

Acting as a Cleaning Lady

By Susannah Donim

Chapter 2 – My Sister’s Cleaner

Dave loses his high-paying job, which might mean they lose their home. Then his sister, Anna, comes up with a possible solution.

On the whole my work at the bank had been going well for the last few months since we had returned from Spain. The team in Madrid had been quite small and mostly responsible for migrating the latest software to the Spanish networks. I often had to visit regional offices in Barcelona, Seville, Cadiz, Valencia and Malaga to sort out local problems. I thoroughly enjoyed the travel and the independence. But most of the original software had been written by the hot-shots in London and that was where I really needed to be. That’s where the state-of-the-art stuff was being done, and where the new innovative services would be developed, hopefully to put us ahead of our competitors.

I had settled into this team well but was very much the most junior software engineer. Harry, my boss, was aware of my academic qualifications, and was very encouraging, but he made sure I understood that my time in Madrid didn’t count as ‘relevant experience’ for his team. I would have to work hard to catch up with my peers. It was true that the bank was Spanish in origin, and Madrid was the international Head Office, but it was a quiet backwater for banking finance software. London was the hub.

I worked hard, and at my first annual review Harry was glowing with praise. More importantly, he came up with a five-figure bonus and a 10% increase in salary. We paid off a bit more of our mortgage.

Unfortunately that was the last bit of good news we were going to get for a while. Harry was promoted to Vice President and his replacement, Lawrence, was a very different animal. He was nothing like as good as Harry, either at software design or as a manager. He also had a bad habit of claiming other people’s ideas as his own work. The rest of us engineers couldn’t understand what management was playing at in promoting him.

We no longer saw much of Harry as he was always flying off to conferences in the USA and the Far East, but when I bumped into him a few weeks later I couldn’t resist asking him about Lawrence. He assured me it wasn’t his decision and he was as baffled as we were. He suspected nepotism had been part of it – Lawrence had a relative at board level. Harry’s advice was to keep our heads down and stick it out. He had already heard rumours that Lawrence’s performance at management review meetings was less than impressive. It seemed he was unlikely to last.

But he lasted long enough to destroy my career. I don’t know how he found out – I had kept it quiet at work – but he discovered my side-line in digital currency trading. I wasn’t actually breaking any rules doing this. I wasn’t competing with my employer, as the bank didn’t currently offer any services in crypto-currencies. But Lawrence found a different objection. He claimed that since I was an employee of the bank when I developed my app, the intellectual property and any trading profits belonged to them. As my Line Manager he called me before a disciplinary hearing.

I argued that I had written the app entirely in my spare time, which was true; the design was entirely my own, having been based on my degree dissertation, which was also true; and that I had used no bank resources in the course of the development, which I also believed to be true. So I hadn’t infringed my contract in any way, and everything to do with the app was my sole property.

But Lawrence had been thorough. He had been through the search history on my bank laptop and found that I had accessed various cryptocurrency and block chain websites. I remembered doing some research one wet lunch hour months earlier. I'd had a bright idea for a new service and I couldn't wait till that evening to check it out.

Every member of the disciplinary committee knew Lawrence's argument was thin, and I could tell they wanted to let it go, but they had no choice. There was a case to answer and they would have to get the lawyers in. They couldn't say how long the legal process would take but warned me that it was likely to be at least six months. The only good thing was that the committee promised to provide legal representation that we would not be charged for if we lost, and which we could pay for over time if we won.

Meanwhile I was suspended without pay, and the bank took out an injunction to stop me accessing any of the revenues that continued to flood in from the app. Their argument was that until judgement was complete the funds were potentially theirs, and I shouldn't have access to them in case I spent the money or squirrelled it away somewhere they couldn't get it if they won the case. We considered an appeal, but that would cost us a packet in lawyers' fees and we would be completely ruined if we lost.

We were in trouble now. With the bank's redundancy programme still rolling there was no chance of Sally getting a promotion, even though her manager admitted that she was overqualified and underused in her current position. She was always on the lookout for higher-ranking opportunities within the bank, or at head office, or with competitors, but nothing came up. So without my salary and with no more revenue from the app we wouldn't be able to meet the mortgage payments and also feed ourselves from our income. We had savings of course – the last year had been very good – but they wouldn't see us through six months. We might just make it if we returned the leased BMW and managed with Carol's Fiesta. We resolved to stick it out, hoping that we would win the Tribunal eventually.

We started an economy drive – no spending on non-essentials. No holidays. No new clothes. No haircuts. No long journeys. No nights out. No parties.

Meanwhile with nothing but time on my hands, I looked for any other source of funds. I couldn't sign on the dole, as I was theoretically fully employed. I couldn't apply for hardship benefits; we had too many assets to pass the 'means test'. I couldn't work for another bank as a freelance. I couldn't get any other contracting work as my only experience was in the financial sector. The local computer shop was interested but they really had no openings. Paid work wasn't forthcoming.

To fill my time I started doing odd jobs around the house. I put up shelves; I mended the garden fence; I redecorated two bedrooms; I did the grocery shopping and cooked our evening meals. Carol had given me a good introduction to housewifery before she left for Oz so I did all our laundry – even ironing – and I cleaned. Boy, did I clean! I emptied out all the kitchen cupboards and scrubbed a generation's worth of grease out of them. I cleaned all the appliances: fridge, freezer, oven, grill, washing machine, tumble-dryer, microwave. I dusted and vacuumed the whole house, including the loft. I put all my frustrated energy into cleaning the house within an inch of its life.

I actually quite enjoyed myself. I pretended to be Fifi again, and hummed French folk songs to myself as I scrubbed.

* * *

Every night when Sally came home to see another area of our home transformed and rejuvenated, she looked me over with a sort of genial scorn.

"I wish I'd known this was where your real interests lay before I went to the trouble of marrying you," she said. "I could have just hired you as my cleaning lady."

"I like to think I have more to offer than that. What about the sex? Were you going to pay for that too?"

"Touché," she laughed. "OK, sweetie, while you have your frilly apron on, you can get me a drink."

"Yes, Madam."

As she was currently our only source of income, she was doing all the overtime she could get and was working long hours. I knew she appreciated not having to do any housework when she got home and I was more than happy to do a little waiting on her.

She pulled her high heels off, rubbed her stockinged feet, winced, and threw herself down on the sofa. She reached for the TV remote and clicked the news on. Her eyelids drooped. I put her glass of Chardonnay down by her hand. We were on our last bottle of her favourite tippie and I was wondering whether our economy drive would run to replenishing our stocks, when the doorbell rang.

It was my sister. Anna walked in (without being invited) and headed for the sitting room. She snorted at my apron.

"Nice pinny, Dave," she said. "Good to see you're adapting to your rightful place in the house... *Holy Moley!*"

"What?" I said, following her into the lounge, a little worried that she was going to disturb Sally. "What's the matter?"

"This place looks amazing!" she said. She saw Madam returning to consciousness on the sofa. "Sally! How on earth do you keep this place looking so great when you work full time?"

"Hey!" I said.

"Oh it's murder," Sally said, "and of course your lazy brother just sits around playing on his computer all day while I slave away."

"Hey!" I said, louder.

Both women laughed.

"Seriously, Dave, you're doing an amazing job," Anna said.

"And you know I appreciate it, babe," Sally added.

"In fact, yours is probably the cleanest and tidiest house in the area," Anna said. I gave her a scathing look. Sarcasm wasn't necessary. "No, I mean it," she continued. "Since Pinner Maids packed up, no one I know can find any cleaners, so we're all living in increasing squalor."

"What happened to them?" Sally asked.

"It's a sad story. The company was set up... oh, probably ten years ago... by Pat – I don't think I ever knew her surname. She was an ex-charlady from... er, Watford, I think. She recruited all her unemployed friends and *their* friends, and their daughters, and their daughters-in-law. They were mostly school leavers with no qualifications or prospects; or young married women struggling to make ends meet; or older widows down on their luck.

"Anyway, Pat checked out every cleaner personally and vouched for them, and they did a great job. They'd do a top to bottom spring-clean in three or four days, then two hours a week afterwards to keep it like that. They were all friendly and helpful. They'd do some shopping for the elderly and housebound; pick up their prescriptions; some were even trusted to go to the cash machine. My cleaning lady was Betty. She was great." She sighed. "But they were victims of their own success."

"So what went wrong?" I asked.

"Well, sort of what you'd expect, human nature being what it is. The service was so popular, Pat struggled to get enough girls. Eventually she must have hired some wrong 'uns. Valuables started going missing. The police got involved. A couple of women upped and disappeared but I don't know if anything was ever recovered. It broke Pat's heart. They didn't find any evidence against *her*, of course, but the trust was gone. Most of their clients cancelled their contracts, and some of the older cleaning ladies – including my Betty and Pat herself – said they didn't need the hassle and retired."

"So all the posh houses in Pinner are getting dirtier and dirtier?" Sally said, with little sympathy.

"Well most of the wives in this area work. They *have* to, to afford their mortgages. Some – like doctors and teachers – work locally, but plenty of them commute up to town. Even those whose husbands do their share – and that's far from all of them, of course – don't have much time or energy left for cleaning after minding the kids, grocery shopping, cooking, and laundry. And as I said, there are a number of elderly widows who relied on their cleaning ladies for a lot more than just cleaning, but they're terrified of letting strangers in now."

Anna was eyeing Sally's wine thirstily. I went to the kitchen to get the bottle and another glass. When I got back the girls were deep in earnest conversation.

"I really came over to see how you're managing," Anna said. "I must say, I think your boss is a total scumbag!"

"No argument here," I said. "But please don't worry about us. We just need to survive till the Tribunal. We'll get by."

Anna looked at Sally. I noticed that my wife wasn't rushing to back me up.

"You do know that Phil and I will sub you if you need help," Anna said.

"I'm not taking money from you," I said, firmly.

It sounded stupid and unreasonable as soon as I said it. Sally looked away.

"But if you only have Sally's income...? You need more money coming in. You don't want to eat up all your savings..."

"*We'll manage!*" I insisted.

“All right, you silly, proud boy,” she said. “How about this? I’ll cover your next mortgage payment if you’ll clean my house as well as you’ve done yours,” she said, with a challenging look on her face.

“Don’t be silly! That’s nearly a thousand pounds!”

“So? Are you negotiating your fee *downwards*, Bonehead? I reckon it’ll take you at least three days – and you can undertake to keep it like that as part of the package – two or three hours a week till the Tribunal.”

“That’s still bound to be a lot more than you were paying what’s her name, Betty. What was she getting? Minimum wage?”

“Not bloody likely! Pinner Maids were really good and much in demand. We paid £20 an hour.”

“Really?” said Sally, perking up. “That’s a lot more than I would have guessed.”

“Well, this is stockbroker belt. Families round here are more than happy to pay £50 a week to avoid housework. Some people have *two* girls for two hours.”

I hesitated. Sally saw her chance.

“Well, for heavens’ sake, why not, Dave?” she said. “It’s perfectly respectable work, and you’re obviously good at it. It just gives us a little breathing space.”

I hesitated, again.

“And you enjoy it too, don’t you?” she added.

“Oh all right,” I said at last. “But you can’t tell anyone that your brother is cleaning your house. It would be too embarrassing.”

“Agreed,” Anna said. “It would be embarrassing for me too.”

I must have looked unconvinced.

“I mean it,” she said. “I know I tease you a bit sometimes...” I snorted. “...but this is a serious situation, and I only want to help.”

“OK, then,” I sighed. “When would you like me to start?”

“As soon as possible. Before Phil and I get food poisoning or something.”

“Don’t forget Maria’s coming next week,” Sally said.

I had forgotten that Maria Ortega was coming to stay with us for a few days. She was considering going to London University and we had volunteered to put her up while she went to interviews and checked out possible accommodation. It would be nice to see what kind of young woman the Spanish schoolgirl we had known had become.

“OK, I’ll make a start as soon as Maria’s left – say, Monday or Tuesday week.”

“Great – and why don’t all three of you come to dinner at the weekend? We’d love to meet her.”

And so it was arranged. I admitted to Sally later that earning enough for even one mortgage payment would be a load off my mind.

* * *

Maria arrived on the early morning flight. We met her at the airport, just managing to get the three of us and her luggage in Carol's old Fiesta. We had told her parents about our financial setbacks and they understood that we wouldn't be able to treat her to much. We promised to make it up to her when we were back on our feet. She was grateful just to have somewhere to crash while she went to her meetings and checked out university life in London.

She had grown into a charming young woman. Her Spanish hill farmer heritage was plain to see; she was short and a little plump; but she had flawless olive skin, raven hair, and an enchanting smile. We had a lovely day together catching up. Sally and I enjoyed practising our Spanish again, and we tried to help Maria with her English, which was quite good already. We gave her a mock interview, to make sure she had all the vocabulary she would be likely to need.

We took her round to meet Anna and Phil. They liked her immediately and treated us all to a meal at their favourite restaurant, currently out of bounds for us on our economy drive.

Maria's interviews seemed to go well, but it would be a while before she knew whether London University would take her, and she was planning a Gap Year.

She was with us for the rest of the week. On a free afternoon Anna and Sally took her into London to go shopping in Oxford Street, window-shopping in Sally's case.

We had a riotous dinner party on Saturday night at Anna's place with card games and several bottles of excellent wine. I helped in the kitchen, which was beginning to look seriously grubby. Anna didn't work but kept herself busy with her social circle and various charities. She certainly didn't seem to spend much time looking after her house.

We were sad to see Maria go back to Madrid, but we all had high hopes she would be back the following October.

* * *

Ever since I had foolishly agreed to clean my sister's house I had been looking around carefully on every social visit to size up the job. Each surreptitious inspection had depressed me a little more. Cleaning our own house hadn't been too bad, because Sally and I were naturally fairly tidy people, but Anna and Phil were *slobs* – no other word for it. Worse: their place was quite a lot bigger than ours. It had five bedrooms, four bathrooms, two *en suite*, and three reception rooms. The kitchen/breakfast room was enormous with a central island. Like the rest of the house, it was filthy.

I turned up to make a start on the Monday after Maria had gone home. I was wearing an old T-shirt and jeans, as I fully expected to ruin my clothes, but Anna insisted I wear a cleaning smock that Betty had apparently left behind. It was very feminine and completely unnecessary, just another in a long line of Anna's pranks, intended only to humiliate her little brother. When I objected, she insisted that she was the boss, and if I wanted to be paid, I would have to obey her instructions.

As she was showing me around, I raised another obvious objection.

"Look, Anna, I signed on to *clean*, but I can hardly even start without doing a major tidy-up. You've got stuff lying around everywhere." We were in the lounge as I was speaking. "I mean, just look at

this place! On every surface there are books, videos, papers, CDs, magazines, letters, bills, dirty coffee cups, wine glasses... I mean, I don't know where to put any of this stuff and I can't clean until it's all cleared away."

"The coffee cups go in the dishwasher, but the wine glasses are crystal. You have to wash them by hand."

"Har-de-har. And what about the rest? If I have to put everything away somewhere it'll take twice as long and you'll never be able to find anything."

"Well we can't find anything *now!*"

"But it's the same in every room..." I sighed. "OK, I'll do the tidying-up too, but don't blame me if I put things in the wrong places. And I'll probably be here all week!"

* * *

And I was. First of all, I went round the house gathering up dirty plates, cups and glasses and putting them in the dishwasher, or the washing-up bowl in the case of her precious crystal wine glasses. Then I started collecting up all the books, alphabetised them by author, and consigned them to near-empty bookcases all over the house, non-fiction downstairs, romances and thrillers in the bedrooms. I did the same for their videos and albums. All but the most recent papers and magazines went in the recycling. I filed all the official-looking letters, utility bills, invoices, receipts, and tax demands in the study desk drawers or the filing cabinet, in accordance with their rudimentary and completely inadequate system. I wasn't snooping but I couldn't help learning a lot more about their financial situation than I had known before. Phil was doing very well. They were *loaded*.

I changed the sheets on their bed as well as those in the guest bedrooms – God knows when any of them were last washed – and I collected up all their dirty clothes. Then I began at least two months' worth of laundry. I tried to draw the line at ironing, but Anna argued that she was paying £1,000 for five days' work, so I should do everything she asked. So in between the tidying and filing I was continually loading and emptying the washing machine and the tumble-dryer.

The ironing pile grew steadily. How could one couple have so many clothes? I guessed that when they had no more clean shirts or underwear, they just bought some more. When I opened Anna's wardrobe to put her ironed blouses, skirts and dresses away, I saw that she kept all her shoes in their original boxes, which were stacked in tidy rows, four deep. I worked ten hours on my first day, and I was knackered.

By Tuesday lunchtime I could finally see all the carpets and the surfaces of the tables, chairs, and furniture. So cleaning was now possible. I was ready to make a start when I discovered another problem.

"You're practically out of cleaning materials!"

"Probably," Anna agreed. "What do you need?"

"Well... everything! Cleaners for the kitchen, bathrooms and toilets; bleach; disinfectant; furniture polish; scrubbing brushes; dusters. You don't even have a mop!"

"Betty looked after all that for me. She brought a lot of brushes and dusters and smelly cans and bottles with her on a little foldaway cart. She made me buy an expensive vacuum cleaner – that should be working all right. As for the rest, make a list, then you can go down to the supermarket."

“Er... I don’t think I can afford all that,” I said hopefully.

Anna wasn’t fazed. “You can take my credit card. I often gave it to Betty when *she* was my maid.”

“I’m not your maid!”

“If you say so, sweetie. Can you do a grocery shop while you’re there? I’m sure you can work out what we need. You can fill up your little car too, if you like. Mileage is a legitimate expense for a professional cleaning lady.”

I was about to object at being called a ‘cleaning lady’ when I realised the Fiesta’s tank was nearly empty and would take fifty quid to fill, so I held my tongue. I was just wondering if I could buy anything else on Anna’s credit card. I knew she never checked her statement...

“I can trust you, can’t I, sweetie? I’d hate to think that my little brother was less trustworthy than my ex-maid.”

I swear, sometimes it’s like she can read my mind.

“Don’t forget to take your smock off – or maybe you’d just like to borrow my hat, coat and handbag?”

* * *

The laundry and shopping finished off Tuesday. So I began the main cleaning on Wednesday morning.

I started in the bedrooms. A long-handled feather duster was soon filthy with cobwebs. There were grubby fingerprints on the paintwork all over the place. I wiped with ‘Mr Muscle’, dusted, and vacuumed. Then I moved on to the landing, hall, lounge and dining room. I filled the vacuum cleaner bag twice.

Then I tackled the bathrooms and toilets. They were disgusting and took hours. It was also hard physical work, as even with the most powerful cleaning fluids, months of accumulated grime took a lot of scrubbing.

I couldn’t say I was enjoying the work exactly. I particularly hate ironing. But it was... peaceful. Once you’ve planned your day, housework doesn’t require much thinking or calculating or decision-making. I could switch my brain off. More importantly, I could calm my mind and stop worrying about our financial situation. I put some Mozart on the sound system and found myself relaxing for the first time in months.

But it’s strange the way the human brain works. On Wednesday morning, while I was mindlessly ironing Phil’s eleventh shirt, my mind apparently a blank, the risk algorithm from my digital currency app suddenly popped into my head and I realised where it was flawed, *and I knew how to fix it!*

With my sister’s grudging approval, I quit a little early on Wednesday to go and get on my computer. I wanted to rewrite the algorithm. It wouldn’t be long before potential competitors noticed what my application was doing and started working on their own versions. I needed to stay ahead of them. My service was still fully operational via the Atkinson Stern website, linked to my personal server. I couldn’t profit from it at the moment, as its revenues were going into an escrow account. I thought about redirecting them to a new account the Bank wouldn’t know about, but I realised that would be in contravention of the injunction. I didn’t need to be facing criminal charges on top of everything else. Hopefully all the money would be returned to me if – *when* – I won the Tribunal. Meanwhile I was

trying to keep the service up to date and ahead of the competition. Besides, it was a matter of personal pride that my application should be as good as possible.

I was back at Anna's bright and early on Thursday and I worked solidly through the day. I was even humming happily to myself, now that I had fixed my algorithm problem. To my surprise, more ideas of a similar nature floated into my head as I worked. I couldn't wait to get home and start coding.

When I finally packed up for the day only the kitchen was left to do. I might even get Friday afternoon off! I was getting ready to go when Anna reminded me that she wanted the garage clearing out before the end of my week's servitude. *Aarghhh!*

* * *

"I had some friends round for bridge yesterday," Anna said.

She and I were sitting in her kitchen over morning coffee. It was a couple of weeks after I'd done her major clean, and I was there to do my two hours upkeep, plus the laundry and ironing, of course.

"They all admired how clean and tidy the place looks," she continued.

Was that a slightly shifty look in her eye?

"So of course you told them how hard you've been working to keep it looking nice?" I said sarcastically.

"Ha! No, they know me too well. None of them would have believed me."

"I hope you didn't tell them I cleaned for you! *You promised!*"

"No, no, I kept you out of it. I told them I'd hired a new maid," she laughed. "Well, it's true, isn't it? I just didn't mention that the maid was a boy."

"Good," I said, relieved. I was used to her calling me her maid by now. Water off a duck's back. "But we'll have to be careful that none of them see me here when I'm doing your two hours a week."

"Don't worry about that," she said. "But I haven't finished. They wouldn't drop the subject. They're all desperate for a cleaner. No one seems to be filling the gap left by Pinner Maids closing down. They all wanted to hire my new maid."

"So what did you say?"

"I said she was a friend of yours from your time in Spain – Maria Ortega."

"*Why on earth...?*"

"I thought it was quite clever. A couple of my friends had seen Maria going in and out of your place. I said she was only visiting temporarily and was a bit short of money, so I had hired her to clean our house. But I told them she's gone back home now, so she's not available."

"Maria is *not* a cleaner," I protested. "For God's sake, she did the International Baccalaureate and got very high grades. She's hoping to come to London to study Medicine."

“Well no one here ever needs to know that, do they? And if she does come back sometime, we can always say it’s a different Maria. No one saw her up close, and Ortega is a fairly common name in Spain, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so, but why did you have to make all that stuff up at all?”

“I’m sorry – I panicked. Maria just came to mind after that evening we spent with her. Anyway it worked, didn’t it? They stopped asking for her contact details.”

“It might have worked – for now. But what will they think when they see that your home *stays* nice and tidy? They’ll know *someone’s* cleaning for you.”

“Are you trying to get out of your weekly chores? No way, buster! If the local ladies hassle me further about my mysterious cleaner, I’ll think of something else.”

* * *

It was a very specific ‘local lady’ who next asked about Anna’s maid. Dorothy lived a few streets away. We’d seen her coming and going to Anna’s house for coffee mornings and other social occasions, but she was partially sighted and didn’t get out much. She usually travelled by taxi. We learned of her plight at half past seven one evening when Anna burst in and interrupted our dinner.

“You *have* to clean Dorothy’s place for her!” she announced firmly. “She’ll pay you the same as I did. That’ll be another mortgage payment sorted out.”

Sally looked up, hopefully.

“Hold on,” I said. “I told you I don’t want to make a career out of cleaning. It’s too embarrassing. This is a posh neighbourhood. We wouldn’t be able to hold our heads up...”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Dave!” Sally interrupted. “You have plenty of faults, God knows, but I never thought you were a snob.”

She got up to pour Anna a glass of Rioja. Yes, we’d spent a few quid from my earnings as a cleaner on wine.

“I’m *not* a snob!” I began. “Hey! What do you mean, ‘plenty of faults’?”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” said Anna, gulping our plonk. “*Dave* can’t clean Dorothy’s house. He’s a man – sort of.”

I ignored that. Typical Anna insult.

“So what?” Sally said.

“Well, none of the older ladies around here who live alone would dream of letting a man in to do their cleaning. Even if they might have considered it before, it’s out of the question now after the Pinner Maids debacle – Dorothy least of all with her handicap. Why do you think domestic cleaners are all women? Come to think of it, that even applies to us younger married women – our husbands wouldn’t be happy with a strange man in the house when they’re out at work! Phil even complains when I invite our gardener into the kitchen for a coffee. Bless his jealous little heart.”

“So what have you come to us for?” Sally asked. “*I’m* certainly not doing it!”

“No, not you, and not Dave,” said Anna, with that air of smugness that’s annoyed the hell out of me since we were kids. “So that leaves... *Maria!*” she finished, triumphantly.

Her triumph dissipated when she saw our blank looks.

“Maria isn’t here anymore,” I pointed out, “and *as we said* she isn’t a cleaner anyway!”

“Oh for Pete’s sake...! *You* can clean Dorothy’s place, Dave, *disguised* as Maria! See... no need to be embarrassed in front of the neighbours!”

Our blank looks changed quickly; Sally’s to amusement, mine to outrage.

“You’re mad!” I spluttered. “I’d never get away with it... even if I were willing...”

“Yes, you would,” Anna insisted. “I’ve thought it through. Dorothy’s eyesight is *really* bad. She can only make out shapes and colours, not faces. We just need your hair, figure, mannerisms and posture to be convincing. So you’d have to put on the shapewear you wore for the party, with a woman’s top and leggings, and that smock I lent you. You’d need a dark wig or you could wear a headscarf or something. You showed at the party that you can move like a woman really well, with feminine gestures and mannerisms. You actors...!”

Anna didn’t know the half of it. We never mentioned that I’d spent an evening out disguised as Sally’s mother and got away with it.

“But even if all that worked, she’d know I was a man as soon as I opened my mouth!”

“Actually the voice you put on as Fifi at the party wasn’t half bad – that high-pitched, breathy whisper,” Anna said. “You’d probably be fine. But there’s no need to risk it. Maria’s Spanish, right? We can say she doesn’t speak English, so you won’t have to talk to Dorothy at all.”

“But if I don’t speak English, how is she going to tell me what she wants me to do?”

I thought I had her there.

“Well, let’s see. It’s too far to walk so Sally will have to drop you off each morning on the way to the bank. Then she can go round the house with Dorothy, talk through the day’s chores with her, and give you your instructions in Spanish. You’re both fluent, right? You’ll just to have nod and say ‘*Si, si, Señora,*’ in a Spanish version of your Fifi voice. It’ll be fine.”

“The whole idea’s barking mad,” I said, though it seemed she’d thought of everything.

“Please, Dave! Come on, it’s just another acting role. I really like Dorothy and she’s desperate.”

I couldn’t remember Anna ever pleading with me for anything. *Ever*. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

“Look, I was fine with being Fifi; it was a fancy dress party. Lots of men drag up for parties, but this is *real life*. People wouldn’t understand...”

“*People* won’t know,” said Anna.

“Nine hundred pounds, babe,” said Sally, quietly.

I sighed. The money *would* keep the wolf from the door for another month.

"I suppose I could try on an outfit and see what I look like..."

Anna hugged me. Sally smiled.

"...but if I look stupid, you can forget it!"

Both women nodded vigorously.

* * *

We agreed that we would test my disguise that weekend. Sally still had access to the Pinner Players costumes and props store. So on Saturday morning we went round and appropriated the foam breast forms again. She also found an expensive-looking, long-haired, jet black wig. Apparently it had been procured for the natural blonde who played Dulcinea in the previous season's production of *Man of La Mancha*.

"That's going to be hot and uncomfortable to work in," I objected.

"I can pin it up for you," said Sally, "and you can wear a headscarf. That should at least keep it out of your way. It's a pity your own hair isn't long enough. Mind you, it soon will be since you banned haircuts on our economy drive."

"All right, all right, you can get your hair done," I said, taking the not-so-subtle hint. "With Dorothy's payment we can afford *one* trip to the hairdresser's. Just a trim, mind!"

"I promise. I need to look smart for my job even if you don't, and even my split-ends have split-ends. Now, let's go up to the bathroom. I need to shave you all over."

"Why? I'm going to be wearing slacks and long sleeves."

"You always say the costume is an essential part of getting into character. Smooth, lady-like skin is just as important for that as your padded bra and girdle. Now stop arguing and get upstairs."

"Can't we use that Nair stuff? Shaving all over will be really scratchy."

"No, we haven't got any. But I'll rub you all over with Aloe Vera afterwards. Actually I like you all smooth and oily, so maybe we can... make the most of it afterwards... if you know what I mean."

Oh, I *knew*! I shelved my objections. Sex in the afternoon. Cool! The sheets needed changing anyway.

* * *

After our 'afterwards' Sally handed me one of Carol's bras and the breast forms. After my practice getting into my role as Fifi I was able to put them on like an expert. She went with black underwear this time, as she had picked out dark colours for my outer clothes.

Then I had to endure the indignity of getting into my mother-in-law's shapewear while my wife padded it all with cotton wool. Again it would obviously be padding to anyone who looked closely but we hoped that with her poor eyesight Dorothy wouldn't be able to tell, just so long as my overall shape was about right.

Before she decided what I would be wearing, she added the wig and some make-up, so I could begin to get into character as Maria. I stood in front of our bedroom mirror and examined myself from every angle. I had to admit it; I looked good. Very good. Very *curvy*. I might even get away with it with someone with *good* eyesight – at least, at first glance.

“Haven’t you rather gone overboard with the padding?” I asked. “I’m sure I wasn’t this fat as Fifi.”

“You’re not fat,” Sally said, “just ‘pleasantly plump’. Okay, maybe a little over-endowed in the bust region,” she admitted. “I may have ‘enhanced’ the forms a little. But it’s all deliberate. We need Dorothy to see a convincing feminine silhouette, don’t we? You need a nice, curvy, hourglass figure.”

“I suppose so, but this humongous bust will get in the way when I’m cleaning.”

But she wasn’t listening. She was busy rifling her mother’s drawers.

“OK, here’s a plain top and some dark leggings,” she said. “They should be skin tight, but quite comfortable over your shapewear.”

Both the top and the leggings were made of a soft but stretchy material. This wasn’t the sort of clothing I was used to – most men don’t wear anything skin-tight, I suppose – but since everything sensitive was well protected by the shapewear and the padding, it was all ‘quite comfortable’, as Sally had promised.

“Good, now let’s put your cleaner’s smock over it all.”

I complied and took another look in the mirror. I realised then that I was actually going to have to go through with this. I looked pretty convincing – certainly good enough for someone with impaired eyesight.

“You look great,” Sally confirmed, “but you can’t work like that. Your hair will keep getting in the way. Put this headscarf on. I’ll show you how.”

I didn’t even know Sally had a headscarf – I supposed it must have been one of Carol’s – but it was the finishing touch. I would only need a little light make-up to look *exactly* like a cleaning lady.

“We should talk only in Spanish now, *Maria*,” Sally said, switching effortlessly to that language. “We need the practice.”

* * *

It was late afternoon now, and Sally called Anna and Phil. They came over straightaway, eager to offer their unbiased opinions.

When he’d finished laughing, Phil said, “Fifi was much sexier, Maria mate.”

“We’re not going for ‘sexy’,” I said, sullenly. “We’re only aiming for ‘passable’ – to a half-blind lady.”

“Hey! That’s no way to talk about a handicapped person,” said Anna, nudging me painfully in the ribs. “She’s ‘partially sighted’.”

“Thank you, the PC brigade. Can we get on with the business in hand? Will I pass?”

“Well, you look pretty good – actually much better than I expected. You’d almost pass even in front of a fully sighted person. Maybe not close to, or for a prolonged period, but it’s *nearly* good enough for Dorothy...”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming,” said Sally.

“She’s supposed to be a Spanish peasant girl, isn’t she?” said Anna. “An olive-skinned beauty...”

“Well, not necessarily a *beauty*, but I see what you mean,” Sally agreed.

“What?” I asked. “What’s the matter?”

“Your skin, babe,” said Sally. “You’re a pasty-faced white chick.”

“As I said, Dorothy can see shapes *and colours*,” said Anna.

“Is it really that important?” I asked. Both women nodded. I sighed. “So what can we do about it?”

“Fake tan,” Anna said. “I’ve got some left over from our Indian Ocean trip last summer. I’ll go back home and get it.”

Phil and Anna had spent three weeks in the Seychelles the previous year, and Anna, being Anna, couldn’t bear to appear as a chalky-white Englishwoman in front of the natives and all the tanned jet-setting women. So she had enhanced her complexion with ‘tan in a bottle’ until she had achieved the real thing. Fortunately she browns quickly so there was nearly half a bottle left.

Thirty minutes later I was stripped to the waist and Anna was rubbing a noxious brown fluid into my skin. She covered my hands, arms, shoulders, neck and face, and was starting on my chest and back. I tried to stop her.

“Hang on, I’m not going to strip down to my bra while I’m cleaning!”

“Sorry,” she said, not in the least sorry. “I got carried away.”

“It’s a bit pongy,” I complained

“The smell will soon fade. Anyway, you’re lucky,” Anna said. “I had to do my whole body. It took ages.”

“You mean I had to do your whole body,” grumbled Phil.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t enjoy it,” Anna said. “OK, I’ve finished. The trick is to avoid it looking streaky.” She turned me toward the mirror. “What do you think?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “It’s pretty convincing.” I was sporting a very Hispanic dark brown face.

“I think you’d pass anywhere now,” Sally said. “After all, lots of people at the party didn’t realise you weren’t a woman.”

“Until the following morning when I appeared with my wig askew and no boobs in my bra. Hey, how long does this warpaint last?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll still be a dusky maiden on Monday when you start at Dorothy’s,” Anna said, reassuringly.

“That’s not what I meant! I expected to be me again for the weekend. I can’t go out as Dave with Maria-coloured skin.”

“Why not?”

“Well, suppose someone we know saw Dave with brown skin and then met Maria? It would be obvious what was going on!”

“Well, I suppose you’d better stay as Maria for the moment,” said Sally.

“Does it wash off?” I asked.

“Well obviously it doesn’t wash off!” said Anna scornfully. “It’s for when you’re wearing a swimsuit at the beach or by the pool. You have to be able to go in the water after sunbathing. You don’t want your tan to have disappeared when you come out. It will *wear* off as you lose the top layer of skin – in about twelve to fourteen days, I think. The only way to remove it earlier is to exfoliate using lemon juice or suchlike. That’s not much fun, and you’ll only have to put it all back on again for Monday.”

“Not to worry, babe,” said Sally. “Mum’s wardrobe is full of stuff for Maria to wear. And at least we know your tan won’t make a mess of the sheets... no matter what we might get up to.”

“Too much information,” said Phil.

* * *

I stripped off my disguise after Phil and Anna left and refused to budge for the rest of Saturday. I also insisted Sally answer the door when our pizza delivery arrived. I rushed upstairs to hide when the doorbell rang.

But Anna was right about the robustness of my fake tan. It was unchanged on Sunday morning, despite some vigorous action overnight. I tried to persuade Sally that we should stay in all day again, but she would have none of it.

“It’s a lovely day, and you need some more Maria time, to practise your act and build up your confidence. We could go for a walk in the park, then to the shops, and maybe a movie this evening.”

“What if we meet someone we know?”

“Not very likely, but we can go out to the country, if you’d prefer. How about a Sunday roast at that pub in the Chiltern Hills?”

As I may have mentioned, there’s little point in arguing with Sally when she’s made up her mind, so I grudgingly allowed her to dress me up as Maria again – padded bra, shapewear, wig, light make-up.

“You know, some false eyelashes would make you look even more feminine, and maybe a little exotic.”

“Forget it.”

Grumbling, she went off and ransacked her mother’s wardrobe for more casual wear that would fit my enhanced figure. She found some plain dark slacks, a grey top, and a black ladies’ jacket. I wore

the same sensible black shoes I had bought for Fifi. I had to admit, with the dark skin, jet-black wig, and make-up, I looked exactly like a Spanish hill farmer's daughter... I imagine. I've never actually met a Spanish hill farmer's daughter. The real Maria Ortega was strictly a sophisticated urban *señorita*.

"You'd better take off your wedding ring," Sally said.

I wasn't happy about that. There seemed to be something altogether too symbolic about it. But I did. Sally was prattling on.

"And you can wear my old ladies' watch. Yours is too masculine. I've got some fun rings here too and a little necklace with a crucifix – very suitable for a good Catholic girl like you. Oh – we should get your ears pierced when we get a chance, but these hoop earrings are clip-ons."

"I don't want my ears pierced, thank you. Surely Dorothy's eyesight isn't up to noticing whether I'm wearing earrings?"

"Hopefully not. I'm just pointing out that a Spanish girl of your age would almost certainly have pierced ears. Here, you can put your money and keys in the old handbag of mine that you used when you were my mother." She rubbed her hands with glee. "Sometimes it's quite fun being married to an actor – or should I say 'actress'?"

* * *

Sally drove us out to the Royal Oak, an excellent country pub we'd been to a couple of times. It was about three quarters of an hour away, enough to make it unlikely we would bump into anyone we knew. Sally had to drive of course, as once again I didn't look anything like my driver's licence photo.

We found a table in a corner where we wouldn't be overheard. I spoke only Spanish, trying to keep my voice at an appropriate pitch. Sally ordered for me in English.

Just as she had when she and I had gone out for dinner before our party, she quietly but firmly corrected me if I slouched in an unladylike manner; or if I let my legs slip apart; or spoke too loudly; or if I did anything else unfeminine. This continued throughout the meal and afterwards when we went for a walk.

"Little steps, Maria. Pretend you're wearing a tight skirt," she said. "And maybe try swinging your big bum from side to side a little." So I tried that. "Not as much as that, you dork! Think Audrey Hepburn, not Marilyn Monroe." I tried again. She sighed. "Well at least you're not walking like John Wayne anymore."

It was a brisk Autumn day and there were lots of other walkers on the footpath, many with dogs. Most of them smiled and said hello as we passed but I was a little worried at the attention we were attracting. Was this because my disguise wasn't good enough? Maybe it was too obvious that my curves were stiff padding rather than jiggly female flesh? Or maybe I wasn't moving right – stomping around like a docker, or mincing like a flamboyant drag queen?

Sally hastened to reassure me.

"You're doing fine, Maria," Sally said. "You need to get used to people looking at you. You're an attractive girl now. In fact, I'm a little surprised that no one's tried to pick us up yet. I'd be tempted to let them in your place – you're a single girl in a foreign country..."

“Pass!” I said firmly. “And don’t *you* even think about it either. Your husband may be out of sight at the moment, but he’s not far away.”

“Yeah, well, out of sight, out of mind, babe.”

I hoped she was joking. But, all in all, it was a good day, and I was beginning to get used to being Maria. Perhaps my disguise wasn’t up to close inspection, but I knew my gestures, mannerisms and movements were becoming decidedly feminine again. I just hoped it would be as easy to go back to normal next weekend – assuming I could get rid of my fake tan by then.