor that he's "good" to come with her, and he responds that she needs the help. She corrects him: he is company, not help. Victor thinks again about how Carol is worth more than what she's paid and how her integrity means she would never steal anything.

It is important to Carol not to take charity from others. She didn't ask Victor to come along in the first place, and refuses to call him "help," even though he's there specifically to help her clean. With this clarification, she makes it clear that, while she appreciates Victor being there, she doesn't need him to help her or protect her from anything. Though Victor has a different understanding than Carol of what the client's actions mean for Carol's pride—that the accusation and request to return have somehow injured it—he still firmly believes in her inherent personal goodness and worth.



Victor tells Carol it's "demeaning" to go back to clean the **apartment**. Carol asks if Victor means it's demeaning to *him*, then laughs at his pride. Victor wonders what type of woman would fire Carol for stealing and then ask her to come back for a final week. Carol says that it's the client's loss since she won't find anyone better than her. Victor agrees that there's no one as good as Carol.

Though Victor finds the situation demeaning, he doesn't answer his mother's question of who exactly is demeaned by it. It is noteworthy that Carol does not seem humiliated by it, leading readers to question why it is that Victor is so insistent and upset. For Victor, the way the client has acted is incomprehensible. He genuinely can't understand what sort of person would do what she did. The lives and motivations of the upper class are strange and alien to him. During their argument, Carol and Victor find common ground repeatedly in their shared belief in Carol's inherent worth as a cleaner and as a person.



Victor brings up the fact that the client hasn't even gone to the police about the **earrings**. Carol thinks the client must know that she didn't steal anything. Victor says the entire situation is an attempt to get some advantage over Carol. He thinks the client might give Carol the job back to make her grateful and then try to underpay her for her work. Carol argues with this—the client has probably already found the earrings by now. She adds that the client wouldn't have called to tell Carol about finding the earrings because “these people” never apologize. Silence is their idea of apology.

Still, Carol notes that she has plenty of clients on a waiting list and she'll always have business. She tells Victor that they'll “show” the client by cleaning her **apartment** flawlessly. Victor is not satisfied with the idea.

The client's street smells like old money to Victor. He urges Carol to park in the client's spot, but she refuses to “give her the satisfaction.” Carol has brought her own cleaning supplies today, rather than using the client's as usual. Victor correctly guesses that this is because of “the principle” of the thing. He feels “sick for her” and thinks she looks old as they walk into **the apartment**.

Carol's generalizations about “these people,” as she calls the wealthy upper class, reveals two things First, that she also sees the wealthy as not just wealthier but morally different than her and Victor. Second, it makes clear that she has far more experience and knowledge in dealing with them than Victor does. Victor finds them indecipherable and comes up with unfounded conspiracies about the client's motivations, while Carol calmly and assuredly explains what the wealthy are like. Both Victor's and Carol's theories about the client seem plausible, given the way the wealthy have been characterized in the story thus far, but Victor's portrays the client as malicious while Carol's understands that the client is simply careless and arrogant.



Up to this point, Victor has advised his mother towards petty retribution—to not show up for the last week and leave the client without a cleaner until she can find a replacement for Carol. Victor wants to respond to the pain caused by the client by inflicting pain back. Carol, however, has a different strategy. Rather than getting upset and doing something that might damage her reputation among her other clients, Carol decides to finish her job perfectly, both to remind her client of what she's losing and as a statement of her uninjured personal and professional pride.



Just as it's important to Carol's pride to not require Victor to come help her, it's also important to her also to take nothing from the client. She refuses to use the client's parking spot, or to even use any of the client's cleaning supplies. Even as she plans to do a perfect job for the client, she is consistently asserting her own independence and worth. While Victor remains agitated and sick about the situation, Carol seems unaffected and almost cheerful, determined to make the best of the situation. Victor feels “sick” for his mother because he believes her response is ineffectual—that she is asserting something that has already been taken from her by the client's false accusation. He thinks the only honorable way forward is to take some direct and aggressive counter action.



The apartment smells like cats. Carol opens an envelope left for her and seems upset by it, but won't tell Victor what it says. There is money in the envelope. Victor looks in the refrigerator, curious to learn what he can about the client who would brusquely fire Carol after years of service. Carol tells him not to snoop.

Here, Carol and Victor differ again in their methods. Carol wants to treat the apartment as respectfully as she always does, but Victor feels that the client has lost her right to his respect for her privacy. He wants to understand the client, and there is the implication that he hopes to find something in the house that will explain her actions or possibly incriminate her. That the client's letter upsets Carol shows that Carol is affected by the client's treatment of her, such that her refusal to act on that upset is highlighted even further.



As his first task in helping his mother clean the house, Victor cleans the litter box. Rather than disinfecting it as he usually would, he just empties the litter box and fills it back up with litter. The smell is awful. Meanwhile, he overhears Carol singing to herself as she cleans the bathtub. As Victor dusts the counters and shelves, he thinks about how someone who had to clean their own house would never own so many trinkets and figurines which have to be individually and carefully dusted.

Victor's halfhearted cleaning efforts are another aspect of his campaign of petty revenge against the client. As he cleans, Victor contemplates the wealthy class that employs others to clean their houses. His thoughts about how a person who had to clean their own home would never own so many trinkets raise the idea that simply having such wealth makes people blind to the fact that they are, at once, spending money on things that have no value and lazily creating more work for those with less money for no good reason.



The apartment feels lonely, and Victor thinks that, despite his and his mother's "grim few years" since his father left, their own place is never as melancholy as this. He tries to imagine a stranger cleaning their place and touching their belongings. He decides that people who have their houses cleaned must either ignore the existence of the "intruders" or have perfect confidence, "a kind of annihilating self-assurance."

Again, Victor finds it difficult to understand the choices of the wealthy. He can't imagine how a person could so casually reveal themselves by letting others into their most intimate spaces, and he concludes that the only answer has to be that the wealthy, because of their wealth, feel such "annihilating self-assurance" that they don't even realize what they are revealing. This thought further suggests that the wealth and privilege of the upper class allows them to disregard the working-class people they consider to be beneath them. Their arrogance allows them to invite cleaners in to tidy their messes and assume the cleaners don't judge them for it. Victor, who knows what it's like to be the working-class cleaner, can never have the same ignorance as the wealthy upper class.



Victor looks through the bookshelves, stocked with novels, psychology, feminist literature, and erotica. In the study he finds biographies and academic work, including a “clumsily written” paper. Above the desk are photos of the client who looks “decent, happy, loved.” He looks through her desk but doesn’t find anything interesting. He realizes that he won’t find anything that will satisfy his curiosity about the client’s character or incriminate her enough that he can hate her fully.

Victor cleans the bedroom quickly. He is preoccupied with why the client did not report the supposed theft of the **earrings** to the police. Victor’s uneasiness about his own snooping leads him to wonder if the client might know he had been to the house before and suspect him instead of Carol. Maybe she knew who he was from college—he attends the university where she works—and had decided not to report him as a kindness. Victor vacuums the house “feverishly.” When the client’s cats jump out from behind some curtains, he chases them from the bedroom. In the kitchen, he asks Carol what the note said, and whether the client suspects him of the theft. Carol tells him not to be silly, and Victor goes back to vacuuming.

When Carol follows Victor into the bedroom, he asks again why they didn’t just give the place a light clean, or, better, take the money and leave. Carol says it would look like an admission of guilt. He suggests she “force the issue” and call in the police, but Carol says that regardless of what the police did or didn’t find, such an act would result in her losing her reputation and her other jobs because of the resulting gossip. She’s going to grin and bear it.

Victor finds nothing in the apartment to prove that the client is a particularly bad person. In fact, she seems perfectly normal for someone of the upper class, with friends and loved ones. This realization that the client is ordinary might be disappointing for Victor, as he wishes he could reveal the client as some kind of villain. But the client’s ordinariness allows the story to more profoundly condemn the upper class. As an ordinary upper-class person, the client comes to stand in for her entire class. Her ordinariness implies that all upper-class people have the capability for such casual cruelty—any wealthy person could treat Carol as the client has treated her because any wealthy person has the means and opportunity to do so. There isn’t any real reason for the client’s actions beyond the banality of her carelessness and the ordinary disdain of the wealthy for the working class.



Still unsatisfied with the idea that the simple carelessness of the upper class led to his mother’s treatment, Victor considers other motivations. Guilty about his own behavior in the apartment, he wonders whether the client might have acted as she did as a way to patronizingly protect him. This logic is rather tenuous, but captures both Victor’s own guilt about his behavior in the house and his confusion about why the client acted as she did. Victor searches for a reason for the client’s behavior because he doesn’t yet fully understand what Carol already knows—that the power of the upper class enables them to do pretty much whatever they want without thought, reason, or consequence.



Carol’s spotless behavior, while motivated by personal pride, has also been an attempt to minimize the damage already done by the client to her reputation. By performing perfectly, Carol ensures the client has nothing to complain about and robs the client of any motivation to slander her further. In this passage, Carol attempts to convey to Victor the scope of her wealthy clients’ control over her livelihood and the importance of her good reputation. Her reputation reflects her work, but it is not a perfect representation of it. Her clients are the ones who control her reputation, recommending her to others or accusing her falsely of theft. By involving the police—which would spread the story and make her look defensive—Carol would only be harming her reputation further, even if she was proven right. Not only that, bringing in the police would make clear that Carol was willing to publicly contradict or embarrass her clients, which none of them want. At this point, it is clear that Carol’s reputation is only a reflection of what her clients think of her, and it is not simply a product of her personal pride, dignity, or behavior.



As Victor vacuums up a pile of chocolate wrappers near the head of the bed, there's the sound of something hard being sucked into the pipe. He stops the vacuum and digs his hand inside the disgusting bag. Inside, he finds an **earring**. Victor and Carol search nearby where the first one got sucked up, and find the other earring on the floor against the baseboard. Carol realizes the client left the earrings on the pillow, then knocked them onto the floor accidentally, and never even seriously looked for them. It was all just carelessness. Victor thinks the client hasn't gone to the police because the earrings are cheap and calls it "fake outrage." He comments that it wasn't important to the client. Carol responds to note that it was important to her, though.

Victor tells Carol that at least she's cleared her name. Carol shakes her head, angry but smiling. She realizes that the client can just claim that Carol felt guilty and returned the **earrings** to save her job or her reputation. All Carol has is her good name, and the clients can take that away from her. She can't fight back. Carol blows her nose as Victor looks down, realizing he is "powerless to defend her." As Carol finishes cleaning the kitchen and Victor continues vacuuming, he looks over at the earrings on the bed. He wonders if their value is sentimental. He picks them up and throws them into the cat litter box, thinking that the client can have them if she cares enough to look.

With the discovery of the missing earrings, Victor finally finds the evidence he was looking for on the client's character: she is careless, thoughtless, and inconsiderate. That the earrings were so easy to find highlights how little effort the client put into actually trying to find them, and how quickly the client shifted to blaming Carol. The earrings were at once not important enough to the client to call the police for or even to search under the bed for, which makes clear just how little regard the client had for Carol that she felt the lost earrings were something worth firing her over though there was no evidence to suggest she had taken them.



For one final time, Victor underestimates the power of Carol's wealthy clients and their own comparative powerlessness as working-class people who work for the wealthy. The client can make any claim and she will be believed above Carol because of the influence of her wealth and social status. Carol has no meaningful way of sticking up for herself, presumed guilty whether the earrings are missing or found. Her reputation and the actions of her clients are beyond her control, and any attempt to establish her innocence will be taken by the wealthy as a sign of her lack of innocence and her willingness to air dirty laundry in public. All Carol can do is respond with her certainty of her own integrity and her exemplary cleaning skills. Throughout the story, Victor has been frustrated by his mother's response to her mistreatment by her wealthy client. Now that he knows that she is responding in the only way she can, Victor properly aims his frustration at the wealthy upper class and at the social systems at play which serve to oppress and exploit the working class. However, he still responds with his method—petty revenge—rather than his mother's display of personal pride.



As they finish up with cleaning the house, Carol tells Victor she isn't taking the money left for her in the envelope because she's "worth more." They pack up the cleaning supplies. Victor goes back to the cat litter box and cleans off the **earrings**. They weigh nothing in his hand. He places them beside the envelope of money and Carol's key to the house. He sees Carol silhouetted by light in the doorway, and he's able to breathe easily again. He follows her outside.

Though Carol's clients can mar her reputation, they can never take her integrity from her. By leaving the money, she makes an assertion of that integrity to her client as the final word of their relationship. In leaving the earrings with the money, Victor adds to that show of integrity, forcing the client—at least privately—to face the evidence that she might have been wrong about Carol. In leaving the earrings next to the money, Victor also finally follows his mother's method of dealing with the upper class by asserting her own dignity rather than attempting to fight insult with insult. By Carol's example, Victor recognizes that pride, integrity, and dignity are unassailable. The clients can't take them from Carol, and Carol refuses to relinquish them for petty retribution. The final image of Carol is a triumphant one: she stands haloed in the sun, and Victor sees her as being like a hero or an angel. Though she has no way of clearing her name, she has triumphed morally over the client—a quiet yet not thankless victory. Meanwhile, Victor's contentment in his mother's dignity is more consoling to him than any revenge could be.





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