The Cleaning Lady

I sat, surrounded by the humid thrum of the tumble driers, magazine lying useless in my lap. Transfixed I watched the small load tumbling round and round not unlike my thoughts. I enjoyed doing laundry, or, to be more accurate, I enjoyed the opportunity to be alone. This was one of the few places John didn’t bother to follow me. Most of the tenants put their load of washing in and leave, trusting it will still be there when they got back. I simply told him I wasn’t so trusting. For a man riddled with as much mistrust as he was that made perfect sense. The truth was, I relished the opportunity to be alone with my thoughts! Often they weren’t pleasant thoughts…and when the odd groan of frustration or tear of self-pity escaped, I was grateful for the solitude. How was it possible? A nice ‘well brought up’ girl like me ending up in this dismal situation? Or, on the other hand was it inevitable? Was I the stereotypical product of a broken family? I sighed in hopeless frustration. Then jumped as I heard someone clear their throat. “That’s a heavy sigh dear! So sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude” I shrugged, embarrassed at being caught but also a little relieved to be distracted from my depressing thoughts.

The older lady seemed pleasant enough offering an apologetic smile in my direction as she started unpacking her detergents. ‘Wow, that’s a lot of cleaning stuff you have there!” I commented trying to break the awkwardness. She turned towards me. A halo of soft white hair forming around her face implied age but her clear blue eyes framed by plenty of laughter lines made her look ageless. “There’s a solution for every stain.” she said nodding her head firmly “Really?” I responded. “Oh yes, it’s my job to know what solution works on what kind of mark. I run a cleaning firm you see” then, closing the door on the washing machine she turned to me offering a firm handshake. ‘Dorothy,” she said with a wide grin, “I’ve just moved into number 5” As I shook her hand I tried to recall when last John and I had argued loudly enough to make me fear a neighbour would overhear us. Had Dorothy been moved in as early as last week? I felt a blush move up my neck. Had Dorothy overheard the horrible names he called me? As though she read my mind she mentioned that although she’d taken possession from the beginning of the month she’d been spending most of her time with her daughter and new granddaughter in a suburb nearby.

I began looking forward to bumping into Dorothy in the laundry room. Well-travelled with a wry sense of humour I found both Dorothy herself and her stories engaging. At the very least the stories distracted me from my hopeless thoughts and even gave me reason to chuckle. Meantime things had gotten progressively worse since John had lost his job. His frustration and self-loathing palpable and inconsolable other than when he turned it on me. The arguments came more frequently, the words became uglier. I on the other hand was feeling more exhausted than ever having taken on second shifts at the diner. Yet although she must have overheard the arguments by now Dorothy never treated me as a creature of pity. On one occasion I shared some of John’s awful family history with her. The way his parents had idolised his older brother, and then all but abandoned him when their golden son killed himself while driving drunk. Abused and neglected, it was hardly surprising he found it hard to trust…How he was really all alone in the world with no one to care about him, except me…. I’d hear my voice trail off. Hear myself excusing him. Knowing it was my own behaviour I was excusing. Trying to let her know, I wasn’t another abused woman. I was a strong woman trying to ‘be there’ for a broken man. She simply put her hand on the edge of the sleeves I was trying to discretely pull down over the bruises on my wrist. “Your John” She said, looking me in the eye “reminds me very much of a man I was once married to…” then she bent to start shoving the laundry into the machine. “How did you fix him?” I asked softly half to myself but I thought I heard her say something in reply like ‘good, fixed him good’, her voice somewhat muffled by the fact she was half speaking into the machine. “Excuse me?” She stood up. “I said, I fixed myself. You can’t fix another my dear. I know you might want to but…it’s just the way it is. However you can help yourself. “She smiled. “Once I put the work into myself, and make no mistake, it took a while,” she smiled grimly .. “but almost as soon as I did I got my second chance. And I grabbed it with both hands dear. Second chances are so rare” Then with a clumsy attempt to lighten the moment she did a complicated segue into a story that involved abseiling, nudity and champagne. Clumsy but a funny story nonetheless and I was still smiling when I walked back into my apartment, but not for long.

The atmosphere I walked into was as thick as a peanut butter. I could feel discontent radiating off my boyfriend, smell the stale beer in the air. “Oh, so you’re home” he said sarcastically, “do you think you could be bothered to make me something to eat *IF* its not asking too much!” I took the line of least resistance, anything to keep the peace. I was so exhausted both physically and emotionally that everything felt slightly surreal and I certainly had nothing left in me for a fight. A stale taste filled my mouth and my eyes burnt almost constantly. “Sure. What would you like?” He still hadn’t bothered to get off the couch or even turn to look at me. “A polony sandwich.” And my heart sank. Shit. I was supposed to have bought polony on the way home. He’d specifically asked me to but I’d been so tired I’d totally forgotten. I wanted to sob. There’d be no avoiding an argument now. “There’s no polony, I’m sorry” I spoke quickly. “I’ll make you a boiled egg sarmie instead” I offered, already moving quickly to the fridge and oven to put eggs onto boil, then to the counter. But of course, he had been waiting for any reason to take offence and this was perfect. I’d forgotten to get polony not because I was exhausted, stressed and run off my feet. Oh no, it was because I despised him, because I wanted him to go hungry, because I was having an affair, because I was a bitch. A stupid bitch. Standing in front of the chopping board staring down at the freshly chopped parsley, my husband’s ugly words slamming off my back, I began to cry and laugh simultaneously, almost choking on my tears. This whole scenario was so crazy. All this yelling because I hadn’t bought polony! An ashtray sailed past my head. I yelled at him over my shoulder “what the ? Are you crazy?” (Yes, a part of my mind said, yes, he’s crazy and now you’ve poked a crazy wounded bear)

My reaction infuriated him further and he came towards me in a rush, my reactions sluggish, I was slow to duck and I felt his nails rake burning paths down my cheek just before I hear the thwack of his hand hitting the kitchen tiles. “Bitch!” The force with which he had come at me had propelled him right past me and now he turned cradling his hand, lip upturned, hate burning from his eyes. I tried to retreat, shuffling backwards maybe two steps before I came up short, my back against the counter, my arms against the edge, knife hanging down. The knife handle gripped so tightly in my hand that my muscles on that side trembled. He moved towards me, I started to put my hands up to fend him off. He kept coming. I knew I should run, but I was trapped, nowhere to run, I stood there paralysed – he seemed to move so fast it was a blur, and then a crunch sound, a vibration shuddering down the knife blade, my wrist bending awkwardly, my hand releasing the handle of the knife. A surprised look bloomed in John’s eyes and a red stain began to do likewise on his t-shirt. I screamed but it came out a small yelp. His eyes caught mine, surprised. Horrified. He gave a burbling moan and slid to the floor. I stared down at my boyfriend lying slumped awkwardly at my feet. His back heaving unevenly. The knife shuddering as it jutted from his chest.

 I heard a sharp intake of breathe and looked up to see Dorothy standing in the entrance briefly outlined against the light coming in the front door before she kicked it deftly shut behind her. “Shit” she exhaled. Striding across to the kitchen she grabbed the washing gloves on the sink and, pushing up her sleeves, put them on. Then she knelt down and gently help lay John flat. She stared at him awhile before turning to me. Gently she helped me away from the counter where I stood frozen. “I heard a racket, and well, I didn’t want to pry but I was worried dear”. She led me to a deep armchair covering it first with some towels from the laundry basket. “Sit here. You’ve had a shock.”

Nodding numbly I sat on the edge of the chair, gripping its sides to try and stop the trembling in my arms and hands. I stared straight ahead but, at the periphery of my vision I couldn’t avoid seeing dark shadows, not black, not red on my hands and the sleeves of my sweater. I felt faint. I couldn’t help feeling a cooling stickiness on my arms and hands. And, something else. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dorothy her back towards me bend over John’s inert body as though whispering something in his ear. Then her hands on the blade of the knife appeared to push down. John gave a jerk. Had..? Had I just seen that? “Dorothy” I screamed but it came out a garbled moan

Dorothy turned to look at me and I could see a handkerchief covering the blade of the chef’s knife beneath her hands. “What dear?” she asked me as calmly as though we were discussing where to go for tea. “It’s over.” She sighed and pulled a phone out of her jean pocket. “Hi. It’s me. I need 2 strong men with a canvas roll at this address.” She looked down at the body of my husband lying on the kitchen tiles. “It’s a fairly easy job, no upholstery or carpets so just bring my number five bag” With that she disconnected the call. “I told you dear. I do this for a living you know. Clean up other people’s messes” She looked over her shoulder at John’s body. ‘In this case most likely his parents.” Then she moved to sit across from me she took my hands in hers gently wiping them with the handkerchief. “Now dear, I know you’re still feeling a bit shaky, but we need to discuss what you plan to do next. It’s not every day you get a second chance”.