

Acting as a Cleaning Lady

By Susannah Donim

Chapter 7 – A Born Cleaning Lady

A new career beckons for Maria, the hard-working cleaning lady and laundry maid.

As promised, Anna and Phil came round at about eight o'clock to see how Maria had turned out. I answered the door and took some pleasure in seeing their open mouths and gasps of astonishment. I loved performing, and being admired for my acting talents.

"Por favor, pase, Señor y Señora," I said in character, holding the door wide open.

They came past me, eyes fixed on my face and curves.

"It's unbelievable," Anna said. "You'll pass easily. You make a brilliant Spanish peasant girl!"

"Gracias, Señora."

I managed a little curtsy.

"I must admit, I never thought they could make you look this good," said Phil, as I led the way into the sitting room.

They greeted Sally and took their seats. She poured some wine for us all.

"I really thought you'd have to give up this whole idea," Phil continued. "What's it like under all that... stuff?"

"Surprisingly comfortable, actually," I said, reverting to English and my Dave persona. "It's quite heavy, but that's OK, 'cause that makes me move right; I mean, as a woman who's this shape would *have* to move. I didn't expect to be so fat, but they said it was necessary to conceal my male figure – broad shoulders, thick waist, and so on. I notice your eyes are drawn to my bust, by the way."

Phil harrumphed and blushed.

I handed out the wine. As I moved, Anna was eyeing me up, appraising my silhouette.

"Yes, I see what you mean," she said. "And they're quite right. You're plump, but your figure is entirely feminine – classic hourglass, even."

Phil was nodding vigorously. I wondered if he had a thing for the fuller-figured female. Bad news for Anna if he did. She was stick-thin – like her brother before he became her sister.

"So how much do we owe you for the Transformations invoice?" Sally asked, ever practical.

"Oh don't worry about that for the moment," Anna smiled. "Let's just see if Maria's earning power is everything we hoped for. Then we can discuss you paying us back."

She smiled sweetly, but I have never trusted that smile of my sister's. Still, it was a very pleasant evening – the last day of my enforced holiday. Tomorrow it would be back to work – and how.

* * *

On Monday morning I shaved carefully around my facial prosthetics, although I couldn't actually see any growth, then applied a little make-up. I put on my stiff shapewear and dressed in another pair of Carol's slacks and a floral blouse. Sally helped me twist my long hair up into a bun, and with a headscarf keeping it out of my eyes, and my cleaner's smock to protect my clothes, I was the perfect image of a hard-working charlady.

My first client was a Mrs Woodford, who lived about half a mile away in a slightly more upmarket area. She insisted we call her Joyce, until Sally reminded her that I didn't speak English and would probably just call her *Señora*. She didn't seem put out by that.

Sally described how we had managed with Dorothy. Joyce should lead us around the house explaining what she wanted in each room; Sally would translate her instructions into Spanish; and I would take notes. Joyce was happy with that. She had clearly spoken to Dorothy at length and understood the process.

The house was much bigger than any of the three I had cleaned before. It had two large reception rooms, a study, and six bedrooms on three floors. It was at least half as big again as Dorothy's.

The Woodfords had four children from seven to sixteen, two older girls and two younger boys. The girls, Joyce explained, had been press-ganged into helping their mother keep the place clean since the demise of Pinner Maids.

Joyce worked part-time for an Estate Agent. She did a lot of work on her computer in the study but would also come and go throughout the day to conduct viewings. The irregular hours of her job enabled her to manage her big family, but were also the reason why she needed help with housekeeping. Her husband, Peter, was something in the city. He caught the 7.15 train into London in the mornings and was rarely back before seven in the evening, so it was unlikely I would ever meet him.

I could tell Joyce was seriously stressed and I was beginning to understand why: a big house to run, four children, an absentee husband, and a job of her own to hold down. I was amazed she was functional at all.

At first glance it seemed that the three ladies' efforts focused on hygiene rather than tidiness. Clothes, magazines and other clutter were strewn all over the children's bedrooms so, as at Anna and Phil's place, vacuuming would have to be deferred till after I had tidied up. However the kitchen and bathrooms had been kept quite clean. They would need a top to bottom spring-clean, but at least the girls' efforts meant that the whole house wasn't a disease death trap.

I suggested to Sally in Spanish that she ask Joyce whether she wanted me to organise the family laundry too. I pointed at the sheets on the bed in the room we were currently in. Joyce confirmed that she would like that, and that I should also assume that any clothes lying around on the floor were dirty. She asked me to be careful with the girls' underthings, but by now I was becoming familiar with the principles of washing delicates. I realised I would probably need to wash each family member's clothes separately to avoid mixing them up. If I needed to do whites and coloureds separately too, that could mean as many as *twelve* washes – three washes a day! And a hell of a lot of ironing. So now I wasn't just a cleaning lady; I was officially a washerwoman and laundry maid too. Great!

I told Sally that with the washing I might not be able to finish everything in a single week. She looked worried and reminded me that I was booked to move on to another client next Monday. She turned back to Joyce and explained our concerns.

"I quite understand," she said kindly. "I know it's a big job. I suppose I could wait till the following week for Maria to finish..." Then she had a bright idea. "...or if she was willing to carry on into the weekend, I'd be happy to pay double rate?"

Seeing money was no object for Joyce, Sally quickly accepted that generous offer on my behalf. There went my weekend.

She went on to talk about payment and gave Joyce the bank account details of our trading company, explaining that she had set up Maria as an employee under European Union employment law to minimise the tax burden for both of us. I had no idea whether this gobbledygook actually meant anything, but Joyce nodded wisely and said that was fine with her, as she did all of her banking online.

"Oh, by the way, Lucy – she's my eldest – is studying A Level Spanish," she said. "I'm sure she'd love to practise with Maria."

It was a good thing I'd been rehearsing my Maria voice.

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I made steady progress through the week. I developed a routine: put in a load of washing; clean a room (working from the top of the house downwards); take the washing out and put it in the tumble-dryer or hang it outside if the weather was fine; put another load in; clean another room; and repeat. I got a great deal of satisfaction at seeing a sparkling clean bedroom or a tidy pile of ironing, and I got a warm glow from putting neatly folded clothes away in their owner's chest of drawers. It had never occurred to me before taking up this new life that such simple tasks would afford so much satisfaction.

I stopped cleaning when the kids came home from school. Then I set up the ironing board in the kitchen and Lucy and I conversed in Spanish while I did the ironing. She was very keen, despite it having been her mother's idea. We concentrated on her vocabulary and use of idiom. As for most people taught a foreign language in school, her usage was grammatically correct – mostly – but no one in Spain ever actually spoke like that. We talked about the country; what it's like to live there; and a little history and geography of places Maria could be expected to know. No politics – sixteen-year-old schoolgirls aren't interested in politics, and we twenty-something laundry maids don't know anything about it anyway.

I had to tell her quite a lot about myself – that is, my fictional Maria-self. I leaned heavily on what I knew about the real Maria and her family, the Ortegas. I just hoped I would remember everything I made up and wouldn't contradict myself. Lucy was *sharp*. She was a pretty, friendly girl, and the only one of the children who ever looked at me. When I finished the ironing, she helped me put the clothes away in the appropriate wardrobes and dressers, both of us still chattering away happily in Spanish.

On the Wednesday her Spanish homework was to write an essay on how technology was changing modern life. She begged me to help but I had to be careful here. Dave was an expert on digital transformation, financial information systems, social media, artificial intelligence, the cyber threat – you name it – but Maria wouldn't know about any of that. I could only help her with the language; anything more could raise suspicion. Lucy's understanding of IT was basic and she made some glaring errors in the content, which I couldn't correct, but her teacher probably wouldn't know any better.

By the end of the week we had become firm friends. To my relief she never seemed to doubt that I was anything other than what my appearance suggested. I grew steadily more confident in my performance.

When Sally came to collect me at half-past five each day, I was worn out. With the extra forty pounds I was carrying, my whole body felt like lead. All I was good for when we got home was stripping off, showering, eating a quick ready meal or a takeaway, and dozing in front of the TV with a glass of wine. Some nights I didn't even take off my false bottom, so we just cuddled in bed, rather than enjoying the rampant passion of the previous weekend. I promised to make it up to Sally when I was better rested.

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One evening that week, I sat at the dressing table in Maria's room in my bra and panties, checking my make-up. Still no detectable beard growth. I stared at my strange new self in the mirror and marvelled at how quickly this had become routine. I was used to putting on and removing make-up occasionally of course, from my years on stage, but it still surprised me how easily I had adjusted to the lingerie, the big boobs, the padded butt, and my unrecognisable, feminine face.

I removed the pins from my bun and watched my long black hair fall down over my ears, onto my neck, and down my back.

For the first time, and to my astonishment, I realised that I was actually *enjoying* being Maria. Was it because of the work? Maybe – I hated dirt and untidiness and had always taken pleasure in clearing up and cleaning. Sally often joked that my obsession with cleanliness was the main reason she married me, as she hated housework herself.

Or was it the continual acting, immersing myself in a part, very nearly 24-7? I was sure that was a big part of it. I was never going to be a professional actor now, but this was a great substitute – the opportunity to fool people and make them think I was somebody else – even a working-class immigrant girl – so different from my real self, the married male IT professional and owner of a nice house in a prosperous area.

Or was it simply being a member of the opposite sex, I mused, as I preened in my bra and knickers, in front of the mirror. Maybe it was the new experience of being female, to be admired, pursued, seduced, rather than the male of the species, admirer, pursuer, seducer? That line of thinking was beginning to make me uncomfortable. I knew I was entirely heterosexual, so actually *wanting* to spend time as a female would make me... what? A transvestite, certainly. Perverted? Maybe.

I threw off my lingerie and went into the family bathroom. I reached for a shower cap. I would need to discuss some of this with Sally. I needed to know what she thought.

Not tonight, though. Too tired. Every muscle ached.

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"I could come and help you on Saturday," Sally offered.

"That's a kind offer," I said, "but a bad idea."

"What? Why?"

"Firstly, you're not a working-class cleaning lady; you're a middle-class professional."

She looked at me sceptically, clearly about to interrupt. I held up a hand to stop her.

“No, I know – you and I aren’t class-conscious like that, but a lot of the people around here *are*. It’s a wealthy area. If any of our neighbours found out you were cleaning houses, and getting paid for it, we’d both be stone dead, socially. And my sister would never speak to me again.”

She raised an eyebrow. I grinned.

“OK, so it wouldn’t be *all* bad. But my point is, this is a temporary situation. Sally and Dave have to live here when our financial problems are over and after Maria has gone.”

“OK, I accept that,” she said. “You implied there’s another reason?”

“Well, secondly, I’m getting double rates,” I continued, “and the longer I work, the more we make. This could stretch over the whole weekend. We don’t want to cut that short. If you’re desperate to contribute, you can do the shopping, cooking and cleaning at home.”

Predictably, her face fell.

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By the end of my week at the Woodfords there was only the ground floor left. I had completed the laundry, washed all the upstairs windows, and thoroughly cleaned all six bedrooms, three bathrooms, two landings and the staircases. I was feeling pretty proud of myself. I made a really good cleaning lady!

On Friday evening, when Sally came to collect me, Joyce declared herself delighted and was very grateful that I had agreed to finish over the weekend. Through Sally the interpreter we made arrangements for Saturday. She promised to keep the family out of the way as much as possible. She also demanded that they all tidy up downstairs, and threatened that any books, magazines, letters, videos or games left lying around anywhere would be in the bin by Monday.

Sally dropped me off in the morning a little later than usual and I started on the kitchen as soon as the family finished breakfast. After that, Joyce and Peter spent most of their time ferrying their kids to and from ballet lessons, football and hockey, and squeezing grocery shopping in between.

I began by clearing out all the cupboards. I checked all the saucepans, bowls, crockery and cutlery and ran those that looked grubby through the dishwasher – three loads in all. I isolated all the bottles and jars of sauces and preserves that were long past their ‘Use By’ dates for disposal, with Joyce’s permission. Then I scrubbed out all the cupboards and replaced their cleaned contents. Finally I swept and mopped the kitchen floor. I stood back to assess my morning’s work, and felt a now familiar pride in my achievements.

I was left undisturbed until about half-past twelve when the family returned *en masse* through the back door. Joyce just managed to stop the boys in the utility room before they trampled my clean kitchen floor in their muddy football boots.

I helped Joyce and Lucy prepare the family lunch, Lucy acting as interpreter. I also helped carry the food into the dining room but by mutual agreement I ate alone in the kitchen – as befits a servant, I mused ruefully. Though to be fair the conversation would have been a little stilted if I’d joined them, I being a stranger and unable – they thought – to speak English. I picked up a copy of *Marie Claire* – either Joyce’s or Lucy’s, I assumed – intending to read it as I ate. Just in time I realised I could only look at the pictures as Maria couldn’t read the articles.

After lunch, while I was clearing up and loading the dishwasher yet again, Joyce inspected the kitchen. She was clearly delighted. She could only tell me so in English of course, which I had to pretend not to understand, but her smiles and ‘thumbs up’ signs were enough for me to show that I realised she was pleased. I smiled; muttered ‘*Gracias, Señora*’; and even bobbed a sort of half-curtsey. Joyce seemed especially happy with that.

So far I hadn’t had much to do with the master of the house but at about half-past one, while I was hand washing the china and glassware that Joyce didn’t want to risk in the dishwasher, Peter came by and tried to engage me in conversation.

Lucy had told me that his Spanish was pretty much limited to “*Una cerveza, por favor*,” but he had clearly spent a little time with an English-Spanish dictionary, or maybe Google Translate. As he spoke, he kept glancing down to a scrap of paper in his hand. His accent was atrocious but I got the gist.

“*Gracias por todo tu arduo trabajo, Maria*,” he began. “*Has hecho un excelente trabajo!*”

Well I was glad he appreciated that I had been working hard all week and that I had done a good job.

“*Muchas gracias, señor*,” I said softly, hoping this conversation wouldn’t go on for long. My hopes were quickly dashed.

“*¿Por qué una chica tan guapa como tú trabaja como limpiadora?*” he went on.

Well for the money of course! Why did he *think* ‘a beautiful girl like me’ was working as a cleaner?

Wait... beautiful girl? Me? Is he kidding? Oh *God*, is he trying to chat me up? Another high-flying banker, who thinks he’s God’s gift! Mind you, Sally and I were – had been – high-flying bankers...

Before I could answer, I heard Lucy’s voice from the doorway.

“Leave the poor girl alone, Dad, for heaven’s sake!” she said, angrily. “We want her to come back next week!”

Peter had the grace to blush and left hurriedly, calling, “Come on, boys! Time to go – before the pool gets too crowded.”

Lucy turned to me apologetically, saying in her halting Spanish, “Sorry about that, Maria. He didn’t mean any harm. He’s just... being a man, you know?”

This little girl was wise beyond her years. I assured her that I understood, and that no harm was done, and that I wouldn’t say anything to her mother. Well how could I? We didn’t speak each other’s languages. I returned to tidying up.

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When everyone had gone off to their various afternoon activities, I moved on to the utility room, where I had to clean around the washing machine, tumble-dryer and freezer. I couldn’t move any of them, of course, so it was mostly dusting, removing cobwebs and scrubbing the floor clean of muddy bootprints and more. There was a shower in the utility room too, much used, and that clearly hadn’t had a really good clean in a long time. It took a lot of Joyce’s scouring powder and my elbow grease but it eventually came up gleaming white.

It was now after half-past three. I would just have time to do the downstairs bathroom. That would leave dusting and vacuuming the rest of the downstairs for Sunday.

At about half-past four, I stopped and stretched. I was aching all over, but maybe I didn't feel as sore as I had on the first couple of days? Perhaps I was adjusting to being forty pounds fatter?

I checked my thin ladies' watch, tight around my thick male wrist, hopefully concealed by the frilly sleeve of my top. I stopped for the day and took off my headscarf, which was getting sweaty and uncomfortable. I took out my hair grips and my long black locks fell around my shoulders and down my back. I took a scrunchie from the pocket of my smock and gathered them into a ponytail.

I was putting my cleaning materials away and getting ready to leave when Joyce came back with the girls. They had all been to the hairdresser. I told Lucy in Spanish how beautiful they all looked and she passed it on to her mother and sister.

Claire, the younger sister, said she thought my hair looked lovely too. I tried to look blank until Lucy translated.

"Muchas gracias, pequeña señorita," I said, smiling.

At that moment the doorbell rang. Sally was there to collect me. Greetings were exchanged, and Joyce sang my praises for the wonderful job I was doing. I tried not to look embarrassed as theoretically I didn't understand her.

I told Sally in Spanish what was left to do for Sunday. She passed that on to Joyce, and we left, promising to return at half-past nine in the morning.

"We really must do something about Maria learning English," she said in the car on the way home. "Your girl voice is quite convincing enough, and it's not realistic that you should be over here for months and not pick up any of the language. As Mrs Willoughby said, most European girls come to England to improve their English."

She was right. Besides it was only a matter of time before I gave myself away.

"I'm not going to evening classes," I said. "We can't afford to waste the money."

"I'll drop in at the library during my lunch hour on Monday," she said, "and pick up some books. At least that will give you an idea of how a foreigner goes about learning English; what rate of progress is reasonable; and so on."

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When we got home I saw that Sally had made an effort. The fridge and kitchen cupboards had been replenished and the surfaces in every room were tidy. I thanked her and suggested perhaps we might go out for a meal – at a reasonably priced restaurant, of course. Having been working hard all week neither of us felt like cooking.

So Saturday night became date night, except that Sally was going out with her live-in cleaning lady, rather than her husband. After showering off the day's charlady perspiration I put on clean underwear, a pink bra and panties and a matching half-slip, and tights. Sally lay on the bed watching me with a silly grin and saucer-like eyes.

I raided Carol's wardrobe again for a nice dress and chose a lacy, off the shoulder, black and white number, with a black silk belt. It fell to just above the knee.

"I don't remember seeing your mother wearing this," I said. "Do you think it's too short?"

"It looks great on you," Sally said. "Of course, it would be longer on Mum, as she's shorter than you."

"What about the shoulders? Do you think I should be covering up more?"

"It's fine. Your boobs are easily big enough and that chin and neck prosthesis covers up everything there that might be a giveaway. But it might be a good idea to wear a shawl or a cardigan. It's cool out tonight."

This was the first time we had gone out together in the evening, so remembering Vera's instructions, I shaved again. There was some visible five o'clock shadow but it was nothing like as bad as I would have expected, so the anti-androgen cream was obviously working. I hadn't noticed any diminution of libido, but Sally had been so passionate on those nights when we had had the energy to remove my false butt, that lack of sex drive on my part was hardly a problem. Nor was getting and maintaining an erection.

Sally helped me put my hair in an updo and lent me some earrings. Then she supervised my efforts at doing an evening make-up. I had qualms about all this getting dolled up, but she firmly squashed them.

"You're a young woman now, Maria," she said. Noticing my wince, she quickly continued, "If you don't make the best of yourself, you'll only attract attention for the wrong reasons."

I sighed and picked up a blush brush.

We decided to return to the distant restaurant we had gone to when I was practising being Fifi / Sally's mother, as there was little chance of seeing anyone we knew.

We did attract a certain amount of attention but Sally assured me they were admiring glances. Anyway, no one bothered us. It may have been that we were conversing entirely in Spanish; or that Sally was giving the evil eye to any wandering male who came too close to us.

We had a great meal, and reminisced about the changes we had been through since our previous visit.

"You don't look like my mother anymore, Maria," she said, "with your dark Hispanic looks, but I still can't stop thinking about what's lurking under your dress."

I looked around hurriedly to make sure no one had overheard that last erotic remark.

"Look, Sal," I said, "are you *sure* you're OK with this... whole... Maria thing?"

"I'm fine with it – really. I can see why you might have your doubts, but I promise you I *love* it. And I think you're very brave to go through with it all. I don't know what else I can do to convince you – apart from what I've got in mind for when we get home..."

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What she had in mind for Saturday night nearly made us late on Sunday morning, but everything went well enough. The Woodford family kept out of the downstairs rooms. It was mostly just dusting and

vacuuming, lighter work than I'd had up to then, and I finished around lunchtime. I called Sally to come and pick me up. When she arrived she and Joyce discussed our final invoice and Joyce insisted on adding another fifty pounds because she was so pleased with the job I had done.

"I hardly recognise the place," she gushed.

She insisted on giving me a £20 note as a tip 'just for yourself'. Sally graciously permitted that. Joyce also asked if I would be able to come regularly, suggesting that three hours every two weeks might be enough. Sally readily agreed, of course.

"You've obviously missed your vocation, babe," Sally said in the car on the way home. "You're a born cleaning lady."

Music to my ears, I *don't* think!

"I suppose you can keep the twenty quid, as you've been such a good girl this weekend," she said with a grin. "Just don't spend it all on make-up or frilly underwear."