

Acting as a Cleaning Lady

By Susannah Donim

Chapter 10 – Our New Careers

Maria, the cleaning lady, gets a new boss (same as the old boss). Business booms.

Sally and I (as Dave) rang round Pat's list of clients – nearly thirty in all. Dorothy, Joyce and Ruth were very willing to act as references, although they wanted Sally's assurance that they wouldn't lose Maria's services. Some of the ladies on Pat's list had already made alternative arrangements, but many were keen to talk further after checking with our referees. Some had already heard good things about us on the grapevine – which presumably meant Anna and Dorothy.

Sally interviewed Chloe and Fleur together. She met them in the dining room, with me as Maria in and out with refreshments and listening from the kitchen again through the serving hatch. They were cousins, not sisters, and they were very different, but they both seemed to be nice girls – friendly, boisterous, with an earthy sense of humour. They were obviously very fond of each other. Like the older women in the family neither girl was at all academic and both left school at sixteen with barely a GCSE between them. Nearly ten years later, nothing much had developed for them, career-wise.

Chloe was married to Harry, a plumber, actually a plumber's mate, still learning the job. They had recently moved into a little house on the downmarket side of Pinner. Pat had helped them out with a deposit of three-quarters of the asking price – she wasn't kidding when she said she was 'financially secure' from running Pinner Maids for thirty years – but she had insisted they take a mortgage and meet the payments themselves. Hence Chloe's need for cleaning work – at least until Harry was fully qualified and earning properly. Then they wanted to start a family.

Fleur was single and lived with her mother, Pat's older daughter. She seemed to be in no hurry to settle down. She was very attractive, as was evidenced by a string of boy-friends. Her mother and grandmother had indulged her 'wild days' for some time but had had enough by now, and that was why she too had to find honest work.

Sally introduced me to them as I came in with refreshments. She made it clear that I was 'the help' and employed as a cleaning lady by J & J Services. I played along, deferring to her politely and calling her '*Señora*'.

"Maria's learning English," Sally said, "but she has a way to go. Show them, Maria," she added in Spanish.

"*Ello, lye-deez,*" I began. "*Ah yam Maria. Ah yam a clean-eeng lye-dee. Ah work for Señora Jackson.*"

Both girls struggled to control their laughter at my terrible English. Sally smiled indulgently.

"So if you work together, you'll probably have to talk to the clients for us," she went on. "You'll be representing J & J Services. I hope you'll be comfortable with that?"

Both girls assured her that wouldn't be a problem. They both obviously liked the idea of being 'team leader'. I quietly determined that Maria would learn English more quickly than originally planned.

Sally promised the girls that she would be in touch as soon as she had firm orders from any of Pat's old clients.

That happened quickly and Chloe and Fleur were soon engaged by J & J Services on a freelance contract basis.

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Neither Chloe nor Fleur wanted to work full-time, while I, of course, very much needed to. I was used to cleaning for my existing clients by myself, but for the new ones we tried working in pairs. So I often found myself working with one of the other girls.

We got on very well but communication was a problem at first, so they both took a keen interest in helping me improve my English. They helped me learn the words for everything a cleaning lady did: dusting, vacuuming, ironing, and so on. I pretended to struggle with all the new vocabulary and had to think hard about how an ignorant Spanish girl would mangle the vowels in words like ‘tumble-dryer’. Chloe and Fleur giggled helplessly at my accent. They particularly enjoyed teaching me the names of the clothes as they came out of the washing machine.

“What’s this, Maria?” Chloe would say.

“*Uno Sostén*,” I’d say.

“It’s a *bra*,” Chloe would say.

“*Brarre*,” I’d repeat.

And she would laugh her head off, and repeat the exercise with another garment.

“*Las bragas*.”

“We say, *knickers*.”

“*Neek-erse*.”

Laughter.

But I was gradually able to improve my English over the next two months without raising any suspicions – at least for words that would come up in the daily duties of a cleaning lady. Thus Maria was able to operate more independently as she learnt the language, and I didn’t need to be so careful to pretend not to understand what was being said in my earshot. If I slipped, and showed I understood a word that wouldn’t be part of a housemaid’s everyday vocabulary, people simply assumed that it was something I had learned at home from Sally, my landlady and employer.

* * *

Our business took a big leap forward when Sally’s branch of the bank decided to terminate the contract of their current cleaning service, who had become lazy and complacent. Sally got wind of this early and quickly put in a bid. With her inside knowledge of the premises and excellent references from our existing clients, her tender was successful. So now Sally and Dave had to ring round more of Pat’s old contacts to find more staff. Till then Chloe, Fleur and I had an extra two hours work at the bank every day from five till seven. The girls were grateful for the overtime, though it limited Fleur’s social life and Harry had to start making his own dinners. I was a little less grateful, as I was now working a fifty-hour week. But at least the money was good.

Over the next three weeks Sally interviewed and hired three more girls, all highly recommended by Pat. Since she was still full-time at the bank, I had to do most of the rostering. I sent instructions via text messages from a spare phone, signing them as my wife. It was better that Dave take a back seat so that Sally could say he was away on business. I didn't want any of the girls to start asking, "How come we talk to Mr Jackson on the telephone all the time, but never see him?"

Now that the business was taking off on a grander scale Sally decided to introduce a uniform to make us more distinctive. I argued against spending the money, but gave in because I could see how it would help the business. Nevertheless to control costs we agreed on just a cleaner's smock in either pink or grey with our new 'J & J' logo on the left breast, worn with smart black leggings which the girls had to provide themselves.

Staff were allowed to wear maid's dresses, but they would have to pay for them themselves, so no one else did. I was therefore the only J & J employee who wore a maid's uniform. Sally arranged to have the logo added to all my dresses. (I wore a smock and leggings too whenever the client hadn't explicitly asked me to wear a dress.)

So in the early days of our contract with the bank, Chloe, Fleur and I would rendezvous at their back door at ten to five. Chloe and Fleur did all the talking to the bank's custodial staff of course, and they were very competent.

There were three floors to clean so we took one each, collecting our cleaning carts from the store in the basement and taking the lift to our assigned work areas.

Each floor had a kitchen with a small dishwasher, so our first job was to collect coffee cups and clear up any lunch detritus from the desks, and stack and start the dishwasher.

Then we made our rounds of the work areas, emptying the waste baskets into two big plastic sacks at the end of the cart, one for recyclables and one for rubbish. Then we would dust the surfaces, being careful not to disturb any papers (lots of people ignored the bank's 'clear desk' policy); clean up any spills; and then vacuum.

By this time the dishwasher cycle would have finished, so we'd empty the cups and plates into the cupboards. Finally we tidied the kitchens and collected all the rubbish, taking it on our carts down to the basement and the large garbage disposal.

As for all of my – *Maria's* – work as a cleaning lady, it was mindless activity and I found it calming, almost Zen. I found myself thinking of other more important things, though these days that was as much about developing our business as my money-making digital currency app. I thought about the admin, the rostering, how we would staff our rapid expansion. I was planning to set up a website for J & J Domestic Services. This was overdue and Sally had been nagging me about it.

Then I would turn around and see the beautifully clean and tidy bank offices and smile. I *loved* this job. When they saw me smiling happily, the other girls thought I was weird.

Chloe and Fleur both had little brothers. When the three of us chatted over our breaks they would often exchange stories of their awful siblings. I, that is, *Maria*, was an only child and anyway I had to pretend not to understand a lot of their conversation, but some of their complaints were familiar. Hearing the horror stories of the big sister – little brother relationship from the sister's side made me more sympathetic to Anna.

So she was a little surprised when I went out of my way to hug her the next Friday morning before the bride ladies arrived.

“What on earth was that for, young lady?” she asked.

“Can’t I hug my big sister who’s been so kind to me?” I asked.

“Are you quite well?” she asked. “Have you got some terminal illness, or something? Anyway, get off! I can’t let my friends see my maid hugging me.”

‘Right!’ I thought. ‘That’s the first and last time I show her any affection.’

“You’ve got a ladder in your tights, by the way,” she added. “I hope you’ve got a spare pair in your handbag.”

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Sally was in her element. She was always good at organisation and telling everyone what to do, so she was born to run a company. She took on more staff to support the ever-growing client base. She interviewed every new cleaner personally; insisted on at least two references, which she always checked; and made sure she partnered each new member of staff with an existing, trusted girl (sometimes me). She also visited the client’s house whenever a new girl was deployed there, to see her in action for herself. She was determined that J & J wouldn’t run into the kind of problems that killed Pinner Maids.

Things began to settle into a routine for us over the next three months. The business continued to grow and was starting to make serious money. I helped by computerising our invoicing and payroll, using freeware for small businesses. We were charging our clients the same rates Maria had got from Dorothy, Joyce and Ruth in the early days, but none of them objected, as we were developing a reputation for excellence. Sally made sure the quality of our work was exceptional.

I set the company’s standards. I drafted work instructions for every type of cleaning job and these were distributed to each new member of staff as they joined. Of course, none of the others knew that Maria had written them – how could she have, with her poor command of English? They thought it was all Sally’s work.

Our staff were always ‘cleaning ladies’, never ‘maids’. (I insisted on that even though most of my clients liked *me* to wear one of my maid’s uniforms.) Our ladies were required to be conscientious. Slapdash work would not be tolerated. They mostly toed the line. Those who didn’t weren’t offered many shifts and Sally made sure they understood why. With our clients’ enthusiastic cooperation, she carried out surprise inspections to make sure everyone followed the guidelines. Most of the girls didn’t mind anyway. They were all making more than they had when they worked for Pat. Pinner Maids hadn’t been exactly ‘cheap and cheerful’ but J & J was a *premium* service. We were practically a status symbol for Pinner ‘ladies of the house’.

The company still made a 25% mark-up on each hour worked by our staff. I was working forty to fifty-hour weeks, but I took no salary as Maria. Our revenue came from dividends paid to the company directors according to their shareholdings. Phil acted as our accountant. He assured us our arrangements were legal and minimised our tax burden. Soon we were doing very well and were much less worried about meeting our mortgage payments.

We eventually decided that we could afford for Sally to leave her dispiriting job at the bank and devote herself to running the company full-time. So then I was a company director, website designer, and Sally's secretary, but mostly a humble but happy cleaning lady.

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Around about the end of my third month as Maria I realised I wasn't *acting* as a cleaning lady anymore. It had all become *real*. I had even started thinking in Spanish. I *was* Maria; she had fully materialised as a person in her own right; and she was completely different from Dave. I was used to being told what to do now, by my clients, and by the *Señora*. Dave might not have liked it much, but I, Maria, was completely comfortable with it all.

It was different when Sally and I were alone together. We were equals as we always had been, not mistress and maid, but even then my posture, movements, gestures and mannerisms were entirely feminine. It was too difficult to switch between Dave and Maria, so I stayed as Maria all the time.

What was even better, I realised I was getting used to being Maria – reconciled to being her, even *happy* to be her. I stopped worrying about Sally no longer thinking of me as a husband; or that she might start looking for a real man to replace her sissy secretary and maid (I mean, *cleaning lady*). She had long ago convinced me that she found me equally attractive as Maria, if not more so.

Now that we had a little more money, I let Sally persuade me to buy some sexy evening wear and go to a beauty parlour. We both enjoyed getting me dressed up to go out on the town, my hair in a fancy style, dramatic evening make-up, my voluptuous figure in a killer frock – plus size, of course.

I looked for dresses that displayed my décolletage to best effect. Some of them were quite short; Sally persuaded me I had good legs – for a 'fuller-figured' girl anyway. I found I liked to wear stockings, despite their obvious inconvenience, and I loved petticoats. They just felt so sexy.

When Sally first saw me done up to the nines, she couldn't control herself and dragged me upstairs, where she quickly undid what had taken me the best part of two hours to do.

We started going out together at weekends into London, or anywhere a good distance away from Pinner. On one occasion we were walking from the underground to a night club in Soho and I became aware we were being followed by two men, who weren't trying too hard to keep their conversation private.

"Have you seen that fat bird's arse?" one of them said. "It's like two huge sacks of jelly!" Which of course wasn't far from the truth. "Can you imagine what her knickers must be made of to keep that lot under control?"

I'd wondered myself, so I'd looked it up. Spandex is a synthetic material primarily made of polyurethane polymer.

His friend laughed. "I'd give her one though, wouldn't you?"

I was blushing big-time now. It felt like my face was glowing like a furnace.

"Well, yeah, I wouldn't kick her out of bed. It would be like rolling around on a pile of pillows. But have you seen her friend? Fuckin' gorgeous. Could be a beauty queen! Wonder where they're going?"

At that point Sally and I turned into a well-known gay club. Our admirers' disappointment was obvious.

"Shit! *Shit!*"

Sally took my hand and grinned at me. I smiled back.

"I've never seen you blushing like that," she said.

"What about *you*, 'Miss Pinner 2018'?"

We often went to gay clubs where two ladies dancing and smooching together wouldn't attract attention, but occasionally we went to ordinary night clubs and allowed ourselves to be picked up. She was much more attractive than me obviously, but some men seemed to like my voluptuous figure and exotic Spanish accent.

We never let it go too far though. Sally was very clear that she didn't want to have sex with another man, but she was curious, maybe even a little excited, about the idea of me letting a man have his way with me. She threatened to slip some Rohypnol in my drink when I wasn't looking. I *think* she was joking.

I couldn't help but wonder whether my abdominal prosthesis could accommodate a man, assuming he could get my heavy-duty knickers off...? Or whether I might have to try one of the other well-known ways to satisfy him. But I wasn't gay and couldn't imagine doing that. Besides, I didn't want Sally to go with another man either, so obviously I couldn't.

My usual excuse was that I had work in the morning. Of course when Monday came around I had to go back to being a drab cleaning lady. It wouldn't do to let our clients – or our staff – think that Maria was a wealthy good-time girl only moonlighting as a cleaner.

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But while I was perfectly happy in my role as Maria, we knew it wasn't a long-term option. There were too many things that could go wrong. So we were looking forward to the Tribunal. Then I could give up cleaning and Dave could come back permanently.

The first development on that front was a phone call from Bill Rafferty, a solicitor recommended to me and paid for by the bank. He asked lots of questions, and we exchanged many more telephone calls and emails. He was very keen to arrange a face-to-face meeting, which I was equally keen to avoid, for obvious reasons.

At first I was concerned that I would be stitched up – after all Bill's fees would be covered by the bank unless I won my case – but in our conversations he convinced me that he was completely on my side. He had the papers the bank's lawyer had prepared, and he faithfully recorded everything I told him in my defence and turned it into an appropriate deposition in legal language.

When I asked him (over the telephone) whether he thought we would win, he hesitated.

"It's tricky," he said. "It's fairly obvious you haven't done anything that's really *wrong*. You haven't tried to defraud anyone. You weren't acting in competition with the bank in any area in which you have been employed. But Atkinson Stern *is* a competitor in other areas, and you are technically in breach of your contract. To be honest, I think this is more about a settlement, and what they really want from you."

That wasn't very encouraging, especially if Lawrence was involved. I would need to take the Tribunal very seriously.

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At lunchtime one Wednesday I got a telephone call from the bank on my cheap mobile. (Maria obviously couldn't afford an expensive smartphone.) Fleur and I were in Joyce's kitchen. I was, as usual, ironing. Seeing the Caller ID, I excused myself and went into the back garden to answer.

Almost six months to the day since I was suspended, the bank was ready to proceed to Tribunal. The hearing was set for the following Monday morning at their headquarters in the City. I immediately called Bill and Sally. She told my clients for the remainder of the week that 'something had come up at home' and I would be unavailable for a while; and, no, she didn't know when I would be back. We arranged for other girls to cover my shifts.

So my last day as Maria, the cleaning lady and reluctant maid, had arrived and we arranged an appointment at Transformations to bring Dave back. I had been there several times over the last few months for waxing – which got steadily less painful – and maintenance of my prosthetics, skin and hair, but on all those visits I knew I would be leaving again as Maria. This would be very different.

Luckily they had a slot available on Friday. Sally dropped me off with a suitcase containing Dave's clothes.

"It will be great to see my husband again," she said, smiling, although I felt she might have spoken with a little more enthusiasm.

Angela, the receptionist, welcomed me and called Vera.

"You look wonderful, Maria," she said. "You've really blossomed. Are you *sure* you want to go back to being a man?"

I realised I had been wondering that myself. The last six months had been unexpectedly happy and fulfilling. But it was a fantasy, and more than slightly perverted, so I confirmed my wishes.

"Very well, then," she said. "Follow me."

I stripped off and packed my dress, tights and shoes in the suitcase. The first job was to remove all my prosthetics: Maria's nose, cheeks, chin, ginormous boobs, buttocks and hips. A short, thin man with a familiar long face gradually emerged from under the fat little female body. As a result of months of hard physical graft I had gained some muscle, but had lost more than ten pounds in all. I was hard and wiry, but also the skinniest I had been in my entire adult life.

I was genuinely astonished at how light and agile I felt afterwards, though I almost fell over backwards when I stood up, my centre of gravity having changed so much. Looking down, it was a surprise to be able to see my feet again without turning sideways. I had gotten used to only being able to see a pair of giant breasts. I realised to my surprise that I was going to miss them, and their matching buttocks.

"We'll keep your prosthetics for a month or so," said Vera, as if reading my mind, "just in case."

"I won't need them," I said, scornfully. "My next performance won't involve female impersonation."

"Still," she grinned, "you'd be surprised how many people in your position change their minds."

I didn't believe she had ever met anyone 'in my position', but I didn't say so.

"I strongly recommend you wait a while before 'purging' your collection of women's clothes too," she continued.

I packed Maria's bra and panties in my suitcase with just a hint of regret. I pulled on a pair of Dave's underpants and some of his socks. They felt rough on my skin. Presumably that would change when my body hair returned.

My next appointment was with Sharon at the Transformations hairdresser salon.

"I know you need to go back to looking like a man, Maria," she said, pointedly sticking to the only name she knew me by, "and obviously you need a serious trim. Only hippies and rock stars have hair down to the middle of their backs. But I recommend we don't go *too* short, just in case you change your mind."

Her too?

"Not going to happen," I said.

"Well, I'll go short enough that you can look entirely male by putting it in a trendy low ponytail, or female again just by styling it differently and setting it with hair spray. It can't hurt to keep your options open, can it?"

"I suppose not."

"I need to dye it back to your original colour now," Sharon said. "I'm afraid that's going to take a while. I need to bleach out the black colouring first. I would normally recommend using a clarifying shampoo to do this as there's much less risk of damaging your hair, but that would take several washes over a period of weeks to work, so that's out. The product I'm using is a specially designed colour remover. It attacks the molecules of the original hair dye. It's less harsh than bleach, though there is still some risk of damage to your hair. Unfortunately it probably won't restore your natural colour – most people come out looking a bit orange – so we'll have to use another dye to get back to your original mousy brown. But we took plenty of photos back then of course, so I know what product to use."

She set to work with her colour removers and dyes. As usual we chatted as she worked. She asked me about my experiences as a woman over the last six months, but I parried most of her questions politely. I liked Sharon a lot, but the fewer people who knew about what I had been doing, the better. She didn't seem offended by my reticence, and gradually the conversation gave way to silence. I dozed through most of the two hours her work on my hair took.

When she finished trimming and combing it through, I stared at my image in the mirror. I looked very much like how I had in my first year of university. In fact, with my weight loss and my 'long-haired student' hairstyle I looked eighteen again, except that the anti-androgen cream I'd been using meant that I hadn't even the beginnings of a beard. In fact, faint residual traces of Maria's make-up made me look like an off-duty drag artist. Sharon saw the problem.

"It might help if I add some sideburns and a little five o'clock shadow," she suggested. "I can bulk up your eyebrows too. All easily reversible if you change your mind."

I let her do that, but I decided not to bother asking her to remove the skin dye or my lip filler. I had taken out and discarded the last of my dark contact lenses, so I looked enough like Dave again now. If anyone asked, I could just say that I had spent part of my enforced suspension sunbathing in Spain.

I hung up the Transformations smock I'd been wearing over my male underwear and got some of Dave's clothes out of the suitcase. I dressed in a simple black T-shirt and jeans, both of which were baggy on me because of my weight loss.

I was glad to be able to put my wedding ring on again, and exchange Maria's little ladies' watch for my old cheap but masculine Casio.

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Sally came to collect me later in the afternoon. I was waiting in Reception. I stood up when she came in. She did a comical double-take when she saw me.

"My God, I almost didn't recognise you!" she laughed. "It's been ages... and I had no idea you'd lost so much weight under all that..." She trailed off.

"Not too much of a disappointment, I hope?"

"Of course not, silly!" She reached up to give me a kiss. "Nice to be able to do that in public again," she said.

"You kissed Maria in public all the time."

"Not where we might be seen by anyone we knew," she said. "Are you ready to go?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that it might take me a while to get used to being Dave again."

"I can see that," she said. "Look at how you're standing, for a start."

"Huh?"

"One foot in front of the other with your hand on your hip. Also you're thrusting your boobs out at me, even though you haven't got any anymore."

I shuffled my feet and tried to stand in a more manly manner.

"Also, your hands..." I looked down, puzzled. "Your wrists are cocked; your palms are downwards; and your fingers are extended. That stance makes you look... effeminate." She tutted. "Oh, stick your hands in your pockets, or something."

I picked up my suitcase, now filled with Maria's clothes. Sally led the way to the car. As we approached she dropped back. I turned to see her watching me.

"You're walking funny now. You're wiggling your bottom the way a woman does, but you don't have big hips or a fat bum anymore and you're not wearing high heels. Can't you just try to put one foot in front of the other, like a man?"

"It's a habit," I said, embarrassed. "I'm sure I can break it. It's just a matter of practice."

I put the suitcase down and walked back towards her, concentrating on walking like John Wayne.

“Right,” she said, sceptically. “There's no need to *swagger*, for heaven's sake. Take longer strides – you've gotten used to taking mincing little steps. Swing your arms more.”

“You originally trained me to move like a woman,” I said. “I may need your help to go back.”

“I have *personal* experience of female movement!” she snorted, opening the door of the car. “I don't know how to move like a man.”

“You seem to be doing a good job of pointing out when I don't!” I said.

“I'm only trying to help,” she said. “Come on then, get in.”

“I should drive,” I said. “I always used to drive us when I was Dave – before, I mean. Besides I haven't driven for six months. I need the practice.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

She'd always liked being chauffeur-driven. She went round to the passenger door while I put the suitcase in the boot. I opened the driver's door and sat down.

“That was wrong too,” she said.

“What now?”

“You got in like you were still in your maid's uniform: turning round, dropping your bum down onto the seat and then swinging your legs in – the way a woman gets in a car when she's wearing a tight dress. You're wearing trousers now; you won't show the world your knickers if you get in one leg at a time.”

And so it went on all day. When we got home I made some tea, resisting the temptation to put on an apron. We took it into the sitting room. I had just sat down when I heard her sigh.

“You're sitting like a woman.”

I was sitting upright with my legs together demurely, and my hands were on my knees. I sat back and relaxed.

“Better,” she said, “but not quite right yet.”

I looked blank.

“Men don't cross their legs like that. In fact, they usually don't cross their legs at all. Open yourself up.”

I sat back and splayed my legs.

“Like this?” She nodded. “It feels weird,” I said. “Practically indecent!”

* * *

Over the weekend we tried to get out and about as much as possible. On the Saturday morning we made for the shopping centre after breakfast. Sally and Maria had promised to do some shopping for

Dorothy as usual, but as we weren't available on the usual Friday afternoon, we had to get her groceries and drop them off a day late. She had confirmed that she could manage till then.

After getting Dorothy's and our own groceries, we left the shopping in the car boot. Then we went back for a coffee and window-shopped for new clothes for me – for Dave, that is. I was wearing a typical casual outfit but everything felt heavy and rough and fitted badly. It was ironic that as Maria I had been much too fat to wear Dave's clothes, but now new Dave was too thin for them. I suggested we at least buy me a new suit for the Tribunal, but Sally said we should wait. After all, if I was no longer doing fifty hours a week of hard physical graft carrying forty pounds of surplus fat, I'd probably regain the weight I had lost quite quickly.

We delivered Dorothy's shopping at around lunchtime. She was pleased to finally meet me.

"We were beginning to think you'd left her, or something," she said mischievously. "I just wish I could see you clearly. You sound handsome."

"Oh he is," said Sally, surprisingly. "I wouldn't settle for anything less. It's just a shame that his work takes him away from home so much."

"But we're hoping that will change soon," I added, unpacking her groceries into her cupboards. I hoped she wouldn't notice that Dave knew where everything went.

"And how is Maria?" Dorothy asked.

"Oh she's fine," said Sally smoothly. "Some sort of family crisis back in Spain." Dorothy looked concerned. "It seems that it's all under control, but she doesn't know when – or if – she'll be back. But don't worry, we have other girls now. We'll make sure you're not left high and dry."

"Well that's kind, but I will miss Maria. She's a lovely girl, and her English is coming on very well. We have nice chats now."

That was a slight exaggeration. Our chats tended to be limited to topics such as washing, ironing, and cleaning. I could never allow Maria to be *chatty*. It would be too easy to give myself away in an unguarded moment.

We debated introducing Dave to some of Maria's other clients, so that Sally could show everyone that she really did have a husband after all, but it seemed like an unnecessary risk. Of course I looked very different from Maria now; also I could speak good English and make my voice sound very different from hers. But there might be other giveaway clues – especially if I accidentally said something only Maria would know, or did something effeminate. Better to let their memories of Maria fade a little, and give me a chance to cement my restored masculine identity.

* * *

We went out for dinner with Anna and Phil on Saturday night. Anna kept looking at me strangely.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I confronted her.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "It's just that it's fascinating. You've changed so much."

"Well of course I have," I scoffed. "I've stopped playing the fat immigrant cleaning lady, and I'm back to being your annoying brother."

“No, it’s more than that.” She was thoughtful. “I can see both Maria and the old you in there. It’s as though you have two personalities, competing for control. When Maria is on top, you’re softer, quieter, courteous. Then it’s as though you’ve remembered who you’re supposed to be, and Dave pushes back into the conversation, loud, rude and contradictory.”

“Hey, I’m not like that!” She raised an eyebrow. “Well, not to anyone else – just you!”

“You certainly don’t treat Sally that way, I agree, but that’s only because she got the measure of you years ago. I doubt anyone else would put up with your histrionics.”

I turned to Phil and Sally for support. Sally was grinning and nodding.

“She’s exaggerating,” said Phil, “but she’s not completely out of order. To be honest, you’re as bad as each other.”

Anna had a face like thunder. Phil would be for it when they got home.

“You’re both good company though,” he laughed. “It’s never dull when you two start on each other.”

I had never understood the dynamics of their marriage. I now realised I had been wrong about Phil all these years. He wasn’t the least bit intimidated by Anna. He indulged her because he loved her, but he certainly wasn’t afraid of her. My opinion of him shot up.

The rest of the evening went very well. We were all laughing together by the end. Several bottles of good wine were consumed. In the end we were glad we had come in a taxi.