

## Acting as a Cleaning Lady

By Susannah Donim

### *Chapter 8 – A Maid by Any Other Name*

*There is a difference between a cleaning lady and a maid, isn't there? Not according to Dave's mean big sister.*

So I had worked through the weekend, which was exhausting, but we had made much more than we'd expected. If we could carry on like this, our home would be safe, at least until the Tribunal. I had now been Maria continuously for eight days, except for removing my abdominal prosthesis about every other day. At bedtime on those nights I washed the grotesque object and myself carefully in Carol's – now Maria's – *en suite*, and Sally inspected me closely to make sure no extraneous hairs were popping up. She insisted the inspection needed to be tactile as well as visual, which inevitably led to enjoyable nocturnal shenanigans.

But when that Monday morning came around, and I woke up groaning, there seemed to have been no gap between finishing at the Woodfords and starting with the Hunting-Smythes for my second week as a full-time cleaning lady. I was usually up before Sally, who was not a morning person, and making breakfast before she surfaced, but today she had to rouse me.

She had spoken to Mrs H-S on the telephone and explained that she would be delivering me at eight o'clock, and would 'conduct a survey', as she put it, so that she could brief me in Spanish on my duties. Our new client, a married doctor with no children, was very different from Joyce Woodford. She was happy enough to converse with Sally, whom she recognised as managerial class like herself, but clearly had no interest in talking to me, even if that had been possible. She called Sally 'Mrs Jackson' and made it clear she was to be 'Dr Hunting-Smythe' to her, and '*Señora*' to me. The relationship would be strictly employer-employee. Sally played up to this outrageously, presenting herself as the Managing Director of our prestigious household services agency. She had always seen herself as my boss, of course, and was glad to have it recognised by a client.

We began the usual tour of the house, Sally barking orders in Spanish and me taking notes. When we'd finished and were back in the kitchen, Dr H-S turned to Sally and said, "I suppose I can trust her? She'll be on her own here all day once I've gone in to work, and after what happened with Pinner Maids..."

"Rest assured, Dr Hunting-Smythe," Sally said. "Maria is an honest girl. Also she knows that if she puts a foot wrong, her work permit will be revoked and she'll be packed off back to her village outside Madrid. She'll behave herself; she knows how lucky she is to be in Pinner."

Good grief! It's lucky I had no dignity left anyway. My wife would have killed the last of it this morning.

"Very well, but perhaps you could warn her that I will be popping back at some point during the day. Hopefully that will keep her on her toes."

Sally complied. I nodded vigorously, muttering, "*Si, si, Señora. Entiendo.*"

And I *did* understand. This week wouldn't be like being part of the family, as at the Woodfords. It would be strictly business and I would be strictly servant class.

The upside of working at the Hunting-Smythes was that it was a smaller house and Dr H-S was far too fastidious to have allowed it to degenerate into squalor just because she had no cleaning lady. I never

learned what her husband did for a living but I suspected he had to share the household duties, or else!

Anyway, the work was much lighter, and I wasn't required to do laundry or ironing, so I completed a diligent spring-clean of the whole house by the end of Wednesday. Dr H-S professed herself content when Sally came to collect me on Wednesday at half-past five and gave her a cheque. No tip and just a wintry smile as thanks. She did however say that she would like to retain our services for two hours a week for the foreseeable future at the same rate. So she must have been satisfied. Sally made a note in her diary.

When we got home, she called Dorothy and asked if there was anything we could do for her this week as I was unexpectedly free. She offered my services for grocery shopping as well as cleaning. Dorothy was delighted and confirmed that she would be happy to pay for a morning's work that Friday. She dictated a shopping list which Sally duly recorded.

"Hang on," I said. "What about transport? I can't drive, remember?"

"No problem," she said smugly. "You can do an internet shop and get it delivered here tomorrow. Then we can take it round on Friday morning in the car."

I had to admit that she was getting quite good at running a domestic services agency.

"I think there's an old bike of my mother's in the garage, by the way," she said. "You'll just need to pump up the tyres and oil the moving parts. It would be better if you didn't have to depend on me to ferry you backwards and forwards."

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Since I was now free on the Thursday I decided to go round to my sister's for morning coffee. It was thanks to her that we could now see a light at the end of the tunnel. Maria was her idea, and she had facilitated and paid for my transformation. I hated to admit it but I owed her a huge debt; I just didn't realise how huge. Sally had passed Mrs McLaughlin's envelope to her unopened.

"£3,750," Anna said, when I insisted on knowing how much she had spent.

"How much?" I gasped.

"I told you not to worry for the moment," she said. "That's nothing to us; well, next to nothing. It can wait till after the Tribunal. You'll easily be able to afford to pay us back then..."

"Assuming we win!"

"...assuming you win."

"I can't be in your debt for all that time," I wailed. "I just can't!"

Her face went dark.

"This is about *us*, isn't it?" she said. "You and me. Our sibling rivalry?"

"I would never borrow that amount of money from a friend, and you and I..."

"...aren't friends," she finished. "I know."

“That’s not what I was going to say...”

Although it was, of course. I had just stopped myself because I was aware of how it would have sounded.

“We were never close growing up...” she went on.

“To put it mildly,” I snorted. “You’d get up and walk out of the room when I came in!”

“And you kept sneaking into my bedroom and throwing my clothes all over the place, particularly my first bras, and you laddered my first grown-up tights.”

I’d forgotten that. We fell silent.

“No, we were never friends,” she said, “but we’re *family*. You’re my little brother, despite what you currently look like.” She chuckled. “I may not always like you, but I love you. I only want the best for you and Sally – who you absolutely don’t deserve, by the way.”

“Finally we agree on something,” I said. She smiled. “But I still can’t stand owing you so much money,” I insisted.

She sighed. “Well, how about you work it off, a little at a time, and pay off the rest when you can afford it? I still need my house cleaned regularly, and someone to do the laundry, and so on. I hate doing housework and you seem to be really good at it. How about £100 for three hours a week?”

“That’s much more than I’m getting from anybody else!”

“Well I suppose I could add a condition that would make it a little harder for you; make you feel you’re *earning* a higher rate...”

Her eyes gleamed. I knew that look and I knew I wasn’t going to like it...

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It was good to see Dorothy again on Friday morning. We brought her shopping in and I put it away while she and Sally went through what she wanted me to do that morning.

“By the way,” said Dorothy to Sally when we’d finished making the day’s ‘To Do’ list, “how is Maria off for clothes? It’s just that she looks like she’s wearing her mother’s cast-offs. I can’t see it very well of course, but her outfit looks too old for a girl in her twenties.”

“You’re quite right, actually,” Sally agreed. “I gave her some of my Mum’s old stuff. She can’t afford to buy new clothes, hence her need to work as a cleaning lady.”

“No, I understand that,” she said, “but I have wardrobes full of old things I’ve never got round to throwing out. I haven’t worn most of them since the eighties. Oh, I don’t mean business suits with huge shoulder pads, or gold lamé, sequinned party dresses. Just ordinary tops and skirts. They don’t really go out of fashion and they’re much more suitable for someone of Maria’s age.”

She lowered her voice a little, as if afraid I might overhear and be offended by what she was about to say, even though she ‘knew’ I couldn’t understand.

"I was a plump little thing back then too. I'm sure my clothes would fit her, even though she's quite a bit taller. She can think of it as a tip, if you like. Have you got time to come up and help her pick out some nice things?"

"Oh, I think so," said Sally. "They won't mind if I'm ten minutes late for once. I'm usually first in."

She explained Dorothy's offer to me in Spanish. Dorothy led the way upstairs to her spare bedroom.

*"¡Vamos!"* said Sally, grabbing my hand and hurrying after her. *"¡Ropa nueva! Esto será divertido!"*

Looking at new clothes might be fun for *her*... Sometimes Sally seemed to forget that I was not really a woman. I tried to look happy for Dorothy's sake, then I remembered she could barely make out my expression. We entered the back bedroom.

"I offered all this lot to my nieces years ago," Dorothy said, opening the first of two large wardrobes. "They weren't keen to take their Auntie's old clothes, and in any case they're both tiny little things. They take 'petite'. Maria can have anything she'd like here."

Sally reached for a couple of hangers, pulled them out, and looked at them thoughtfully. Everything looked... quite nice... but of course I had no idea whether the clothes were decent quality, in fashion, or what.

The wardrobe was overflowing with dresses, skirts and women's slacks. There were some long, elegant Laura Ashley-type dresses, obviously from the seventies rather than the eighties, or even earlier. Dorothy was probably old enough to have been a flower child. They were beautiful and I liked them a lot, but even I knew there was no way they were fashionable now.

"Ra-ra skirts!" exclaimed Sally in English. "She'd look great in these!"

Dorothy went over to a big, old-fashioned chest of drawers.

"These are full of tops, smart blouses, cardigans, shell suits – remember those?" she laughed. "There's not much underwear of course, but she wouldn't want my old worn-out bras and knickers! There might be some nice slips though..."

Sally had to go to work, but we arranged to come back on Saturday for a proper look. I spent the rest of the morning dusting, vacuuming and doing laundry. It passed quickly and happily.

Sally came back during her lunch hour. I made tomato soup and toasted cheese sandwiches for the three of us. The conversation was lively, despite me needing simultaneous translation.

"So how was your morning?" Sally asked in the car on our way home.

"It was fine," I said. "Dorothy is a lovely old lady. She's so cheerful despite her handicap. I'm happy to help her."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Maria," she said. "You've another busy week coming up, and then you'll be going back to the Woodfords and the Hunting-Smythes for a couple of hours each – maybe more. A cleaning lady's work is never done – fortunately!"

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It was Saturday morning. I was standing in our kitchen submitting to a critical inspection.

“So now not only do I have to clean her house for her every two weeks, I have to do it wearing a maid’s uniform! And it has to be Friday mornings so that I can serve coffee and biscuits to her damn Bridge Club ladies. She said that having a uniformed maid will shoot her straight to the top of the social pecking order.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes to you,” Sally said. “You’re already disguised as a woman and wearing women’s clothes all the time. Why is a maid’s dress any worse?”

“I’m not a maid, I’m a cleaning lady,” I insisted.

My wife laughed. “What the hell’s the difference?”

“A maid is a *servant*. She has to do everything her mistress says. She’s *servile*, submissive, at her employer’s beck and call. A cleaning lady is a freelance contractor. She’s a *professional*, engaged to provide specific services for a predetermined number of billable hours – just like a lawyer! She doesn’t have to do anything she doesn’t want to.”

It struck me that this was a ridiculous conversation for a man to be having with his wife. And it didn’t help that I was dressed from head to toe as a maid. After our talk on Thursday morning, Anna had called Transformations and ordered three maid’s uniforms in my size, one black, one grey, one navy blue.

“Your sister is a bit much sometimes, isn’t she?” said Sally, sympathetically.

“You’re just realising that *now*?” I asked gloomily.

“No, I’ve always known she’s a mad bitch. I just tried to keep the peace between you, but now she’s going too far. This is too humiliating. I’ll have a word with her and get you out of it.”

“No, I’ll have to do it. We took her money. I promised, and anyway, there’s no reason for anyone to connect Maria the maid with your absent husband, Dave.”

“Really?” She looked confused for a moment. Then the light appeared to dawn. “I think you’re actually looking forward to it!”

“No, no. I just have a thing about keeping my promises...”

“You’ve got some sissy fantasy about being a maid!”

“No! No, I...”

“It’s OK, actually,” she smiled. “I’m more than happy to share that fantasy. It’s sexy as hell!” She checked her watch. “Come on then, maid Maria, let’s go.”

We trooped over to Anna and Phil’s place. I was under instructions to go round the back – the Servants’ Entrance, as my beloved sister put it. She was waiting for us in the kitchen. She hooted with laughter when she saw me.

“Oh Dave – sorry, *Maria* – you look marvellous! A perfect picture of a housemaid!”

I gritted my teeth and didn’t reply.

“To be honest, I don’t see how this is going to work,” Sally said, well aware of my rising anger. “How are you going to give your maid orders, when *she* doesn’t speak English – your idea, I seem to remember – and *you* don’t speak Spanish?”

Anna’s face fell. I hadn’t thought of that either. My clever wife might have found an escape clause for me.

“Well, you’ll just have to jot down some phrases in Spanish for me,” she blustered. “You know – ‘Coffee and biscuits, please, Maria’. ‘You can clear the cups and plates away now, please, Maria’. That sort of thing. Write them out phonetically. I’m sure we’ll manage. My maid won’t want to embarrass me in front of my friends...” She looked at me meaningfully. “...because she knows that I could embarrass *her* much more!”

I sighed. That was indisputable. Anna was going to win again.

“Now I want you to practise serving us,” she said, “so that there are no mistakes next Friday.”

“What – now?” I said, looking at my tiny ladies’ watch. “But we have to be at Dorothy’s in less than an hour.”

“It won’t take that long. Now Sally and I will go and sit in the lounge. You know where everything is, Maria. Bring us coffee and biscuits on a nice tray.”

She turned to my wife and led her out to the sitting room.

“This is brilliant,” she was saying, “I get my house cleaned; impress my friends with a uniformed housemaid; *and* humiliate my horrible little brother. I’d have paid Transformations twice as much for all that! By the way, Sally, *you* don’t have to use the Servants’ Entrance, you know...”

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Anna made me go through the motions twice, asking Sally to write the appropriate instructions in Spanish and explaining how to pronounce them. My sister has a tin ear for accents and sounded like a caricature of an English person attempting to speak Foreign, but I couldn’t pretend I didn’t understand.

This stupid rehearsal made us late and we had to rush round to Dorothy’s place as she was going out later. Obviously I didn’t have time to change out of my uniform. Despite her poor eyesight Dorothy could see what I was wearing. She was most impressed at how her scruffy cleaning lady had metamorphosed into a smart housemaid.

“You look wonderful, dear,” she said, obviously assuming I had come straight from working for another client. “Why don’t you wear that nice dress for all your cleaning jobs?”

I nearly answered her, then remembered at the last minute that I wasn’t supposed to understand. Sally quickly translated. I shrugged and muttered something about how the uniform wasn’t as comfortable or convenient, and not suitable for dirty jobs. Dorothy nodded after hearing the translation and led us upstairs. Sally and I each carried a suitcase.

We spent an hour going through her old clothes. There was some really nice stuff. I took off my uniform and tried a few things on. The few minis she had would have been totally obscene on me, but there were plenty of normal dresses I could wear. Like with Carol’s stuff, skirts which would have been two inches below the knee on Dorothy were two inches above on me. I could live with that.

Sally insisted I try a ra-ra skirt, but I couldn't believe how big it made my bum look. No way would I ever wear *that*.

I took a couple of really beautiful Laura Ashley dresses though. We filled both suitcases. I left wearing a very nice blue minidress, not that it would have been mini on Dorothy. I still looked fat, I thought, but at least the dress was attractive.

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After dropping the suitcases containing my new wardrobe at home, we had to head out to Transformations for my fortnightly maintenance appointment. Sally dropped me at the front door and went off to do our weekend grocery shopping.

I had taken my false bottom off at least every other day to clean it, and check my nether regions for damage, and for... other reasons, but I had been wearing the false boobs, cheeks, nose and chin for two weeks now.

Vera applied a strong-smelling solvent to the affected areas and prised all my prosthetics off, checking for signs of rash or other skin damage. She asked me whether I was following her instructions for looking after myself and keeping the prosthetics in good condition. I was able to claim full compliance with a clear conscience.

"Your skin seems to be keeping its lovely olive tone," she said. "So how are you enjoying being Maria?"

"It's not a question of *enjoying* it," I said. "I'm doing this because I have no alternative."

"Of course, you are, dear," she said, implying, but not saying, *'That's what they all say'*.

She started washing all my prosthetics, being especially thorough with the abdominal piece.

"No, really," I persisted, "I'm suspended without pay from my real job, and me working as Maria is the only way we can keep our heads above water."

I wasn't sure why I was sharing so much personal detail with her, but I suppose I couldn't consider someone who had twice manhandled my private parts a total stranger, could I? Besides, I suppose I felt a need to show that I was a real man, and not a cross-dresser, transgender, or a pervert, even if I was beginning to suspect that I might be all three.

Vera was hanging the wobbly, fleshy prosthetics up to dry. She turned her head to look at me.

"So you're in financial difficulties?" I nodded. "Yet you can afford our fees?" she said, sceptically.

"Well, my sister is lending us the money..."

"Really?" she said. "She must love you very much."

"Well that's not actually how I would describe our relationship, no."

"Okay, off with the rest of your clothes, and up on the bed, please," she said, changing the subject abruptly. "Let's see if you need any waxing."

Shit! I did, of course. It wasn't as bad as the first time though. She examined my face and neck carefully.

"The anti-androgen cream seems to be doing its job," she said. "I'll just give you an extra close shave where the prosthetics have been. You might not need to shave for much longer."

Half an hour later, thoroughly cleaned, waxed and shaven, smothered in soothing lotion, and with all my prosthetics carefully replaced, and a clean pink bra and matching panties on, I made my way to Sharon's salon. We greeted each other with girly air kisses and she helped me into a smock. I soon felt the sensual pleasure of her soft hands and lukewarm water on my scalp.

"Your hair and the extensions seem to be in good shape," she said, approvingly.

"Well I didn't wash it till the third day after I was here," I said. Sally had actually washed it for me when we showered together. "And I used conditioner. Also my wife dabbed tint on my roots last weekend."

"Good girl," she said. I didn't know whether she meant me or Sally. "What style have you kept it in?"

"Mostly just a ponytail or a bun," I said. "I've been too busy working to do anything elaborate."

"I know just how you feel," she laughed. "Even though I know how to do virtually any hairstyle, we working girls just don't have the time, do we?"

I smiled and agreed. It's hard for 'us working girls' to make the best of ourselves.

After Sharon had finished with me, I had put my new blue dress back on, I made my way back to Reception to wait for Sally. While I was waiting I asked Angela, the receptionist, whether I owed them anything for the afternoon's work.

"Oh no," she said. "Your maintenance appointments are all included in your up-front fees."

I supposed that was good news, and maybe went some way toward explaining why Transformations' fees were as high as they were.