

The house was a dark place, and Jason was embarrassed with how it looked. He tried his best to take care of it whenever he could, but life usually got in the way. Jason compromised with himself to at least make the outside presentable. There was a time where he used to let people into the house regardless of how it looked. Talks over coffee with trash carefully tucked behind bookshelves, house tours with some rooms tactically shut, lawn get-togethers, but eventually even the lawn was too close.

Jason heard the clacks of shoes on the sidewalk, and he raced outside to lean on his little porch banister.

“Hello, Isaac!” Jason called out.

“Jason,” Isaac replied curtly. He was a tall, slender, perpetually well-dressed man who wore a navy blue suit and carried a light brown briefcase. Isaac always walked on this sidewalk into the city for work. Isaac was a great man. His house was clean enough that others hired him to clean their houses. But Isaac would never know about Jason’s house.

He felt a strange sense of pride in his dirty secret. His little life was almost perfect. But there was one thing he resented: Not Isaac, but Flora, his next-door neighbor.

Her house was a mess, and she didn’t try to hide it. She would make jokes about her dirty house, too! Her disaster wasn’t why Jason resented her, no. Jason was judgmental maybe, but not a hypocrite. There were two main reasons. First was her confidence. Why would someone with a house this dirty bring light to it? Didn’t she care? If this was the case, and she truly didn’t care, then the second reason Jason resented her wouldn’t exist.

The second reason Jason didn’t like Flora was that he saw her taking care of the inside of her house almost every day. Jason would peek through his window and see her cleaning her room often. He couldn’t understand it. Why clean her house with so much junk? Jason felt a sense of futility about the state of his own home. Cleaning relentlessly, despite how much trash she had, was the reason Jason resented her. Maybe that was the reason. He didn’t understand the difference between him and Flora. His confusion mounted when the Junk Men came that day.

The Junk Men were faceless, wordless men who came to your property every day to dump trash. No one really knew where this trash came from, but everybody got some. Some people got a lot, and some people got little trash at all. When Jason looked outside, he saw he was previously mistaken. The amount of trash Flora was dealt was above even his own. Now his disdain gave way to rampant curiosity. He couldn’t understand how she did it. Despite himself, he felt his legs carrying him to her door. Three sharp knocks and a bit of shuffling later, and the door squeaked open. Piercing green eyes met Jason’s gaze.

“Hello neighbor!” Flora said. The words barely registered, however. Those eyes were mossy black holes demanding all of Jason’s attention. His tongue moved initially without sound, but soon the words came tumbling out.

“Hello! May I speak to you?”

“We are speaking, aren’t we?”

“Why yes we are.”

“Well? You came here with a purpose, and now I have to know why you came.”

“I—uh.”

“Or do you want a closer look at me? Are our windows too far away?”

Jason’s face flushed red.

“I swear that’s not why I was looking through your window, miss.” Jason stumbled through his sentence, flustered. “I just—I need to know. How do you deal with all your trash?”

Flora smiled warmly.

“Of course, Jason, come in.”

Jason wandered through the open door to see the inside of her house. The sight inside confused him further. Her house was still just as messy as his! With all her work and toil, it looked almost the same. Did she really have this much trash? All her work and the result was the same result as Jason’s laziness? Flora seemed to notice his furrowed brow. She motioned for him to follow and navigated the house until they arrived at her bedroom. The room was absolutely spotless. Not a fleck of trash or junk anywhere. Existing in it was just so very comfortable. Suddenly his own house felt more alien in retrospect. He never wanted to leave this palace of safety. Jason thought, Can I just stay here forever?

“If you want, Jason, but if you need help, I can help you clean your room.”

Did he just speak out loud? He didn’t. Did she just read his mind? Did she read his mind before when he wondered about the cleanliness?

“You’re in the deepest, most private part of my house. Things get a little different when you get here.” Flora seemed to realize the implications of Jason’s reaction to this. “How long has it been since you let someone into your room?”

Jason’s expression seemed to answer her question even before his thought reached her mind. Flora nodded.

“To be honest,” Jason said softly, “I don’t even like going there.”

“Hey. You can ask for help. You don’t have to feel ashamed about that.”

Jason didn’t want to ask someone with all their own garbage to help him with his. She had so much more than him, anyways. He felt like he should be helping her. She already knew about all these thoughts running through him. Her face didn’t belie any hesitation. Jason looked over, and her eyes sucked him in yet again. Wordlessly, Jason admitted it.

I need help.

Flora smiled.

Flora nodded.

Walking into his house felt like a nightmare come to life. Even though she showed him her private spot, her safe space, it terrified Jason. He could barely put one foot in front of the other. His breathing shook. He needed help, though. This was a necessary step. He couldn’t move forward if he didn’t let her in. So, through the dark, filthy halls they walked. Jason saw the room he was dreading. The detritus built up the further in they went. His shaky breaths stopped. He couldn’t breathe as they walked into the room. Flora flipped the light switch to reveal the room. Jason’s hands shook. Flora could barely walk into the room; the floor was almost completely covered. She turned to him. Jason’s eyes found Flora’s. Her mind was not repulsed.

She didn't even hold pity for him. Only...compassion? Jason tried to read deeper into Flora's thoughts. All he received was Flora's warm smile.

What, did you think I wouldn't want to help after seeing your room?

Jason almost recoiled with the thought emblazoned into his brain.

"Not exactly, I just..." Jason's voice hitched as tears welled in his eyes. "I've never felt this way. You barely know me and"—Jason's voice betrayed him and squeaked—"you've seen what I have to offer and you're still here?"

I'm still here.

"I'm still here."

Jason's tears were flowing freely now. Flora just held him. Sitting in the stink and the muck she held him. His sobs echoed through the room and his tears soaked into her shirt. Flora's thoughts rang through Jason's head.

I'm still here. There's no shame in showing me this part of you. There's no shame in crying. I'll hold you just the same.