

Acting as a Cleaning Lady

By Susannah Donim

Chapter 11 – The Tribunal

Dave returns to the bank face the music. Is this the end of his career as Maria, the cleaning lady?

I showed up at the bank's headquarters that fateful Monday in my best suit, now a size or two too big for me, and with my dyed hair in a discreet low ponytail. I was smart enough but I guess I must have looked worn and haggard. Maybe I would get the sympathy vote.

The first surprise was that the loathsome Lawrence was nowhere to be seen. I was very pleased that the Tribunal chairman was Harry, my old boss and Lawrence's predecessor. While we were waiting for the other panellists to arrive, he quietly explained that Lawrence had left the company since I had gone on my enforced suspension. He lowered his voice and looked around surreptitiously to make sure no one was within earshot.

"Lawrence was a dick," he said, "and he obviously took a personal dislike to you, probably because he recognised how much brighter you are than he is. I always saw that as a good thing, myself. A sensible manager is perfectly happy to have people working for him who are cleverer than he is. He can claim the credit for their ideas."

He grinned. I had really missed Harry.

"Look," he said, turning serious for a moment. "I know lots of people do what you did. Nobody cares if staff use their computers to browse the internet, or record a TV programme remotely, or write little programs to switch the central heating on and off at home. Even using the bank's resources to pursue your own little project is fine as long as it doesn't interfere with your work. What you did wasn't so very different and most of us managers would never do what Lawrence did. Unfortunately your project was *too* successful. You made too much money, and Lawrence saw it as a way to create a new revenue stream for the bank and claim the credit. As I said, he is a dick, but a lot of the money-grubbers around here don't think he was entirely wrong."

He sighed and gave me a sad look.

"It would all have been very different if you'd told someone what you were doing. There's every likelihood we would have backed you. We might have built a whole new division around you to offer digital currency trading."

"I would have done exactly that if *you'd* still been my boss, Harry," I said, "but there was no way I was going to trust Lawrence with my brainchild! He'd have stolen it and shut me out!"

"I understand," he said, "and you're probably right. It's a shame, but I don't think you're going to win this. I just hope we can come to a fair settlement."

Shit! I had hoped Harry would be on my side, but even he thought I was going to lose...

At that moment Bill, my lawyer, turned up. We shook hands. This was the first time we'd met face to face.

“We’ve agreed that you won’t be asked to speak,” he said, after an exchange of pleasantries. “Everything you might say is in the deposition anyway. It’s possible they might ask some clarifying questions but it’s unlikely. The facts are pretty simple and aren’t in dispute.”

That made sense to me. I’d already told Bill everything and he had skilfully drafted my arguments in writing far better than I could say them in words under potentially hostile questioning in the heat of the Tribunal room. We took our seats.

There followed nearly two hours of depositions and legal arguments, most of which I didn’t understand. They kept referring to my contract. I could tell that some of the panel of five were sympathetic. There was a representative of the bank’s professional body, a sort of white-collar union, but Bill said he was only there to ensure the correct procedure was followed. He would see that I wasn’t wronged or victimised, but he wasn’t there to speak on my behalf.

A Spanish Technical Director I had known slightly while we were in Madrid said that I was too promising an engineer to lose; but a saturnine woman from London Human Resources said it was a matter of trust, and a star performer who couldn’t be trusted was too dangerous to keep on.

They retired for private discussion just before lunch. We were told to return at two o’clock.

When we reconvened, it was clear that they had spent the best part of an hour and a half in heated debate, and they were still arguing when they sat down.

Eventually Harry turned to me and summed up. He clearly wasn’t happy.

“I’m sorry, David, but the majority of the Tribunal panel find that you are in breach of your contract. As such, we have no choice but to terminate your employment.”

So that was it; it was all over. What were we going to do now?

“However,” he went on, when he saw my face fall, “that’s mainly the view of our Legal and HR people, and they don’t run the bank... yet.”

He frowned at the evil-looking HR woman and an equally sour-faced fat man who presumably was from Legal Services. They seemed to find the papers in front of them especially fascinating.

“So we hope we’ve come up with a Settlement Agreement that will satisfy all parties,” Harry continued. “I’ll describe it to you now in plain English, but Mr Rafferty will go through the Agreement in detail with Mr Spratt of the bank’s Legal Department later, and advise you of any niceties.”

Bill looked interested. The fat man blinked at the mention of his name.

“The bank maintained that it should have a claim on the revenues generated by your digital currency app because its resources were used during its development, but as no bank infrastructure was involved in the actual delivery of the service, nor were any of our consumables used, the Panel believes it would be inappropriate to pursue any such claim...”

The fat Mr Spratt winced at this. He clearly voted against that, and felt that Harry was saying things that would put the bank in a dubious position legally, but Harry was too decent a person to hide behind legalese obfuscation.

“...provided that a satisfactory working relationship be put in place for the future. We therefore propose the following. It will of course be up to you to decide whether or not to accept this, and Mr

Rafferty will advise you appropriately, but you should understand that what I'm about to say comes as a package. Failure to agree to any element will invalidate the entire deal, and that may result in litigation, which I imagine none of us wants?"

He paused for breath. No one spoke up.

"First, all the funds in the escrow account will be released immediately for the exclusive use of Mr Jackson. The bank will make no further claim on them."

Whew! I had no idea how much was there but I suspected that we would have no further problems meeting our mortgage payments, at least for the moment. Bill nudged me and grinned. I grinned back.

"Second, the bank will take over the management of the service, collection of revenues, first-line customer support, etc. Once that happens, future revenues will be divided in equal shares – 50/50 – between the bank and Mr Jackson. We will be happy to pay Atkinson Stern a reasonable sum to continue to advertise the service on their website if they wish it, but they will receive no revenue from the service itself, and clicking on the link on their website will redirect the customer to us."

That shouldn't be a problem. I had never paid for the advertisement on the Atkinson Stern website. They only benefitted from the additional traffic the service brought to their site. That had seemed enough to them at first, but they might have been re-thinking that when it started to take off. Too late now. I hoped Danny wouldn't be criticised for not making more of the opportunity.

"IPR?" said Bill. I assumed he was talking about the Intellectual Property Rights for the app.

"I was coming to that," said Harry. "Thirdly, the IPR for the app will be jointly owned, going forward, by the bank and Mr Jackson. Neither will be permitted to make any changes to the service without the permission of the other. Both will benefit equally from any further developments."

Bill was thoughtful. He scribbled something on a piece of paper and passed it to me. It read, "*That might not be good for you. But let's see the whole package first.*"

I think I understood what was on his mind. The money was important, obviously, but the IPR was potentially far more valuable.

Harry had paused politely when he saw our exchange. When we looked up at him again, he continued.

"Fourthly, Mr Jackson will be retained by the bank on our standard freelance contractor terms and at a rate of £1,000 per day for 'support and development services'. It is of course impossible to say how many man-days of Mr Jackson's time will be required in any given financial year – that will depend on service take-up, what kind of support customers might need, what opportunities may arise for further development, etc – but we are prepared to guarantee at least fifty days per year. For what it's worth, my personal opinion is that it's likely to be considerably more than that for at least the first two years. This is a fast-changing area, after all."

So if all else fails we will get £50,000 a year for about two and a half months work? *Result!* Harry had nearly finished now.

"One more thing: it's normal to forbid anyone leaving the bank to return as a contractor for at least six months, but HR have agreed that the six months suspension you've already served will count as that. So if you agree to these terms, your freelance contract can begin immediately."

The sour-faced HR woman looked even more sour-faced, if that was possible. She had obviously only agreed to that under pressure.

“Now I won’t ask for your commitment until you’ve had all this in writing and Mr Rafferty has had the chance to check it,” Harry went on, “but could I ask you for your initial reaction – without prejudice, of course?”

I looked at Bill. I whispered to him that I thought the generous financial arrangements and the freelance contract more than compensated for the loss of half the IPR. After all, they still couldn’t exploit my concepts without my say-so. He nodded.

“If Bill approves the Agreement, I’ll be satisfied,” I said. “Thank, you, Harry.”

The meeting broke up.

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The goblins from Legal and HR left the room. I thanked Bill for all his efforts as he went off with Spratt. Harry came over to me.

“Most of the arguments over lunch were about whether we could keep you on the staff,” he said. “I felt it would be better to have you ‘in house’ doing everything you’ll now be doing as a contractor, but when I realised I wasn’t going to win that one, I negotiated on your behalf for as much as possible. Those bureaucratic idiots don’t seem to realise what they’ve lost. I’m pretty sure you’ll be much better off with this arrangement – at least financially. It’s our loss. Also as an approved contractor, we may be able to put other work your way – stuff that has nothing to do with digital currencies.”

“Fantastic! You’re a true friend, Harry. You must let me know if there’s ever anything I can do for you.”

“It was a pleasure. You didn’t deserve what was going to happen.” He paused. “Actually there is something you might be able to do. You and Sally run a cleaning company in Pinner, don’t you? We live in Harrow. My wife can’t find good household help for love or money. Do you have anyone available?”

“I’m sure we do,” I said. “We were looking to expand in your direction anyway.”

I gave him a J & J Services business card.

“Great, thanks! By the way, do you know how much is actually in your escrow account?”

“No, I haven’t been able to access it – for obvious reasons.”

“Well, there was about £50,000 a few months ago, and that’s the figure the panel saw. I checked more recently. There’s just under a million there now. The revenue flow went up tenfold as a result of that tweak you made to the risk algorithm. I didn’t tell anyone on the panel that, or they might have insisted we pursue our claim. Mum’s the word!”

“Holy mackerel! We’ll clean your house for free, Harry!”

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So the Tribunal was a mixed success. My high-flying career in banking IT was definitely over.

On the other hand, we recovered the money my crypto-currencies app had earned, and it looked like it would earn a lot more, at least for a while. I had never actually speculated with our own money of course – we didn't have any – but my algorithms meant that I made money from all my clients' transactions whether they were successful or not. I just made even more if they made profits – sometimes quite obscene amounts, thanks to the peculiar roller-coaster performance of digital currencies. Also the service was now totally legitimate and backed by one of the biggest financial institutions in the world – and I had a freelance support contract which would supplement our income nicely!

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So on the whole I reckoned we came out ahead. Our money worries were finally behind us. Sally was over the moon. We paid off our mortgage entirely; repaid Anna and Phil for the Transformations' fees; took out a savings account; bought a state-of-the-art home cinema and a new, flashier car; and so on.

Sally took out a lease on a small serviced office for the cleaning business. It was on the industrial estate just outside town. I helped set it up, installing a Local Area Network with some cheap computers, and loaded simple freeware scheduling and accounting systems.

It took a little while to make the arrangements for the bank to take over the app. It had to be transferred to their servers, which had a bundle of security measures that my own private server didn't need, plus a similar number of banking regulations to comply with, not to mention the European Commission's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). None of it made any difference to the service to customers, but it took me at least a month of hard work to tick all the boxes. Still that was paid for out of my contractor fees, so that frustrating, pettifogging, time-wasting exercise in pointlessness netted me about twenty grand. I have no complaints.

I also had to work things out with Danny. He had been a lifesaver and I really hoped he and Atkinson Stern wouldn't lose out from the bank taking over. But it turned out he wasn't around. He had made partner a little while ago, and new partners have to take a sabbatical within two years of promotion, so he was on a break. No one seemed to know where he'd gone. I tried calling his wife, Jackie. She was friendly but said she couldn't reach Dan just at the moment. She was sure he wouldn't be at all upset about the app though, and would just be glad he'd been able to help.

[If you're interested in Dan's situation, check out Inter-Submission by the same author.]

I went back to Danny's deputy at Atkinson Stern and we agreed that they would keep the link up and the bank would pay them a small monthly fee for the space on their website. I promised to update it with more details and new branding. He even asked if I would be interested in doing some IT work for them. I was encouraging but pointed out that I was on a retainer with my old employer and wouldn't be able to help with anything that might be competition for them. We parted friends.

So I was quite busy for a month or so after the Tribunal, but things settled down after that. I was still able to charge about a day a week to the bank for various maintenance and support services, but for the moment I had run out of new ideas for the app, so I didn't attempt any development work. Everything was running smoothly on the bank's platform anyway, and the money was pouring into J & J Services' business account. Although I only got to keep half of my app's revenues now, it was still a lot more than the cleaning business earned.

It also gave Phil plenty to do as our accountant. I felt guilty for taking up so much of his spare time and suggested I hire someone, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said he enjoyed the challenges of

managing the tax affairs of our strange new online business, and anyway he felt he should make up for how Anna had treated me as Maria.

I seemed to have managed to keep my weight steady and Sally finally agreed that I needed new clothes for my thinner, wirier figure, so one weekend we went to a couple of men's outfitters before doing our grocery shopping. I got a new pair of jeans and some smart chinos, and I was looking at jackets, but I couldn't really get into the shopping the way I had as Maria. Men's clothes were boring; they were just clothes.

I was also still acting as Sally's secretary, computerising all the admin, managing the rosters, and answering the phone when she was out meeting clients or checking up on her staff. She also insisted I went back to keeping our house clean and tidy since she was working flat out and I was – apparently – sitting round doing nothing. That was no problem. It took me back to the days pre-Maria, and before our money troubles began. I enjoyed housework. I was even starting to enjoy ironing. It was therapeutic; it calmed me down; and I was sure it would only be a matter of time before my empty mind would come up with new ideas for money-spinning apps.

The only other change was that our sex life wasn't quite as wild and passionate as it had been. Still, apart from that, I was more or less content... for a while...

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Unfortunately none of these activities filled my day. I found one morning, when Sally had gone out at eight-thirty, that I could do the cryptic crossword, and the quick crossword, and the Sudoku, and read the bridge column, then do that day's household chores, and it wasn't half-past eleven yet. So I set the house business phone to forward all calls to my mobile and wandered over to my sister's place. She normally made coffee around now.

I had to be careful visiting Anna during the day in case one of Maria's clients was there. She probably wouldn't connect Dave with Maria, but why take the risk? Anyway, there were no cars outside so I reckoned it was safe. Being used to going in the 'Servants' Entrance' I entered through the back door and called to announce my arrival. An answering voice came from the sitting room.

I was surprised to see Dorothy there, but then I realised she would have come in a taxi. Aware that her eyesight wasn't up to recognising a new face in the room Anna hastened to introduce me.

"Oh I knew who it was as soon as I heard his voice," Dorothy said. "Nothing wrong with my hearing, you know."

So it was a good thing that Maria had always spoken in a high, breathy semi-whisper, with a strong accent.

At Anna's invitation I helped myself to coffee and a Jaffa cake.

"We were just talking about the autumn lecture programme at the WI," Anna said. "I thought Sally might come and talk about setting up a small business. It would be good publicity for J & J Services as well."

"Good idea," I said. Of course I had done most of the setting-up. Still it would be better if Sally talked about it, rather than a man. This was the Women's Institute. "I'll suggest it to her."

“It’s a pity *you* can’t go out cleaning,” she said mischievously. She turned to Dorothy. “Dave does the lion’s share of the housework at their place, you know, what with Sally being the main breadwinner now, and always out and about visiting clients.”

I gave her a filthy look. She knew perfectly well that it was *my* work for the bank and with the digital currency app that earned 90% of our money. Also, the last thing we needed was her telling anyone how good I was as a cleaner. Dorothy just laughed.

“But he’s a man!” she said. “What does he know about housework?”

“True,” agreed Anna. “I can’t see him going out cleaning with any of Sally’s girls.”

They both laughed. For some reason I felt hurt. My skills as a cleaning lady were being impugned.

“I do miss Maria though,” Dorothy said, wistfully. “Sally and Dave do my shopping for me, and I’m very grateful for that...” She smiled at me. “...and the new girls Sally has sent me are very efficient, but it’s just not the same. I don’t know why... Maria and I just seemed to *connect* even though she could hardly speak English. She was always so cheery. It was as if I could *feel* her smiling. She used to sing – well, *hum* – along with the radio as she worked. I think it helped her learn the language.”

It was true that several times I had caught myself almost breaking into song as I worked, which would have been a real give away. I had had to train myself to ‘la-la-la’ in a high voice instead, but I didn’t know Dorothy had noticed.

Anna and I looked at each other, both a little embarrassed, for different reasons. I felt that in giving up being Maria I had let Dorothy down.

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When I returned home that lunchtime, I made myself some soup and a sandwich and watched the lunchtime news while I ate it. Afterwards, still in search of something useful to do, I went upstairs, thinking of clearing out some cupboards or something. I had been putting off packing away Maria’s clothes in the loft and restoring her room to a guest bedroom.

I went in. Apart from me vacuuming and dusting, no one had disturbed the room since I had gone to Transformations that Friday weeks ago to say goodbye to Maria forever. The chest of drawers was full of her clothes – Dorothy’s, Carol’s and Maria’s own. I was no longer sure which was which. There were tops, socks, and her voluminous bras and knickers. Other drawers held colourful smocks, tights, stockings and girdles. I took out some of the garments – just to recall how they felt, I told myself – and sat down on the bed. The material of the panties and stockings was so soft and silky, and, er, *spandexy*...

In a dreamlike state I went over to the wardrobe and slid back the door. Dresses, skirts and slacks met my eye. And three maid’s uniforms. I stared at them, a lump forming in my throat.

I got out some suitcases from the spare room and put them, open, on the bed. I started to fill them with Maria’s things. I was still there, the suitcases half-packed, clothes all over the place, when Sally came home and found me. I was holding one of my maid’s uniforms up against myself and looking in the mirror.

“It suits you very well, sweetie,” she said, “but you’ll need your bust and bum back before you can wear it out and about.”

I smiled vaguely, caught in the act of... what?

She took the dress from me and laid it down on the bed. Then she took my hand, and led me downstairs. She put a glass of wine in my hand and I started to gather my wits together.

"I'm worried about you," Sally said.

"I'm fine," I said. "I thought I'd tidy up Maria's room, and I got distracted."

"You were staring at her – at *your* – clothes, like you missed them."

"No, no, I was just..."

"You were practically licking your lips."

"Look, I'm just *bored*. I've run out of ideas for the app and I haven't enough to do. I'll think of something soon."

"You haven't been really happy since you stopped cleaning... no, since you stopped *being a cleaning lady*."

"Rubbish! We've had a great time, clearing our debts, spending all that money, building your business..."

"Well, *I've* been happy, but you've just gone along for the ride." She looked genuinely concerned. "Let's face it: *cleaning is your thing*. It makes you happy. It's the only thing that *does* make you happy, now that you don't have acting as a release. I bet if you took an aptitude test, it would come back '*cleaning lady*'."

"May I remind you that I'm a highly regarded software engineer?"

"OK, '*cleaning lady who dabbles in computer programming in her spare time*'."

I sighed. Sally was teasing but we both knew there was truth in what she was saying.

"Well I can't go out cleaning with the other girls, can I? I'm the boss's husband. I'd be a laughing stock – even if the clients let me inside – and apart from it being social suicide for us both, there's too much chance of being recognised as Maria. Some of those girls are pretty sharp, not to mention the clients.:" I sighed. "Maybe I'll join up with Pinner Players again, now that I have some spare time."

"Then why haven't you already? You've been free and clear for a month now."

I didn't have an answer to that. Somehow acting for real had spoilt play-acting for me.

"No, I agree," she said, reading my mind. "I think you have to be Maria again."

"I can't see how that would help. Anyway I can't go back to being Maria! It's not *decent*, a man living as a woman. It's *perverted*."

"Don't be silly! Honestly, you sound like a homophobe from the 1950s sometimes. Being gender-fluid is totally acceptable these days, even fashionable."

"Well it's not... *practical*," I said, struggling. "I have to be Dave. I can't be both."

“Why not? In fact, why do you have to be Dave at all? You can do all your freelance work from home, dressed as Maria, and keep in touch with the bank by email and phone. You’re not exactly snowed under with work for them anyway. When they do give you a few days’ work to do, and you have to go in for meetings and so on, Maria can take a break. We have enough girls to fill in for her now.”

“But you need your husband to be around too!”

“And he can be – every couple of weeks when you have to take your prosthetics off for cleaning and personal hygiene. You can make an appointment on a Friday afternoon to be turned back into Dave, and another early on Monday morning to become Maria again. Over the weekend we can go out and about to show you off, and remind everyone you’re still around. The rest of the time, we can say Dave is away working – it’s not even a lie really!”

“But I became Maria in the first place because I *had* to, because of our dire financial situation. If I go back to being her now, it will be a matter of *choice*.”

“So what?”

I couldn’t answer. Was I ready to accept that Maria was a major part of me and that I, and apparently my wife, both preferred me to be her most of the time? Dave would only be back every second or third weekend when I had to remove my prosthetics. Sally pressed her case.

“I *know* you miss working as Maria, and your clients miss you. They ask about you – Maria – all the time. Anna told me what Dorothy said. And Joyce? Remember how frazzled she was before you started helping her? You saved her life! And you miss her lovely kids, don’t you?”

I nodded. I missed Lucy enormously but I could never see her again as Dave.

“So you’re saying I should go back to being Maria?”

“Well, why not? Maria has far more people who know her, and like her, and *need* her than Dave does.”

That was harsh, but true.

“And what about you?”

“What *about* me? I lived happily with Maria for six months! You *know* it didn’t make any difference to me. I don’t care how you’re dressed. You’re my partner, my best friend, my soulmate. I love both of you.”

She couldn’t help looking a little embarrassed at using the ‘L’ word, but I knew she meant it. I said nothing, but I must have looked doubtful. She pressed on.

“Look, you’ve always been an actor, maybe not professionally – though I think you’re easily good enough – but that’s what you *are* on the inside. You’re obviously not satisfied with just being Dave Jackson. He’s only a role, like Maria, like all the parts you played at college. Who knows how many more you have in you – male or female? *But just now you need to be Maria*. You’re not done with her, which is why you’re moping around all the time. Maria is *unfinished business*.”

I was having a hard time accepting this.

“So you *really* don’t mind if your husband is a fat Spanish cleaning lady most of the time?” I said incredulously.

“No, Dave, I really don’t mind,” she said, “and actually it’s more than that... I don’t know... Maria gets me going more than Dave does.”

I must have looked crestfallen.

“It’s not your fault, honestly, babe,” she said hurriedly. “It’s something weird in *me*. I don’t know why I feel that way about Maria, but I love seeing you as her. I don’t know why she turns me on so much. I’m not a lesbian, or at least not in that way. I’ve never been sexually attracted to any real girl. But when I see Maria, I want her – passionately – but only because I know she’s *you*. I also don’t know why you like being her, but I’m really glad you do, because it means our fetishes fit together perfectly. Why don’t we just make the most of it?”

I sighed. “I guess we can try it for a while,” I said, “but nothing that can’t be undone, okay? No implants or hormones.”

She nodded vigorously.

“You should get your beard lasered away though,” she said. “Maybe even all your body hair?”

“I suppose that would be more convenient,” I agreed. “I wouldn’t need that anti-androgen cream.”

“Oh, you should still use that. It helps you to have soft, feminine skin...”

“*Muy bien, Señora.*”

“That’s my girl.”

* * *

So we set up an appointment with Transformations to make me Maria again. We explained that we wanted to bring Dave back every other weekend. Mrs McLaughlin confirmed that they had kept all my prosthetics, and that they could arrange a series of sessions for the permanent removal of my body hair. As both laser methods and electrolysis tended to leave the skin inflamed, she recommended doing it in a series of fifteen-minute sessions, each one being done on the Friday after removal of my prosthetics, to give my skin the weekend to recover before going back to being Maria.

It was nice to see Vera and Sharon again. I knew both of them were thinking “I told you so,” but they were much too kind to say anything.

When Vera brought out my huge boobs and big fat bum, I couldn’t wait to get them stuck on again. In my pink 42D bra and giant granny knickers, I felt like I had come home.

Maria would have to have shorter hair, so that it could easily be re-styled for Dave. It could stay Dave’s colour. After all, women dye their hair, don’t they? Men don’t. It would be quite plausible for Maria to try a new colour when she wanted a whole new style. Most people wouldn’t notice anyway as I always wore a headscarf or a maid’s cap when I was cleaning.

I bought more dark contact lenses from Ingrid. We didn’t need to renew the lip fillers, and we accepted that on his occasional appearances Dave would have permanently darker skin – not

implausible if he was working in Spain. Nevertheless it would be sensible to avoid Dave meeting any of the people who knew Maria, and *vice versa*.

I left later that afternoon with Sally, our arms around each other, chattering away in Spanish. My boobs bounced in my push-up bra. I was wobbling dangerously as I tried to get used to three-inch heels again. My fat butt was swinging from side to side for all it was worth. My skirt swirled around my nylon-covered legs. My handbag was over my shoulder. I looked forward to seeing Dorothy and Joyce and Lucy and Ruth and Margie, even Dr H-S, again.

I was Maria Ortega, plump Spanish immigrant cleaning lady, again and all was right with the world.

Epilogue

So to our neighbours, Sally's husband, Dave, is working for the bank overseas on digital currency applications, and only gets home every couple of weeks. Meanwhile I live and work as Maria, the cleaning lady. Her English is improving; she can now understand simple instructions from her clients. I usually wear a smock and a headscarf and an apron, but sometimes I wear a maid's uniform with a frilly cap because all our clients seem to like that. I smile a lot and nod and bob little curtseys. On average I work three to four days a week.

I still appear as Maria the maid at Anna's place every other Friday to serve refreshments to the Bridge Club ladies. Sally doesn't understand why I do it, but Anna pointed out that it would look odd if Maria suddenly stopped working for her for no obvious reason, especially as she was now pregnant and really *needed* a maid to help her.

We all know it's really because of the social cachet she gets from having a uniformed maid waiting on her and her friends, but I can live with it, I suppose. I still don't really like the humiliation of being my sister's maid, but I owe her a lot. We would have lost our house if it hadn't been for her.

Cleaning is still a joy to me. It keeps me sane and my brain clear, and as before new ideas seem to come to me while I'm doing something mindless. Ironing works particularly well, ironically.

In my remaining time I work on the crypto-currency service, keeping it 'state-of-the-art' and providing support and maintenance. So far I have managed to avoid going into the office for meetings, and the bank has started to assign me other small work packages.

I do most of the housework at home too, often in my maid's uniform. Many's the time Sally has arrived home unexpectedly and come up behind me when I'm vacuuming or dusting, thrown me onto the couch, and jumped on top of me. We both know I'm easily strong enough to resist her, but why would I want to do that?

Sometimes we like to pretend she's my mistress and I'm her submissive maid, but we never do anything without mutual agreement. Anyway we do it the other way around too. I secretly ditch my abdominal constraints and catch her by surprise. It's hard to say which is more fun.

I once thought that being a fat woman would be horrible, but I was wrong. I do understand how an overweight adolescent girl feels – there's so much pressure on us fatties from our peers and from the media to conform to the ridiculous supermodel standard of beauty, which is completely unattainable for most of us – certainly for me!

And that's how I felt way back in my first few weeks as Maria. My figure damaged my self-confidence. I was shy. I was embarrassed meeting new people. I felt humiliated. I remember once stripping down to my bra and panties in front of my bedroom's full-length mirror, and bursting into tears. I'm just

glad that I got myself under control before Sally got home. It didn't help at all that *Dave* wasn't fat underneath because I was *Maria*. That's how the world saw me and I was a porker.

But adolescents mature eventually. I've accepted myself as I am and now I love all my silky, wobbly flesh, and so does Sally. It's so sexy! I've surprised myself. Who knew that inside this thin man there was a fat woman struggling to get out?

Not that I care what men think, but it seems that plenty of them really mean it when they say they find us overweight women attractive. I get propositioned surprisingly often when Sally and I go out together dressed up. In fact it can get to be a nuisance.

I assumed that my obesity would keep men away but I was wrong there too. I guess I'm fat enough to be voluptuous but not enough to be repulsive. And of course, I'm not really fat at all inside, as I'm reminded every two weeks at my appointment with Transformations. With the prosthetics peeled off, I'm slimmer and stronger than ever. I suppose regular manual labour carrying forty pounds of extra weight really does build you up.

At our last session Mrs McLaughlin brought in a doctor to give me a thorough medical, and she cleared me to take whatever exercise I wanted. I'm strong enough now to carry the additional load without risk. I don't think I'd cut a very elegant figure dashing round the squash court, but I might start going along to women's aerobics or yoga with Sally. She's keen to see what I look like in leotard and tights.

The only real problem is that Maria can't be Sally's social equal when there's anyone else around – like clients and the other girls I clean with. She is strictly *la Señora*, and I bob and curtsy whenever I see her, which seems to amuse everyone, especially her.

Maria can't afford expensive clothes, of course, so when Sally and I are out together I always look like the poor relation in my cheap polyester pants or unfashionable second-hand dresses. Oh well.

I also can't drive our flashy new BMW as Maria, which is annoying.

But in the bedroom we're equals (more or less). Sally has bought me some seriously sexy underwear and nightdresses, and I rather enjoy being her sex toy. She loves to undress me, first down to my bra and knickers (or sometimes my plus size bustier), and then she strips me totally naked. My jiggle breasts, fat tummy and big round buttocks seem to drive her wild.

When she's finished working herself up playing with my wobbly flesh, I can get out of my abdominal prosthesis in seconds now, though obviously we can't remove my huge boobs or the facial prosthetics, so we have to leave them in place when we make love. She prefers it that way, so it's not a problem.

Now that we have money in the bank, Sally wants to expand the business. She's heard of a firm called Home Counties Housekeeping, a little bigger than us, who also operate north of London but to the East. She thinks we could link up at first, and maybe we could invest; then she would get a seat on their board; and then perhaps a merger. If I know her, she would be running the joint firm in five years. Then maybe... national?

As long as I can just keep on cleaning as maid Maria and secretly writing software as Dave.

We've bought a cottage in Wales where Sally and Maria can go and be lovers openly. We would have preferred a villa in the Algarve but with no passport Maria can't travel internationally. The locals don't know about Dave at all and call us *y lesbiaid yn Lloegr* (the English lesbians). They're open-minded, as we come often and spend lots of money in the town.

I particularly like going to the cottage because I can dress up and go out as a rich, elegant lady, not as the working-class cleaner I have to be at home. We don't have to speak Spanish there either. We've often invited Anna and Phil to stay with us there, but no one else.

* * *

Can this go on indefinitely? These days it seems to be acceptable to 'identify' as the opposite sex without actually having SRS, but if I want to live lawfully as Maria Ortega I will have to at least get a Gender Recognition Certificate. Without it I won't be able to apply for a driving licence or a passport in Maria's name, or register for tax.

This is what worries me most. If Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs find out about Maria, they'll see she isn't paying tax and might be curious as to why J & J Services' most hard-working cleaning lady isn't on their payroll at all. If they check, we will have to admit that Maria Ortega is really Dave Jackson, a director of the company, and of course he pays his taxes.

I'd much rather they never found out. It's not that I want to cheat the Revenue; it's just that they're a Government Department, so they leak – obviously. I wouldn't trust them to keep such a juicy titbit to themselves, and if someone blabs, that would be the end of my career as a cleaning lady, and who knows what else besides? It might get in the papers! One of my female clients might sue me for getting into their home on false pretences, or I might get beaten up by a husband. I can't imagine the police being on my side. So although it seems superficially stable, my situation is actually quite precarious.

Getting a Gender Recognition Certificate will require evidence from a qualified doctor that I have gender dysphoria. That should be easy enough, given how much happier I am as Maria now. I will probably need to live as her for at least two years, but I know I can do that. I will also have to convince the doctor that I intend to live in my acquired gender for the rest of my life – which is certainly my aim at the moment, though I have no intention of having an actual sex change. Both I and my wife are perfectly happy as we are (though I may have to reconsider breast implants).

Looking back I realise I have done something that all actors dream of, from the hammiest amateur to the most celebrated professional: I have created a character and made her real. Maria is a part of me now and I am as much her as I am Dave Jackson, if not more, and it is clear that both Sally and I want me to be her most of the time from now on.

So, what am I, exactly? A transvestite and a crossdresser certainly, and not a transsexual, but I don't use any of those terms. I'm a heterosexual man who wants to live as a woman, and am phenomenally lucky to have found a wife who prefers me like this. What were the odds? The working-class Spanish immigrant part was a happy accident, but it satisfies my love of amateur dramatics, so I enjoy it.

Maybe if Sally and I ever move to a new neighbourhood, Maria can become an ordinary Englishwoman and I can drop the accent. That could be a new role. What would she be? Sally's sexy secretary? A nurse? A nanny? An old-fashioned housewife? It's exciting to think about...

No rush, though; I'm happy to be Maria indefinitely.

Talking of amateur dramatics, we went to see the Pinner Players all-male production of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. The guy playing Cleopatra was rubbish. I would have been much better.

By the way, we've just discovered that Sally is pregnant. I have absolutely no idea how we're going to handle that...