



Source: Daniel Williams, *'In Egypt's countryside, farmers' anger seen as 'silent time bomb'*, *Washington Post online*, 17/07/05

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Lily was surrounded by silk and satin. Great balloons of fabric circled her as she transformed the piles of material into flowing, swishing pieces. She cut carefully through the swathes of material with sharpened scissors, marked it with tailor's chalk, pinned it, stitched it.

In the sitting room, used most of the time as her sewing room, she worked long into the night, listening to Jack snore softly in the bedroom. She loved to listen to his body's rhythm, and matched the touch of her foot on the sewing pedal to the sound of his breath, in and out, in and out.

'Come to bed,' Jack would call to her. And every part of her wanted to. As she sewed, she thought about his body, the strength of him, the goodness of him.

But Lily had hours to go. Mrs Lawrence wanted her new skirt for the weekend. Mrs Lawrence, who spoke with an English accent, who had lived in Paris with her husband before the war, who was divorced, rich and frightening. Mrs Lawrence, who was only five years older than Lily but had lived a life so much fuller, more exciting. Mrs Lawrence, who had taken over Lily's little room, little house, who had become her only client, and who needed to be pleased.

Before Mrs Lawrence, Lily had a long list of women she sewed for. Work skirts, jackets, Christening gowns, the occasional dress for a debutante ball. But as Mrs Lawrence's demands seemed to grow and grow, the other women fell away. Some felt bitter—they'd depended on Lily for a certain quality of cuff, a straightness of seam and hem. But Mrs Lawrence consumed Lily, consumed her time, her energy, her sewing room.

She wanted silk skirts, full and rustling, cinched at the waist. She wanted embossed satin evening coats, long and flattering. She wanted evening dresses in chiffon, soft and flirtatious, beaded and feathered. Lily imagined the life that went with this long list of items, and tried to ignore the envy that hit her on these long nights with the sewing machine.

Mrs Lawrence brought to the house a long list of fashionable items to be made, and money to spend on them. She brought silks from India and China in greens and blues and aquamarines, reds and pinks and oranges. Audacious colours, glimmering and deep, luxurious to the touch.

And one day Mrs Lawrence brought a mirror to the house.

'I can't see the finished product Lily, and a seamstress needs a proper mirror.'

It was full-length, framed in gold, shining and bright. It seemed made to reflect only beauty, only richness. When Lily looked at herself in the mirror, she saw only a pale version of herself. Perhaps she was too plain to be framed in gold. When Mrs Lawrence stood in front of the mirror, her reflection appeared to grow even brighter than her bodily self.

'There's nothing like a gilt mirror to add some style to the fitting rooms,' said Mrs Lawrence, and Lily wondered what

she meant. She wondered whose guilt the mirror displayed, and how. She wondered if she was guilty of something terrible, and hoped that Mrs Lawrence had not guessed at it, and was trying to put it on display.

The guilt mirror was placed in the corner of the room, away from the windows. When Lily looked into the glass from her sewing table, she could see the picture of her and Jack that hung above the mantle piece.

Mrs Lawrence started to spend more and more time at the house. At first Jack sat in the back of the house away from the two women, but she drew him to them. She modelled her new clothes for him, and talked to him about the world, about things that Lily didn't understand. While Lily worked, they'd move to the kitchen, sharing soup and toast for supper over the hum of Lily's sewing machine. She felt envy as they talked, and looked at herself in the guilt mirror to see if it showed.

The mirror caught her jealousy, her irritation. It caught her being angry with Mrs Lawrence. It caught her envy for Mrs Lawrence's money, figure, style. It caught her anger at not making Jack laugh like Mrs Lawrence did.

Alone with Mrs Lawrence one evening, tired and wanting Jack to be home, wanting him to take her to bed, she asked her client to try on the latest dress—red silk embroidered with fine gold thread that shone in the light. Mrs Lawrence had bought it in India, and had found it just recently in her trunk, filled with fabric from faraway places.

Lily knew the fabric would show off her client's smooth, creamy skin, her raven-black hair, curled and pinned at the nape of her neck.

'You slip into it here. I'll make us tea and help you with the hooks when I come back in.'

She stood in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil. She thought she heard the key in the lock, but didn't hear Jack's sing-song hello and thought nothing more of it. She stood, tired, and rubbed her sore fingers and hands.

Carrying the little tray into the room, she heard his voice, just a whisper. Or did she? Was she hearing things? She couldn't work out where he was, what he was doing, why he was whispering.

And as she entered the sitting room she looked into the guilt mirror and saw the reflection. The two of them stood together by the mantle piece and were caught in the glass. Their two real selves would have seen her, jumped away from each other, straightened themselves and righted it all. But a reflection does not feel guilt, a reflection continues its actions, not caring of consequences.

His reflection fastened the hooks, delicately, tenderly. He worked upwards from the small of her back to just beneath her shoulder blades. And then lightly kissed her creamy shoulder. Without guilt.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.*