

nasty
little
cuts

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Call Me Mummy

Make Me Clean (2023)

nasty
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cuts

TINA BAKER



First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
VIPER, part of Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 525 9
Export ISBN 978 1 78816 526 6
eISBN 978 1 78283 704 6
Audio ISBN 978 1 78283 992 7



For my Bo

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1

4.15 a.m., 24 December

Dolly is singing at the top of her voice, 'Deck the halls with bras of holly!', collapsing into giggles then singing it again. Pat-Pat catches the giggle, claps his hands and jumps up and down like a baby gibbon (*What are baby gibbons called?* Debs wonders) and Marc smiles at the kids and hugs her closer to him on the sofa.

Debs removes the candy cane from Pat-Pat's pudgy hand before he can ram it up the dog's nose and nestles back into Marc's arm. He kisses her head, picks up a large present immaculately wrapped in beautiful embossed white paper, and hands it to her.

'Wow! Thanks, love!'

It's heavy. He probably got the shop assistant to do the elaborate bow on the top. She strokes the shiny wrapping paper and starts to open her gift.

'Best Christmas ever,' he whispers into her hair.

It is. It's all they've ever wanted. It's everything she never really believed she could have.

She's about to kiss him when something stings her fingers. She looks down to see there's red stuff on her hands, on the box.

The pain starts.

She peels back the paper in slow motion to find – razor blades.

She tries to focus on her breathing. In, two, three. Out, two, three, four.

Do not fight for air. It makes it worse. She can't let herself panic, although that icy sensation is already crawling up her spine, squeezing her chest tight.

She catches his sneer. Then the lights extinguish. Sudden darkness all around her. Inside her. Everything muffled, claustrophobic.

She can't see the kids. She strains to hear them.

Dolly! Pat-Pat! The words do not escape her mouth.

Dense fog, bruise-grey presses in. Like being wrapped in cotton wool. The leaden vapour seeps into her brain, clogs her lungs.

She's shivering. Tremors grip her in waves, shaking something loose inside. Her thoughts splinter.

Where are her children?

She stumbles forward. No idea where she is, no idea of direction. Faster and faster now, breaking into a run.

She has to find her kids. She senses they're close, but—

Something shatters. She jolts, spinning round too late.

Then it's on her. And she bucks and struggles, lashing out. She attempts to scream, but her mouth is filled with fog which stuffs words, pleas back in her throat. Gagging, gasping, she fights for air and tastes something metallic.

As nightmares go, it's not the worst.

2

4.15 a.m., 24 December

The clock glows four-fifteen. Around the time her mam died. Debs rubs her eyes to erase the dream. Shudders. She's kicked the duvet off the bed, and she's freezing.

Something's wrong.

For perhaps a couple of seconds her reptilian brain tells her the truth: run. Run *now*. But her conscious self takes over, layering theories on top of the fear, reasoning it smaller, making it more manageable.

She turns over.

The boy is in the corner. Not *her* boy; not her son.

No!

A shadow. There is no boy, never has been. Pat-Pat is asleep next door, not standing silent, watching her with hungry hollow eyes. But, just for a second... *Take a breath*. She's awake now.

She tries to talk herself down, reminds herself fear is only Fantasy and Expectations Appearing Real. She hates these night sweats, waking drenched and shaky.

Get a grip. Buy some bamboo pyjamas.

Breathe.

If only she could get back to sleep, she'd have a good couple of hours before she has to get up and see to the kids and see to the dog and see to

everything else. But she won't sleep again. The flush of anxiety gathers, zinging through her bloodstream like a nasty drug.

Her jaw aches where she's been grinding her teeth in her sleep, despite the thing the dentist gave her which makes her look like a boxer.

She fidgets, restless, but when she reaches a foot across the bed, she finds nothing.

Marc's not in bed. Again. She doesn't even remember him coming in last night. When did he last sleep through? No. He's not one of the kids.

She props herself up, removes her tooth guard and grabs her inhaler. Her tongue finds a mouth ulcer.

So much to do. Christmas Eve already! How did that happen?

Her daytime brain's now completely off the starting blocks: she has to collect two parcels from the Post Office, which will be total carnage; she needs to pick up the Yule log from the baker's and the dog poo from the garden; wrap the last bits and bobs for the kids; email the last of the 'seasonal greetings'; drop off a client's present; prep the turkey, and possibly shove a stick of holly up her bum while she's at it. Merry Christmas, everyone!

Marc will have nothing to do with any of it; this year he can't seem to focus on anything, let alone Christmas preparations. He's been wandering around the house in a daze. It breaks her heart when the kids hug him and he seems to look right through them. It's not just his side of the bed that's cold and empty.

She's worried about him.

It's easier to tell herself that than to unpick the other feelings.

She listens. Can't hear him in the bathroom. He might be in his study, his headset on, so as not to disturb Dolly and Pat-Pat. Always considerate.

She probes her ulcer to check it still stings.

He'll be up working. She knows he's worrying about the latest reshuffle in the office although he's not said much. Never does. The unsaid looms worse, stress etched into the furrows on his forehead.

Will he go in today? On Christmas Eve? She shifts up the pillows, trying to gather herself before getting up.

But what's he got to worry about, really? She's always telling him that they can downsize. Give the Caribbean a miss. They'll survive. They don't

need all this *stuff*. The kids have got so much more than she and her sister ever had growing up. Does it make them any happier? She doubts it. All kids want is attention.

And Marc used to be amazing. The best dad ever.

She takes a long pull of Ventolin through the device they gave her to stop her knocking it back like a tequila shot, then stretches out along the memory foam mattress, consciously clenching and relaxing her muscles as she counts her breaths, trying hard to stop the worries spiralling and knotting themselves around her chest.

But mindfulness just winds her up. And the lists won't leave her be, scritch-scratching at the back of her skull. Sweat gathers slick on her chest. She feels a tensing deep in her bowels. And she knows she'll have to get up and move on the adrenaline before it turns to acid in her gut.

Rattled, she sits and strips off the clammy nightgown, grabs the dressing gown from the chair, and wrestles herself into it as she shuffles to the loo. Dolly's Barbie has been thrust upside down in the toothbrush glass, so it looks like she's drowning, which tickles Debs. Her daughter has recently announced she's now 'too old for dolls'. Aged nine. Nine going on thirty-nine, that one.

She doesn't flush in case she wakes the kids.

She makes her way past Dolly and Pat-Pat's rooms yawning widely. Both of them have been banging on about Christmas for weeks. Pat-Pat's obsessed with Santa. Waking early. Rushing downstairs as soon as she's got him up, demanding, 'Has-he-been? Has-he-been? Has-he-been-yet?'

She doesn't switch on the hall light. She can see well enough thanks to the streetlights glaring outside, obliterating the stars. When did nights become so dazzling? Car headlights are impossible now.

Through the lounge door at the bottom of the stairs she notices the flashes of red, blue, green, white. Marc obviously forgot to switch off the Christmas tree lights when he finally came home last night – *if* he came home last night – so they might have all burned to death in their sleep.

That's not like him. Sloppy.

He has to get help. She'll try to talk to him; tell him he needs to address his ... what is it? Depression? The thought makes her feel slightly dizzy. She holds the bannister as she feels her way down.

Coffee will only ramp up her anxiety, so she considers making a cup of tea. Then perhaps she could lie on the sofa for ten minutes or so and—

The thought's interrupted by an urgent prickling at the back of her neck. She freezes a couple of steps from the bottom.

Someone's in the kitchen. There's a strange whispering.

It's not Marc.

Her heart batters. No! Of course it's Marc. The dog would go doolally if it were anyone else. Her mind rummages for explanations but her body remains in fight-or-flight mode, her senses on high alert.

She holds on to the wall to stop herself falling, a sensation of pitching forward drawing her into blackness. She blows air slowly out of her mouth, but she can't force herself to take another step.

She doesn't have to.

A quick movement to her left. A shape emerges from the kitchen. A man.

He's holding a knife.

3

4.17 a.m., 24 December

Lulu was chasing a rabbit, something she's never done in her life, but the old dreams are hard-wired.

She thinks her name is Get Down Lulu, but the man sometimes calls her For God's Sake. She doesn't know what to make of the man. She loves the woman. She loves the little girl. She hates the boy. Sometimes, she's so afraid of the screeching and chasing, her legs won't work fast enough, and she can't scabble away under the chair or the table to escape the feet and she does a wee. Then, even the woman calls her Bad Girl.

She wishes the boy would go away.

The man woke her up. It's not food time, although she wagged her tail just in case. But he smells wrong. She squashes her bald, wobbly belly to the kitchen floor and tries to disappear by staying very still. But she can't keep her tail from wagging like a surrendering flag.

She hears footsteps on the stairs. Now the woman's here! It will all be okay!

She leans her flank against the dishwasher and closes her eyes.

4

4.23 a.m., 24 December

Of course it's him. Lulu didn't bark.

'Jesus, Marc! What the hell are you doing?'

He's silhouetted in the kitchen doorway against a lozenge of light from across the road. He doesn't move. The fact that he doesn't answer disturbs Debs. She backs away up one step, gripping the bannister. It's not a conscious decision.

She can't see his face.

Even though it's him, thank the lord, not some coked-up burglar come to murder her and the kids in their beds, the bad feeling doesn't ebb. If anything, it notches up a level.

In the lounge, the Christmas tree's perky glow of red and blue and green and white runs through its cycle, changing the shadow's colour, but not its menace.

There's something off in the way he's standing. He's holding the kitchen knife in front of him like a weapon.

She can't see his eyes.

'Love? What's happened?' Something bad, she just knows it's something bad.

Despite the premonition, she forces herself to move forward, slowly,

holding out her hand like you might to a wild animal.

He doesn't reply. He doesn't seem to register her.

She grasps for some palatable explanation. He might have been defending them from some scrote on a bike messing with their car, or an intruder—

'Was someone trying to get in?'

She stands on the new wool rug (he liked the geometric print – beige, black and grey – not her sort of thing) but a chill starts at her feet and climbs the back of her knees, the sweat between her shoulder blades tickling and sickly. The hairs on her arms creep upwards. She tries to control her breathing.

He says nothing.

In those few seconds, she tells herself he's sleepwalking, a swift, calming thought, just as quickly dismissed. Her mind scrabbles for some other reason he might be acting like this but can find nothing close to comforting.

'Marc?' It comes out a cracked whisper.

The pit of her stomach knows before the rest of her realises. She's in danger. She and the kids are in danger.

She can't take her eyes off the knife.

5

Ten years ago

‘Cut glass?’

‘Yes. But understated. Classic.’

‘Cut glass? Really?’

‘Yes. It creates an impression.’

Debs can’t get her head round the price. She’s already terrified she might drop the goblet she’s holding, let alone handle the set on a regular basis.

But the girl with the subtle lip fillers and rather less subtle stilettos concurs, tapping the order on to her iPad with manicured shell-pink nails. What must it be like teetering round on those shoes all day? She’ll have back problems by the time she’s thirty.

Marc’s impressive shoulders, tennis player’s shoulders, lead the sales-girl around the shop, discussing the merits of Welch and Wüsthof versus Zwilling chef’s knives. Debs trails round behind them. She can’t contribute. It’s a foreign language. This is his domain. ‘Entertaining’ will be an important part of his ‘career trajectory’ apparently; his five-year plan, his SMART goals. And she has been invited into this rarefied world; she might be seated next to him at those dinner parties. A dinner party! Her!

He picks up a small ‘paring’ knife.

‘That’s not a knife,’ she laughs, giving it her best Aussie accent. She grabs

a huge blade from the counter, brandishing swashbuckling style. 'That's a knife!'

He looks at her blankly. Turns out he's never watched *Crocodile Dundee*.

He laughs, though, after she explains it.

But three-hundred-odd quid for one bloody knife?

'You are only as good as your equipment.' One of his mantras.

She watches him stride around the shop. Assured, impressive. Belonging. Directing the assistant, who gazes up at him, expertly applied liner emphasising her dark, Bambi eyes. Expensive-looking red soles (fake) take the shoes from tarty to tantalising.

Debs yanks down her own skirt, which has ridden up, and a thought left-fields her – he'd be better off with the salesgirl.

No. Stuff that for a game of soldiers!

She forces down the threat of tears, catches up, inserts herself between the girl's caramel highlights and her man – *hers*, as of five weeks ago – sliding her hand into the back pocket of his chinos to give his lovely bum a squeeze and to hide her purple nail polish, which has started to chip round the edges. He blesses her with a grin, beaming dimples. An almost goofy, indulgent look. A benediction. And she can breathe again.

So what if he wants everything to match and his swanky new flat, his clothes, his favourite restaurants aren't really her style? It's his money.

So what if she's not *MasterChef* material, cut-glass material? He chose her. She can learn how to cook.

'And I think, a dozen ramekins,' he tells the girl.

Debs' heart sinks.

Debs told him she'd never been in that shop before. Not her neck of the woods. What she didn't tell him was that she'd never been into any shop remotely like it.

Those heady, early days. Everything new and different and shiny. An adventure. A promise that she was worthy of a lovely man and lovely things.

But as she smiled and smiled at the glossy shop assistant with the perfect blow-dry, she swallowed the taste of panic: she'd never fit in; she'd never

be able to host a dinner party; she'd let him down; she'd always be found lacking. He'd dump her soon enough.

She talked him out of the most expensive knife, although those he chose were still extortionate. One for carving, another for boning, others for chopping and slicing. Serrated knives for sawing through God knows what. They all made her knees feel weird.

But then he took her for lunch at Bibendum. Beautiful! Like a film set. She ran her hands under the tap in the ladies and tried to dampen down her hair, which had gone from wild, winsome curls to full-on feral. She dabbed on more minty lip gloss – he'd kissed it off twice already – her dark, currant eyes bright with excitement.

She had oysters for the first time. They made her feel a bit sick.

She rang her sister that night to ask, 'What the fuck's a ramekin when it's at home?'

Marc likes nice things and he takes care of them. The knife is kept cleaned and honed. Ready for action. Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

Yeah, she definitely missed some of the signs.

6

4.25 a.m., 24 December

He turns sharply and disappears into the kitchen. She follows on boneless legs.

‘Marc, what’s going on?’ He’s still wearing the suit he left for work in yesterday morning. ‘What time did you get in? Have you slept?’

Lulu raises her head, like she might know.

He makes some weird noise, which sounds like he’s swallowed a wasp and veers against the fridge. There’s an uneasy pause. Then he slides down, crumpling, bringing Dolly and Pat-Pat’s drawings with him, until he’s sitting hunched on the granite floor tiles as if suddenly exhausted. It reminds her of a giraffe keeling over, or one of those giant chimneys buckling and imploding.

Perhaps she could do this in daylight, if she wasn’t wrung out and shattered herself, but now she’s reduced to, ‘Is it work?’

There’s a small movement in his shoulders, which might be a shrug.

Flailing around for suggestions, she tries, ‘Did you crash out on the sofa? Did you have a bad dream?’ Like he’s got the monopoly on those.

No response.

She puts her hand against the thrum of the fridge and ventures, ‘Is your mother...?’

‘No.’ The word spat out.

‘So, it can talk!’ The attempt at a joke feels wrong in her mouth.

Nothing.

She comes a little nearer, takes a big breath, and squats down as near to him as she dares.

‘Come on, love. Please. Tell me what’s wrong.’

His face does something like it’s melting. Jesus! Is he having a stroke? Then his head flops forward. She can’t bear to see him like this.

‘There’s nothing, *nothing* that’s as bad as it feels now. Whatever’s happened, whatever it is, we can sort it out. Anything—’

A quiet part of her listens to this bold statement and wonders. Does she actually mean it?

What if he’s seeing someone? Has a secret wife and family stashed away somewhere? Her mind runs riot in his silence.

‘You’re freaking me out.’

He finally looks up at her. She wishes he hadn’t.

7

Two years ago

He tells their friends (his friends), rolling out the anecdote for clients they entertain in high-end restaurants and their own low-lit dining room, 'It was love at first sight.'

Perhaps. Lust, more likely; lovely, luscious lust.

He makes it sound like he did all the running. 'I saw. I conquered. She came.' One of his risqué jokes with 'the chaps' when he thinks she can't hear.

Tonight, they are entertaining potential clients, so he delivers the more romantic version.

'The hair, her smile. That figure!' he beams at her across the table, and she glows beneath his words.

One of their guests asks, 'How did you two meet?'

Debs can't remember the man's name. Flustered, she catches Marc's eye and says, 'You tell it, love.'

He straightens his shoulders and starts the well-worn schtick. 'Deborah Watson met Marc Johnson at a Pilates class. She said to him, "Nice core control." He said to her, "Do you come here often?" And the consequence was, years of wedded bliss, two beautiful children, and a six-pack each!'

She notices how he watches for his guests' reaction. She knows how important it is to him that the evening goes well. How many times has

he gone on about it! This is the first dinner since his promotion; important clients. They see the charming confident host before them. She sees his nerves; all the effort he puts into preparing before they arrive. But she loves it when Marc cooks. A bloke cooking for her!

‘He actually said, “Do you come here often?”’ asks Marissa, who’s married to the silver fox on her right, although Debs isn’t sure if he’s Swiss or Viennese; one of those dodgy bankers, in any case.

Taking her cue from Marc’s glance, Debs presents her social smile and takes a sip of wine. ‘He did. Although he later clarified that he’d meant it as a joke.’

The truth is, Marc doesn’t really do jokes.

‘And what about Marc caught your eye?’ asks Marissa.

‘I was dazzled by his juicy glutes. An arse to die for!’

The woman rewards them with a tinkling laugh. Marc looks pleased.

‘And he bagged his very own personal trainer,’ Marissa trills. ‘No wonder you look in such fine fettle, Marc, darling. Dating your teacher. Naughty boy! Does she give you extra homework?’

Debs falters. The woman flirting with Marc is a slim, slick blonde, no stranger to the gym herself by the looks of her triceps as she reaches across to lightly touch Marc’s chest through his shirt. Debs herself does not currently feel in fine fettle, despite the new keratin straightening treatment. You can’t be a plump fitness instructor without a certain amount of self-flagellation and Debs is achingly self-conscious about the weight she’s still not managed to drop since Pat-Pat was born. She sits upright and pulls in the softening layer now covering her abs, somehow managing to hold on to her smile as she reluctantly puts her glass down. Empty calories and all that.

Anyway, she wasn’t Marc’s teacher when they got together. There was no ‘conflict of interest’. It wasn’t even her gym – she’d never have been able to afford the fees at the Laboratory, Muswell Hill’s flashy spa and health club, full of ladies who lunch, North London thespians and a few suits like Marc. At the time, Debs was participating in as many Pilates classes as she could (those her mates taught and could get her in for free) because her goal was to do a Pilates qualification. Or at least that’s what she hoped. The courses cost a bloody fortune.

In the meantime, she was building up a batch of personal training clients and teaching everything from Zumba to circuit training anywhere they'd have her, to pay the rent on the Kentish Town Cupboard; the minuscule, mis-advertised 'studio living space' she'd taken when she just couldn't bear yet another messy flat share. And she really needed to get into Pilates before her body gave up on her; rolling around on a mat for an hour being an easier option than leaping up and down wiggling her bum for a living. Plus, better rates.

Marc was taking the class because his osteopath had recommended it for his back, even though it was miles away from his home and office. Being tall, being stressed, sitting at a desk all day and sometimes long into the night took their toll. Once a week he made the pilgrimage to the gym at Alexandra Palace, meeting a specialist trainer qualified in back rehab, followed by Restorative Pilates with a highly regarded instructor.

After their class, Debs and Marc got chatting over Green Machine Super Smoothies (extra spirulina for him, added royal jelly for her; she didn't exactly believe in royal jelly, a placebo with a good PR in her opinion, but he was paying).

She advised him on exercises for the Power Plate and showed him how to use it. He invited her for another drink after the next class as a thank you. They spotted two Bafta winners nibbling radicchio alongside them as she necked a cappuccino and he sipped a bulletproof coffee. A couple of hours after that and the deal was sealed with a making-out session in the private car park that lasted a good deal longer than any stretching they'd managed. He was a good kisser. He was very enthusiastic about her 'gorgeous lips'. She felt herself melting, although he didn't lay a hand on anything but her hair. Yet when he invited her back to his, she said no, even before she discovered how far away it was.

They held fire almost another month before the deed was done – the longest, she assumed, either of them had ever waited – because she wanted to make it special. She'd put the brakes on.

She was more confident back then.

She jumps as Marissa's husband drops his fork on his plate.

Debs doesn't mind Marc's version of events. It takes the sting out of

some of the things that have happened since. It's also quite sweet that he casts himself as the great seducer.

It was all her.

Her body reacted the moment he walked into the class. She wouldn't have gone after him if it wasn't for that.

Debs describes herself as 'five foot plus VAT'. Her gym calls her 'the Pint-sized Punisher' on the timetable, on account of her hardcore HIIT sessions. But while she's no lanky supermodel, she does like tall men, and she admired his dedication to bettering his posture. Plus, she's a sucker for dimples and dark wavy hair and she's always loved Marc's expressive hands and his beautiful long fingers.

But – being really honest – was that why she set her sights on him? Or was it when she watched him drive off in his BMW after the class?

She'd made sure he saw her the next week, wearing the Shock Absorber bra that gave her a boost rather than just battening down the hatches, and her brightest Sweaty Betty mesh leggings, positioning herself so he got a good view of her nethers in the roll-downs. She'd serum-ed her curls so they looked 'invitingly wayward' rather than 'woman being electrocuted'. And she'd applied a light fake tan and enough foundation to look 'dewy' as opposed to 'sweating like a pig'.

She engineered it. Praising his core, when in fact it wasn't up to much, his shoulders drawn back to over-compensate for tight hip flexors as far as she could make out. She advised him on his back problem. She flirted, while presenting a professional front.

And didn't he just take the bait.

Then he pulled her right under with him.

Debs is proper soft-focus by the end of the night. She's well chuffed when Marissa suggests she might come along to one of her classes and *perhaps they could go for a coffee together afterwards*.

She grins at Marc. Result! She's relieved. And he can relax a bit now. He's been so wound up since his promotion.

But when Marc air-kisses Marissa goodbye in the hall, banker-wanker puts his hand on Debs' bum. Not just a pat but a full-on grope. She tries to

laugh it off and push him away, but he grips harder, digging in his fingers.

Shocked sober again, with some wriggling and standing on his foot in a way that might be accidental, she manages to escape. She doesn't want to spoil things, so her face betrays nothing until she closes the door behind the guests, following Marc into the kitchen, spluttering her outrage.

'Oh, that's just Klaus,' says Marc, scraping the small portion of food he always leaves on his plate into the recycling bin. 'We need to keep him onside, darling. He's integral to the deal. That's the new role.'

'Really!'

'He was a little tipsy. I'm sure he didn't mean it.'

'Fucking *really*?'

Marc won't look at her. He switches on the kettle. 'You know how long it's taken to get this promotion, Deborah. Leave it, please. Mint tea?' His voice is cold.

She's dismissed. He doesn't even look up to see how not okay she is. He continues loading the dishwasher.

This is the man who said he'd protect her.

She wants to provoke a reaction. 'At least I stamped on the bastard's foot!'

He swings round.

'What?'

She has no idea what she's unleashed but she notices the energy change in the room. A plummet in pressure. A vacuum. An absence before a tsunami.

That was two years ago – the start of the slippery slope downhill in a bloody bobsleigh – and she still hasn't had the dent in the side of the washing machine fixed.