

About 3,760 words

SKIN DEEP

by

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Maria Consuelo Florencia Gonzales Delacrúz dropped her mop into the bucket with a squelching splash. She leaned on her cleaning cart and sighed with a roll of her eyes.

Through the door to room 103 there came the unmistakable sounds of two lovers locked in passionate embrace--the same sounds Maria had heard the first time she came by to try to clean the room over an hour earlier.

"Chucha mierda," she swore to herself, briefly glancing behind her to make sure the motel manager hadn't sneaked up and heard her. Not that it was likely; he was probably off trying to talk that other cleaning woman--Gladys--into bed.

The rhythmic moans grew louder through the thin walls. Maria heard the woman cry out, "¡Mas rápido, Alejandro, Dios mio!"

Por fin, thought Maria, they're almost done. She tapped her cherry-red, adhesive nails against the scratched stainless steel of the cleaning cart, and listened as the couple went over the top with a final cry. She waited for a moment, listening to a diesel truck rumble by on the highway in front of the motel, giving the couple a few seconds to recover. Then she tapped a fingernail on the door.

"Cleaning service, please," she announced.

There was a moment of silence, then a muffled giggle. "*Un momentito,*" called the man's voice. There came the muffled thuds of rummaging around, searching for clothes. "Uh, five minutes, okay?" the voice called again. And again the giggle.

Maria frowned and stared at the closed door. "Okay. I'll be waiting here."

Hopefully that would hurry them up, knowing she wasn't going anywhere while they got themselves together. Five minutes. She was going to be late for her break.

Having nothing to do but wait, she tugged a tattered copy of *Vogue* from under the pile of white, rust-stained towels on her cleaning cart and idly flipped through it. The pages were wrinkled and smudged from countless readings, but the glossy photographs still showed the beautiful people perfectly clearly. With a plastic fingernail Maria traced the perfect, sharp profile of a slim model's face. The skin looked so creamy, the hair so fabulously blonde....

The door to room 103 banged open. A warm smell of musky sex wafted out the doorway, and the couple emerged from the dimly lit room. The man was short and skinny, dressed in tight black jeans, a red polyester shirt, a black leather jacket, and black silver-tipped boots. He had his shirt unbuttoned halfway down the front, and a gold chain dangling in his matted chest hairs. He reeked of sweat. He had dark skin (like dirt, thought Maria), and dark eyes, and his nose was flat and wide. His thick black hair was greasy and freshly combed back. He had a thin mustache over thick lips, which parted briefly in a show-off smile at Maria. He had crooked teeth.

The woman wore a tight, purple, Spandex miniskirt with an almost-matching blouse. She was curvy but a little overweight, her flesh pushing at the seams of her low-cut blouse, which also smelled of sweat. She wore scuffed high heels and carried a green purse. She, too had dark skin, with long black hair hastily brushed into place. Her heavy eye makeup and rouge were smeared, and her red lipstick looked hurriedly drawn on. She didn't even glance at Maria as she brushed by, heading towards the front desk to return the key.

"*Putá. Whore,*" Maria murmured under her breath when the couple had walked out of earshot. Actually, she felt more sorry than contempt for the woman. That man maybe made her pregnant with his ugly seed just now, and then she would have to raise his ugly child. Maria was never going to make

that mistake, not ever. Not like her mother. Her mother had slept with anyone who gave her presents. Ugly boyfriends. And the way they would leer at Maria when her mother wasn't looking...

She shivered and shook her head. Then she picked up the mop and bucket and headed through the doorway. Inside it smelled of sex, sour sweat and mildew, with just a faint lingering of disinfectant from when she'd cleaned the room earlier that day. The bottom sheet on the bed was stained and damp. The top sheet was wadded up on the floor.

Maria pulled on her rubber gloves and began to strip the bed. She caught a glimpse of her wavy reflection in the cheap mirror over the dresser, and paused to look at herself. Like the woman who had just left, Maria had black hair, dark eyes and dark skin--a lot of native *india* blood. But Maria was a little more overweight than the other woman, and her nose was broader and flatter, more like the man's. No, the face reflected in the mirror wasn't as pretty as the other woman's...but then that other woman wasn't attractive either. Not like the beautiful models in *Vogue*, at any rate.

Maria frowned at her distorted reflection. Ugly boyfriends, ugly babies...

She went back to work. She stripped the bed and wiped down the plastic mattress cover with a soapy sponge. Then she fitted fresh sheets--slightly stiff and musty-smelling--onto the bed. She ran the mop over the floor quickly,

overpowering the carnal and mildew smells with the scent of pine disinfectant. She emptied the wastepaper basket of damp and musky-smelling tissue paper, then went into the small bathroom and scrubbed down the shower and sink. She discovered two condoms--one green and one yellow--floating in the toilet, leaking white fluid into the rust-tinged water.

She flushed the toilet and scrubbed the bowl with powdered bleach.

Gladys Ramirez was flipping through a tabloid magazine when Maria showed up in the back room for her break.

"You're late, *mujér*," she said with a smile. Gladys was several years older than Maria, in her late twenties, and seemed to have been working at the motel forever. She wasn't overweight, but she had an unattractive gold tooth in front and her eyes were too small.

Maria rinsed out a used cup and poured herself a cup of lukewarm coffee. "*Si, yo sé*," she said, sitting heavily in one of the metal folding chairs at the card table where Gladys was reading. "This couple left their room late."

Gladys nodded absently, not really listening as she looked through her magazine. She paused over a page. "Ooh, look, Maria. Isn't he gorgeous, don't you think?"

She twisted the magazine so Maria could see. There was a full-page photograph of a man leaning against a motorcycle and smiling at the camera. Maria thought she recognized him

as some rock star. He had wavy hair, a bright smile, and stylish clothes.

But to Maria his skin and hair were too dark, his features too flat, and he didn't look all that much better than the man who had recently left room 103.

"Umm, he's not so great." She rummaged among the magazines and cookie crumbs scattered over the rusty card table and came up with an old copy of Cosmopolitan. She flipped to one of the pages where she had folded the corner down the last time she had gone through the magazine. "This guy is guapo."

Gladys glanced down at the picture of a man in an expensive business suit. His platinum blond hair was impeccably styled, short on the sides and long on top. He had a strong cleft chin, sharp nose, and his eyes were a sparkling deep blue. She shrugged.

"Sure, he's cute. But not my type."

Maria frowned, giving Gladys a disbelieving glance. "He is mine," she said softly.

She touched the man's face and smiled at the photograph. "That's the kind of man I plan to have. I don't care if I marry him or not, just as long as he gives me a beautiful baby with blue eyes and blonde hair. That's what I want more than anything."

She glanced up in surprise as Gladys burst out in laughter. "You want a man like him? Oh, Maria, good luck!" She laughed again. "What makes you think a man like him--or

even like him--" she pointed at her picture of the man by the motorcycle, "would be interested in someone like us, eh? And where would you even meet him? Here at this motel?" She laughed again.

Maria's face burned. She'd never actually voiced her hopes before, and now that she had they seemed as silly as Gladys made them sound. But she couldn't let Gladys know that--she hated the thought of the older woman trampling so carelessly over her dreams without even realizing what they meant to her.

"I'm not beautiful, but I will have a beautiful baby, you'll see...." She caught the pleading whine in her voice and hated it.

Gladys didn't appear to notice, but she spoke soothingly anyway. "Well, you're not ugly, Maria, and I'm sure any baby you have will be beautiful. I noticed Fernando at the gas station talking to you yesterday, no? I think he likes you. I bet he would be happy to give you a beautiful baby." She gave Maria a suggestive raise of the eyebrows.

Maria shuddered. "Fernando? That greasy torpe? You're crazy--I wouldn't sleep with that boy if he was the last man in the world! I'm going to have a beautiful baby--a fair baby with light hair and light eyes, you'll see!"

"What's wrong with dark ha--" Gladys began, but Maria stood up with a screech of her metal chair across the cement

floor. She grabbed up her magazine and stormed out of the room.

For the entire following day Maria refused to talk with Gladys. She knew she was being silly, but she hated the way the older woman had laughed and thrown her dreams in her face. Yes, she knew Gladys was right--how in the world could she expect to find a man who would give her the child she wanted? The only people who ever showed up at this motel were the cheap, ugly degenerates who came here for a quick fuck with their cheap, ugly women. No handsome, fair-haired man would ever come here.

...But then, the next day, one did.

He came with a lady to stay at the motel for an entire night. He and the lady checked in to room 205, the best room in the old motel. The receptionist told Maria that the man's car--it was a Mercedes!--had broken down on the highway. It was being fixed at the *taller mecánico* just next door, and would be delivered to the motel early the next morning.

Maria saw the man as he climbed the stairs to his room. He wore an elegant gray business suit with a blue silk tie. His lady companion was almost as beautiful, of course, and just as elegantly dressed, but Maria scarcely noticed her. It was the man who held all her attention.

He wasn't all that tall, not much taller than the men Maria was used to seeing. But his hair was an unbelievable golden blond. His face was exquisitely chiseled, as if from

white marble, with just a touch of bronzed tan. His nose was straight and narrow, his jaw line strong and sharp. And his eyes--they were as blue as glacier ice and as bright as the sun.

Maria didn't go home that night. She pretended to read one of her magazines until Gladys left, and then waited for the night receptionist to settle down in front of the battered black-and-white television and watch his usual game shows. Then she crept up to the second floor to listen at the door to room 205.

She heard them from several meters away. She heard the woman first, her breath coming in gasps between muffled moans. And then she heard his voice, masculine grunts of pleasure coming in rhythmic thrusts.

Maria had heard the same sounds through the thin doors countless times before. If she had ever reacted to them, it had been with disgust at best. But this time it was different. She felt an immediate surge of warmth between her legs. For a moment she thought the sudden wetness was an untimely onset of her period...and then she realized it was only her body responding to the sounds of passion.

She moved closer to the door and listened closely. The woman cried out as she suddenly climaxed--and Maria closed her eyes and moaned softly to herself, losing herself in the feeling. *I am the woman lying under him. It is me he is making love to, it is me he is making pregnant with his perfect seed....*

She imagined the passionate cries of the woman were her own, feeling the man's hardness thrusting between her legs, feeling his chest muscles sliding against her breasts and nipples, smelling his clean sweat, feeling his breath in her ear....

Without realizing it, she slowly moved her hand up under the hem of her cleaning uniform. She lightly trailed her fingers up the inside of her soft thighs, and then slipped a finger under the loose elastic of her panties. She felt a moment's vague surprise at how slippery and wet she was within the coarse, curly hairs. Slowly she stroked herself....

The woman climaxed again, her muffled screams carrying through the door. And Maria came with her, using the woman's cries to cover her own gasps of ecstasy.

Some time later, Maria opened her eyes with a flutter. The sounds through the door had ceased minutes ago. She moved away from the door and sat at the top of the steps leading downstairs. She leaned her head against the chipped white paint and rust of the banister, and smiled to herself. She had just made love for the first time, and with the man of her dreams. Her eyes slid closed again, but the smile didn't leave her lips.

She drifted off to sleep....

"Perdón."

Maria awoke with start. For a second she sat blinking in the early morning sunshine that filtered down through a dusty haze kicked up by traffic passing on the highway.

"Perdón, señora."

Maria looked up and behind her--

There stood the man in his business suit and all his golden splendor. In his hand was a suitcase, and the woman stood at his side. It was he who had spoken, in flawless Spanish and with a rich, deep voice.

The man looked away and cleared his throat, and Maria suddenly realized she was staring with her mouth open. And she was blocking his path. Mumbling an apology, she stumbled to her feet and moved out of the way. The man nodded his thanks. He and the woman walked down the stairs without a second look at the dazed cleaning lady, her face burning with surprise and embarrassment.

Maria didn't say a word. The way the man had looked at her was more cruel than anything she'd ever imagined. Certainly there was no love or caring in his eyes. Nor was there any dislike or even disgust. Worse, the man's eyes had shown nothing, nothing at all. They had barely registered her existence. And when he had moved on she had seen even that pass from his eyes like smoke in a breeze.

The couple disappeared around the corner. Maria heard a car engine roar to life, and a moment later the shiny Mercedes pulled out of the parking area and glided gracefully out onto the highway.

It wasn't until that moment that Maria snapped out of her numbed gaping, and the full realization of what had happened descended on her: he's gone!

If only she had said something to him, explained what he meant to her! Surely he would have looked at her with interest--more than interest. *Dear Lord, I made love to him!* But in a part of her mind she knew better; to a perfect man like that she would never be more than another faceless nobody among the ugly people everywhere.

Maria closed her eyes. It didn't matter anyway, she thought. The man was gone. His stopping at the motel was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and she had stood by doing nothing as the opportunity slipped right through her fingers.

She didn't cry. That would have been too much for her to bear. Instead she went to the *bodega* and retrieved her cleaning cart. She would work, keep herself busy, not letting herself think about what had happened.

But her job was to clean the rooms, and right now it was too early for anyone to check out so she could clean their room. Except, that is, for room 205. Maria didn't want to go into that room, not yet...but what other room was there to clean at this hour? She would have to clean it sooner or later anyway.

She wheeled the squeaky cart to the door and opened the lock with her pass key. The dimly lit interior didn't smell

quite as musty and sour as usual. The bed was not a mess; the covers were pulled up loosely in place.

With mixed feelings, Maria set about obliterating all signs that the man had ever been there. She stripped the bed, sponged it down, and remade it with fresh linen. She started to mop the floor when she happened to glance in the wastepaper basket.

At the bottom lay a used condom, knotted at the base. She started to empty the basket into the bag attached to her cleaning cart...when realization struck her like a thunderbolt.

This was the golden man's condom. *It holds his seed!*

Slowly Maria reached into the basket and withdrew the limp, moist bag. It was one of those expensive sheepskin prophylactics, still slick with lubricant. She weighed the condom in her hand, feeling the liquid inside slide easily back and forth as she tilted her wrist. *How can so much gold weigh so little?...*

She put the wastepaper basket back in its place and hurried over to the door.

There was no one outside; it was still too early. She closed the door and locked it. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and again looked at the condom. For a moment she paused, pretending to reconsider what she was doing. But her mind was made up. *I hope it's still good.* She pulled at the knot.

Maria lay down on the stiff, fresh sheets. She pulled up the hem of her uniform and tugged her panties down to her ankles. She lifted her hips and spread her legs.

She used her middle finger to push the opening of the condom as far inside herself as she could reach. And then she squeezed the thin sheepskin with her fingers, milking as much of the thick fluid into her as she could.

Then she lay there for several minutes, keeping her hips raised, hopefully helping the seed slide deeper inside her. She did not feel like she had just made love, not like she had last night. But this was more important. Its results would last more than a few brief moments. The time of the month was right for her, she knew. The seed could take. Now it was just a matter of time....

Maria slowly pulled up her panties and stood up. She smoothed out the sheets and unlocked the door, and went out into the morning sunshine.

"*Oye, mujér*, it looks like you won't be working here much longer," Gladys said over a bowl of lemon Jello, waving a plastic spoon at Maria's swollen belly. "You're as round as a house!"

Maria nodded with a smile. "I don't care. My cousin will help me with a little money, when I need it."

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Gladys' wistful look at her belly, which only made her smile again. Over the past few months Gladys had become envious of

Maria's pregnancy, and Maria reveled in it. She had told Gladys all about the father, how wonderfully handsome he was, with blond hair and blue eyes. Of course, she had said nothing about the condom; instead, there had been a single night, a brief, passionate love affair. Well, in a way that was almost true. Gladys didn't quite believe Maria, of course, but in just a few more weeks she would see for herself.

Maria rubbed her belly softly, feeling movement within. She imagined what her child would look like. It would be a beautiful child, that much she was sure. She knew he would be darker than his father, but that was all right. Her child would carry the bloodline of golden man, and it would show down through the generations. Maria would be the envy of everyone she knew.

"*Incredible,*" said Gladys, shaking her head. She had finished her Jello and now had her nose in one of her magazines.

"What?" Maria had thought Gladys was still looking at her, and she felt a twinge of disappointment when she saw that the older woman had just gone back to her reading.

"There's this article on plastic surgery here. It's amazing what they can do. Not my type, but this man is really cute!"

Maria glanced over at the page Gladys had open before her. It showed a large color photograph of a man: fat, with a weak chin, bulbous nose, big ears, dark skin, dark hair,

and dark eyes. She sniffed in disgust. "You call that good-looking? He's repulsive. I'd rather carry puppies than his child."

Gladys laughed, her gold tooth catching the light. "No, silly, that's the before picture. Here's the after picture." She flipped the page and twisted it around for Maria to see.

The article below the photograph explained at length how they had used dyes and bleach to lighten the man's skin and hair. His eyes were made blue with color-tinted contact lenses. Liposuction had removed his fat. Plastic surgery and implants had built up his chin, raised his cheekbones, pared down and straightened his nose, and pulled back his ears.

But Maria didn't pay attention to the article. She saw nothing but the photograph of the altered man. She recognized that face in an instant.

It was the golden man. It was her lover. It was the father of...

She looked down at the bloated swell of her belly, and the thing inside that had suddenly become as heavy and cold as stone.

The End