

MAKE
ME
CLEAN

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Call Me Mummy

Nasty Little Cuts

MAKE ME CLEAN

TINA BAKER



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For my dad, window cleaner Pete Baker.
And all the cleaners and carers.

1

Maria takes the cloth from the bucket and wrings it, knuckles white, water red. The hot tap scalds her skin as she rinses and wrings, and rinses and wrings again, attempting to steady herself with the repetition. Her hands are strong, stronger than they have ever been, calluses along the palms. When Maria first started cleaning, she wore rubber gloves, as if she were a princess – a thought that makes her want to both laugh and cry.

On her hands and knees, frantically scrubbing, panting with the effort. The tiles are cold but sweat trickles down her neck. She reaches up to wipe it away and is startled by the absence – the buzzcut always a shock.

She hears Elsie cry out in her old office where she sleeps now, too frail to manage the stairs any longer, and hurries through from the kitchen to calm her, perhaps to beg her forgiveness, but the old woman's eyes are closed. She's

curled into herself like a kitten, whimpering under the veil of sleep, creviced lips moving, her scrawny hands clawing at her pillow. Maria strokes the sparse silver hair and kisses Elsie's temple, as she might do to soothe a child, if she had such a thing.

She picks up the empty glass from the floor where Elsie threw it and checks the carpet for bloodstains. She has already cleaned it, furious, frenzied, but she will need to repeat the process after she has dealt with the worse thing. Back in the kitchen, flinching at the sight that greets her there, she runs the tap cold to refill the glass. She places the water next to the old woman in case she wakes in the night, although, thank God, she seems to have settled again, which is something of a miracle in the circumstances.

She ignores the frantic scratching at the door, the desolate pleas for freedom.

Three deep breaths and she returns to finish cleaning the kitchen floor, pouring away another bowlful of filthy water, wiping down the sink, and stuffing the cloth in with the ruined towels. She will need to bleach the surfaces again later, scour the corners with a toothbrush.

She swills round the dregs of sherry in the chipped *God Save The Queen* mug, the only alcohol she could find, and downs it. Then she rolls back her shoulders and faces the old man. She lifts him from his chair, light as a bird, scoops him up into a tender embrace, holding him close to her heart as she elbows open the back door, careful with the step. Then she carries him out to the garden, into the chill of the night air, laying him down on the wet

grass next to the ruined flowerbed alongside the gaping hole in the black earth where she will bury his bloodied, battered body.

2

That morning had been a normal day – a different life . . .

Her first regular job of the week is number 43. It is never a flying start.

‘Here, HERE, yes?’ The woman points, reaching up to mime wiping the top of the doorframe. She beckons Maria through to the dining room and points to the skirting board, dips like she’s receiving a damehood, and runs her finger along one of the grooves before holding it aloft accusingly.

‘See? Here, too.’ She thrusts the can of Mr Sheen in Maria’s face. ‘All around.’ She sweeps her arm in a circle, signifying the entirety of the house. ‘And I want you gone by nine thirty today, yes?’

Maria brings some basic cleaning materials, but they are not deemed good enough for number 43.

The woman turns on her heel, but cranes back to say louder, ‘No later than NINE THIRTY!’ as if Maria is deaf.

Her first client of the day and the first time she bites back a comment.

While not deaf, Maria has affected dumbness in most of the homes she cleans – ‘creeping round like a bleeding mouse’, as Elsie put it. Easier that way. Maria gives a thumbs-up and flashes what she hopes is a cheery acquiescence, but when Nine-Thirty Woman rushes away to make a *very important phone call* (in this house every phone call is *very important*), Maria lets her face fall – resting bitch face, she’s been told.

After another half-hour stretching high and stooping low, Maria’s back aches. She stands, rubbing her knuckles into her lumbar region before heading upstairs. The throb intensifies with the mopping. Her ankle’s also playing up, as it often does when the weather’s cold. It’s February, a gnawing damp early in the mornings, a slicing wind in the afternoons. Where’s global warming when you need it?

She’s on her knees trying to remove splatters of dried-on shit from the rim of the toilet bowl when the woman opens the bathroom door and startles to see her.

‘God, aren’t you done in here yet?’ she exclaims and tuts, shamed into scuttling away to the downstairs loo. The people who live in these lovely homes do not like to be reminded of their own filth.

They must notice this dirt. How hard would it be to clean it up as soon as it happens, rather than letting it dry on hard? Maria realises she’s muttering to herself.

The woman exacts her revenge when Maria is about to leave, blocking her way out of the front door.

‘Next week you can make up this half-hour,’ she

announces. 'I want a deep clean of the en-suite tiles. I can see mould starting on the grouting by the shower head.' This is said as if Maria herself might have summoned the spores to grow.

'And you really must manage your time better. I need you to do some ironing next week.'

Perhaps I could shove a broom up my bum and do the floor at the same time? Although she doesn't say this, Maria's face must do something of its own accord because her employer sighs loudly and adds, 'You know, I don't appreciate having to watch you scowl. Thousands of people like you would be glad of a job like this.'

Maria wonders who *people like her* are supposed to be. Swallowing a retort is harder work than the mopping.

It can take her forty-five minutes to travel between the first two jobs, due to the unpredictability of the bus. The number 91 usually arrives in pairs, with an average wait of around a fortnight in-between. She might be better walking – it would probably be quicker – but it's a heavy day, it's just started to drizzle, and any opportunity to take the load off is welcome. She gets on at Russell Square and eats her late breakfast, a cheese and pickle sandwich, as she sits on the top deck. If she was a different sort of person, this might qualify as brunch. She washes it down with a swig of bottled water that came with the meal deal – special offer, half price – and pops in a chewing gum. God knows what she'd do if she needed a dentist.

She does the sums in her head – how much has she got

left from last week's wages for something to eat this evening? With the extra jobs she's doing, will she manage to get to the food bank tomorrow before everything's gone? Will the biscuits and tea her next client occasionally provides be enough to stop her belly rumbling? Will she go to bed hungry again?

There's not a day goes by when Maria isn't doing these calculations, worrying about pennies pretty much every waking hour. It is both terrifying and boring as fuck.

She alights at Carnegie Street and walks through to Cloudesley Square – a home here in Islington's leafy oasis could buy an entire street where she grew up.

She hears a familiar *thud thud thud* as she approaches the door to the house. When Maria gets the keys out of the pocket of her fleece body warmer, the sound gets more frenetic, and as soon as she opens the door, Minty's soft wet muzzle is pushing against her hand, the rest of the dog wiggling a delirious greeting accompanied by joyful yelps. Sometimes the animal does a wee of delight when she arrives, but Maria doesn't mind cleaning that up because nothing on God's earth has ever been so pleased to see her.

Minty makes Maria smile – a real smile, not the one offered to new clients to signal that she will be a benign presence in their homes, the forced professional smile reassuring, *you can trust me with your property and possessions, with your animals and children*. Those smiles are wearing.

She walks through to the kitchen and opens the back door so Minty can run wild. The dog does a single manic lap of the garden, squats briefly, then thunders back in to lean the whole of her weight against Maria's thigh.

This is true love, pure love, total joy. She feels sorry for the animal, so often left alone all day.

‘Oh, please don’t call her that!’ gasped the owner, Mrs Santos, when she first referred to the animal as ‘a good bitch’. It was intended as praise.

‘I meant she’s a good bitch to breed with?’ explained Maria, attempting to make conversation.

But no, Minty is to be referred to as a ‘girl dog’ and she will never have puppies.

The real bitch in this house is the soon-to-be-teenage daughter who eyes Maria suspiciously when there’s no school, telling her mother loudly, to make sure she’s overheard, that ‘the cleaner hasn’t done under the bed’, although her room is so messy it’s a wonder she can find any place to sleep. The girl knows Maria’s name, but never uses it.

There’s also a boy in the house. Maria finds it difficult to look at him – he has dimples like Joby, which dredges up complicated emotions from her past.

She has never encountered the man of the house, although there are male clothes and shoes around the bedroom, aftershave in the bathroom. Her line of work – licence to snoop.

The dog adores the two children, a feeling not obviously reciprocated. Minty seems at her happiest when they’re at home in the school holidays, lying as close to them as she’s allowed, yet she always finds time to fuss Maria just the same, trotting over as if to say, *You’re not my pack, but you are kind to me, therefore I love you.*

Maria is no one’s family any more. Elsie is the nearest thing she’s got.

She would love a dog. One day, she promises herself, she'll live in a flat that doesn't ban animals, perhaps somewhere she doesn't need earplugs and chains on her door; a place that more resembles a home.

Small ambitions.

Unusually, today Mrs Santos is at home because she has, 'an appointment at the hairdresser later this morning and it's really not worth travelling all the way into work and back again for only two hours at my desk, you know'. They sometimes tell her details like this, these people who pay for her to tidy up after them. Maria's presence makes women uncomfortable, as if she might be judging them within the sanctuary of their own homes. Well, she is but . . .

Men don't suffer the same guilt. They can easily ignore her cleaning while they sit at their computers or play on their Xboxes. She has to ask some of them to move their legs out of the way as she mops, or she might have to dust around them. Some covertly observe her as she works, checking her, or her finishes, and Maria does not like to be watched.

She is busy Hoovering beneath the sideboard when Mrs Santos appears, making her jump.

'Hello! *Hello?*' She's beckoned. Maria switches off the vacuum and hurries after her employer to the kitchen.

'Can you give me a hand with this?'

The woman is struggling with the top of a mayonnaise jar. Maria takes it from her and twists off the lid in one swift movement.

'You're a godsend,' smiles Mrs Santos.

She is one of the nicer employers. She paid Maria cash

in hand when the family went to Dorset for two weeks last year. Maria was tasked with watering the plants in both the house and the garden, as well as giving the interiors of the cupboards a ‘spring clean’, even though it was the middle of August.

‘Just to keep an eye on the place, really,’ trilled Mrs Santos. ‘Of course, there won’t be very much to do with us away, but I’ll still pay you the same amount.’ Her expression was one befitting Mother Teresa.

Finally, thankfully, her employer leaves for the hair appointment and Maria gets on with it.

As she tackles the hob, she’s so tired she tunes out of what she’s doing and finds herself back cleaning the caravan – but that’s a dangerous place to be. She shakes her head to clear the images and refocuses on the stainless steel beneath her fingers. But that transports her to the clinical surfaces from her times in hospital, so she bends to stroke the dog again, to ground herself, to feel something benign. She cannot allow herself to slip into any thoughts involving Joby, or the aftermath.

When Maria finishes, she gives Minty a handful of dog treats as she leaves. She can’t bear to hear the dog’s piteous whines as she abandons her.

There are three more Monday jobs to go, including a new flat to clean, and by the time she finishes up at Elsie’s and gets back to the poky bedsit in the arse end of Wood Green that in no way resembles a home, Maria will be shattered. She calibrates her tiredness, looks forwards to a certain degree

of exhaustion. If she's lucky, she might crash out, sleep a few hours before she's sliced awake once more by dark dreams.

Maria never willingly takes time off. Since Spain, she's never had a holiday. Since Spain has she ever really relaxed?

The new job is a three-bedroom round the back of the big Sainsbury's near Hornsey overground. She finds it stressful meeting new clients, although often this preliminary vetting is the only time Maria will ever see the homeowner.

The door is opened by an angular middle-aged man wearing a grubby tracksuit and Crocs.

'What pronouns would you like me to use?' he enquires.

'Sorry?'

'How should I refer to you? What should I call you – he-she-they, et cetera?'

'*Et cetera?*'

'I don't want to cause offence.'

'I'm sorry. I don't understand?'

'He or she? Chap or *chap-ess*? You know, shepherd, shepherdess, actor, actress, although, I suppose they're all *ac-tors* these days . . .'

Maria reacts with a blank stare.

The man can't hold her gaze and flusters, 'So . . . where are you from?'

'Haringey.'

'And,' he sighs heavily, apparently exhausted by small talk, 'before that?'

'Sheffield.'

Maria never says where she's really from. One of her

irrational fears is that, if she talks about her real home or says Joby's name out loud, he, or his family, might suddenly materialise in a puff of smoke. She's superstitious like that. She's constantly looking over her shoulder, even here in London, tortured by a foreboding that one of Joby's relatives will somehow find her and exact a terrible revenge.

This new client seems irritated by her presence already. He walks briskly, guiding her through to the kitchenette where not a single surface is clear of debris.

'My wife usually deals with all this ...' (*Burglary? Explosion?* considers Maria.) 'But she's away.'

Along with the pile of chaotic dirty dishes there are two pans on the cooker – one featuring burned beans, by the look of it – which she'll probably need to chisel off, and another with a growth that might be a penicillin experiment.

'Have you been cleaning long?' he asks, as if this is a cocktail party.

'Long enough,' she replies. *Far too long* is the truth.

She guesses some of his other unasked questions. Has the agency sent someone who'll turn up on time, work hard and keep their mouth shut, or someone who could hack into the computer and steal the contents of the bank accounts?

She lets the homeowner make of her what he will. She will slide from his mind soon enough and he'll most likely make sure to be out this time next week.

'Can you just crack on in here, please?'

'Of course.'

He turns his back.

'Excuse me? Where's the stuff for the dishwasher?'

The man harrumphs around the kitchen, scrabbles under

the sink until he finds a bottle of Fairy Liquid, waving it aloft triumphantly before plonking it on the table. 'Just holler if there's anything else you need,' he calls as he retreats.

She's about to point out the mistake with the washing-up liquid, but by the tone of his voice guesses that she is never to disturb him again.

Upstairs, a single pubic hair greets her in the bath.

So many cleaning jobs.

Maria didn't have the energy to hate this life exactly; all the same, she deeply resented it. It was gruelling, soul-sapping.

But what she wouldn't give to have that boring old life back again right now.

Because her *new improved* skills surpass everyday scouring and tidying and taking out the rubbish. Her special *deep* cleans now run to the removal of violent husbands and bodies rather than basic waste disposal.

Perhaps she should bill Elsie for the overtime.

3

Elsie's garden is a meagre piece of land, shaded by a tall lime tree on one side and an overgrown tangle of hazel on the other. Narrow, although Elsie brags that for London it's a fair old size.

Maria has been encouraged to plant herbs in one corner, and a smattering of jolly bulbs – daffodils, frayed tulips and grape hyacinths. 'The forget-me-knots seed themselves,' crowed Elsie, grinning, like this was a fabulous gift from Mother Nature herself.

The vegetable patch, Elsie's pride and joy, has yielded enough tomatoes for perhaps two meals in as many years.

Four years Maria's worked here – no, five. Time gets away from her.

There's been too much else to deal with for Maria to garden much recently, but now she digs. No moon, but she can see well enough with the kitchen light and the glow

from the streetlights to the side of the fence. She needs to make the grave deeper. Hard to estimate this sort of thing.

Hours of digging, muscles straining. Deep, deeper, deepest. There are foxes here.

Her eyes keep flicking up to the neighbours' window to her left. Students. For once it is quiet next door. Hopefully they've partied themselves out over the weekend, or they might be away at an all-night party now, or something. She's not entirely sure how many lads officially live there – there always seem to be new faces. It would only take one to look out . . .

The widow in the house to her right goes to bed early. *Let her sleep deeply*, prays Maria.

What would she say if anyone saw her? 'Hi! Me? Night gardening. Yes, it's a thing! This dark shape you can't quite make out? Big bag of fertiliser. Ha ha. Huge.'

She's probably sweating as much from anxiety as from the work, and her hands are filthied from the digging along with the seepages from the old man. The night air is dank, and her ankle feels the cold deep within the bone – old injuries reminding her of their origin story.

Perhaps a metre more to be on the safe side and then she will roll the body into the pit, shovelling soil on top of his battered face and skull, stuffing earth into his nasty mouth.

Her body is shaking with fatigue, but she urges herself on. She knows she must keep going. As soon as she stops, she might collapse.

An owl hoots nearby, the cry soft as a caress.

And instantly she's back there, back with Joby—

Nights of campfires sparking high into a blue-black sky and dancing under endless stars and Joby burrowing into her hair, telling her how much he loved her, and the fucking, so much fucking at the start, and laughter and then screams, and the yearning cry of a solitary owl on a night with a moon so bright she saw her own shadow as she dug another grave—

She drives the spade hard into the ground to rid herself of the memories – that’s a place she dare not revisit.

The owl calls again.

She was surprised to hear owls in the city when she first came to London. Elsie said they lived in the high trees, feeding on rats who grew plump on litter discarded by the kebab shops along Green Lanes.

‘But they’re not the same as country owls, this lot,’ explained Elsie with her serious face on. ‘Their calls are different. If you listen carefully, they hoot, “T’wit t’whoo-you-lookin-at!”’ She cackled her lovely low laugh.

Maria stretches up, squeezing her shoulders to loosen them, and returns to the kitchen.

She had shut Elsie’s cats in the living room to keep them out of the way and they’re now frantically scratching at the door, desperate to investigate, sensing blood. They can’t escape their basic natures – but who can?

She wraps two dishcloths around her palms so she can continue digging and heads back out into the cold night air.

Maria has often been surprised by her body’s resilience.

It keeps going, some deep spark pushing her onwards, forwards: when she stumbled down the mountain, down and down, despite feeling she could not take one single step more; when she summoned all her strength to fight back against the man looming above her with an axe . . . This basic life force does not let her lie down and give up; it does not let her rest. But in her opinion, this doesn't make her a survivor, and it doesn't make her brave – it just makes her a glutton for punishment.

She sets to digging again, the soil heavy. A stone clashes against the metal of the spade, the shock jolting up the handle and through her spine. It's bigger than it first appears, and she struggles to manoeuvre the tip of the spade underneath, trying to lever it away from the cold earth clinging to it in protest. Her arms rebel as she attempts to prise it out, and she loses her hold on the spade, slips, falls back, bruising her tailbone on the hard ground at the bottom of the hole.

She could lie here a moment, catch her breath, but the wetness of the earth is soaking through her trousers, icy fingers on her skin.

Silently she tells herself to get a grip, reminds herself why she's doing this, picks up the spade and starts again, heaving leaden dirt into a pile next to the crater.

Eventually she climbs out of the pit and stands, swaying a moment, then she braces and pushes the old man hard with the sole of her foot to roll him over. Her ankle protests at the kick but there's a satisfying 'whoomph' as he hits the bottom of the grave.

She throws his walking stick in after him and the bedroom

rug because she'll never get the blood out of that.

Another sound makes her pause. A cry. She wheels round but sees nothing at the neighbours' windows. It might be the fox family she's seen over by the garages round the back of the gardens. They loll on top of the flat roofs on sunny days, like an urban lion pride.

In some ways it's harder filling in the hole than it was digging it, although gravity is now on her side. She was terrified that someone would see the old man lying on the grass, although it's hardly less suspicious filling in a giant body-shaped trench in the middle of the night than it is digging one. She hurries, desperate to be done with it.

Finally, she flattens down the loose earth by walking up and down, then stamping on top of it. The idea of dancing on his grave does not horrify her. She shovels the last of the dirt over the top, kneeling to replant the shrubs, hastily shoving them in and squashing down the moist soil around the roots. The sweat cooling on her back makes her shiver. She pushes some unearthed stones between the plants, making a half-arsed rockery around the six sad rose bushes – more than the old bastard deserves.

She says no words over the small mound. The owl alone sends a plaintive blessing.

Maria's mind shoots ahead, worrying. How will Elsie be in the morning? How might she react when she wakes? What on earth can Maria say to her? How can she soothe her, given what's happened? The old girl does not like change of any kind. Dementia makes her reactions unpredictable at the best of times, let alone after a night of screams and blows, when her husband has been

clubbed over the head with his own walking stick, dying in a puddle of blood on the bedside rug right in front of her.

4

She stands under Elsie's shower letting the water wash away dirt and worse, the warmth easing the shrieks along her shoulders, her arms now as floppy as cooked spaghetti. Scrubbing the nailbrush into the ingrained mud and blood beneath her nails, she tries to rid herself of the guilt and shame and anger of the night. And she allows herself to sniffle a little, for all she's lost and all she still might lose – for Elsie and Joby, for her mother and father, for her old life. Not one of those tears is for what now lies beneath the heavy soil in the back garden.

Elsie doesn't have a spare dressing gown, so Maria wraps a bath towel around her chest, switches on the heating, takes the load out of the washing machine and pushes in her own fouled clothes. She drapes the clean towels across the clotheshorse next to the radiator and puts on the kettle, trying to think what might happen next.

Her hands tremble like an alkie's.

The scratching at the door becomes more demented and is now accompanied by a chorus of pathetic yowls. When she lets the cats out of the living room they charge at her, pushing at her legs with demanding whiskers, like a shoal of furry sharks.

'Come on then, you lot.' She gets the large Tupperware container out of the bottom cupboard and starts scooping the crunchy cat food into the four dishes.

When Maria first started work at Elsie's she'd asked if they each had their own dish. Elsie snorted. 'You've never had cats, have you.' It wasn't a question.

Before the feeding frenzy gets underway, Maria strokes each animal and puts a bowl in front of it. Boris always gets his first. 'He's a right greedy bastard,' says Elsie fondly. The girls get theirs next – Spotty and Sweetie – sisters, both built like tanks, followed by the gentle ginger, Harry, who never knows what day it is.

Sweetie is Maria's favourite. She greets her gently, patting Maria's hand with the pads of her paw, then rolling on to her back, exposing her soft speckled belly. She suspects Sweetie is also Elsie's favourite, although she swears she loves them 'all the same, with all my heart'.

Elsie never had kids.

Maria likes to watch the old woman with her animals. The tender moments where she sits and strokes them are like a meditation.

Maria has always wanted a pet, but she's never had the chance, not since she was a kid. Dog or cat, she wouldn't mind. With Elsie's decline over the last twelve months, Maria worries what might happen to her cats.

By the time Elsie stirs, the sky has lightened but Maria's heart has not. She's heaved the washing machine away from the wall and is frantically scouring underneath it. Even though she can't see any bloodstains, she's afraid molecules of the old man might have found their way into the nooks and crannies, clinging to the handfuls of cat fur which collect under all the appliances and furniture in the house like tumbleweed.

When she hears the flush of the downstairs toilet, she pours Elsie her mug of builders' tea: strong, with two heaped spoonfuls of sugar. Maria's been trying to get Elsie to cut down on sweet things – it's not that she's overweight, but it can't be good for her. This morning, however, is not the time to sweat the small stuff.

By the sound of Elsie's voice humming her favourite songs – fragments of 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' and 'Hit Me with Your Rhythm Stick' (she has an eclectic playlist, has Elsie) – the horrors of last night have obviously not yet surfaced.

Maria calls through, her voice strained: 'Do you need a hand?'

'No, darlin',' Elsie shouts back. 'All fine and dandy this end.'

A good day, then. Maria lets out a breath. The one positive thing about the state of Elsie's brain is the likelihood of her having forgotten what happened last night.

Elsie comes through to the kitchen in her bunny-ears dressing gown and plonks down at the table with a soft groan. Maria kisses the top of her head and the cats swarm

around the old woman's legs as she fusses them. She chomps down on a mouthful of the toast and Marmite Maria's laid out for her and starts in the middle of a sentence, talking with her mouth full.

'We met on a course in Oxford, you know. Ruskin College. Young trade unionists, and all that malarkey.'

'Who?' asks Maria, who is used to joining in conversations halfway through. She's also used to Elsie trailing off without warning, giant leaps between topics, or the more disturbing silences.

'Richard. Richard somebody . . . He smoked those little cigars. Stunk of them. Ooh, I loved the smell of them.' There's a long pause. 'Should've married him.' She glugs her tea. 'Hamlet!'

Unlikely, thinks Maria. 'What happened?' she asks.

Elsie seems to properly register Maria for the first time and smiles up at her. 'Life, darlin'. Life.' She sighs and her face crumples. Then suddenly, she adds, 'Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet!' She beams up at Maria. 'Are you having any . . . any . . .?'

Maria watches Elsie's fingers, which are in constant motion, carving emotions and expressions out of the air in place of the words and thought fragments she's now missing. They're covered in rings like Joby's mother's hands were, although Elsie's rings are tiny in comparison and the stones more likely to be chips of glass.

'Bought them all myself,' Elsie once told her. 'Apart from that one,' she nodded, indicating the thin band of her wedding ring. Elsie's husband, Nick, hadn't even bought her an engagement ring – a portent of what was to come.

Maria has been worried about what they'd do if they needed to get the rings off, swollen as Elsie's knuckles are.

'Call the fire brigade to cut 'em off,' suggested Elsie. 'And get 'em to do one of those calendars with their tops off while they're here!'

Elsie nods for Maria to sit with her. 'Have a brew,' she encourages. Then, clocking Maria is only wearing a bath towel, she asks, 'What have you come as?'

Elsie has always insisted on tea breaks. Maria felt flustered when she first started cleaning for Elsie, embarrassed to take the Mr Kipling Cherry Bakewell being thrust towards her. By the time she met Elsie, she'd already spent five years cleaning in London, and she was worn down with it.

'Used to be a union rep, dint I?' Elsie smiled, flashing teeth and gaps. 'Tea and a nice bit of cake and a fag, back in the days when it was okay to smoke and okay to have a bit of meat on your bones. The good old days before calories.' She laughed. 'Your breaks are obligatory, darlin'. You can't let the bosses take the piss. Work through one break as a favour and they come to expect it. Give 'em an inch and the next minute they'll have you bent over a table shoving it up your Blackwall Tunnel.'

Elsie had loved her job and only retired at seventy. 'Worked all my life at that clothes factory. Only gave it up so the young 'uns could have a go,' she explained with pride in her voice. 'I've bought all my own things with my own money. Independent woman, me. That Beyoncé and me? Sisters, we are!'

‘You’re white and you haven’t got a bum,’ teased Maria.
‘How can you be Beyoncé’s sister?’
‘I’m adopted,’ grinned Elsie.

Maria now watches the old woman eat her breakfast. Elsie smiles at her and gives her a little wave. It makes Maria happy to see Elsie smile, but it’s also worrying that she doesn’t recall last night’s horror show. But what is Maria supposed to do – remind her?

Elsie’s been forgetting more things lately, although she reckons she’s always been absent-minded. ‘Even before my brain turned into that whatchamacallit cheese with all them holes in.’

It comes in waves – the gaps in her memory, the mood swings, the *absence*. Sometimes Elsie will sit stirring her tea like a broken-down robot, swirling the spoon round and round, staring at nothing. She can also lash out, hitting and swearing, slump into sobs, panic, confuse strangers with long dead family members. She can no longer be trusted to go to the local shops alone in case she gets lost.

Occasionally she forgets who Maria is, which cuts deep. Maria can’t bear to lose someone else.

When Elsie’s finished her toast, Maria takes the plate and puts it in the washing-up bowl. Elsie’s always refused a dishwasher. ‘Don’t need one,’ she declared. ‘Don’t want that Greta bleedin’ Iceberg round here duffing me up.’

‘Do you want the radio on?’ asks Maria.

The old woman seems not to have heard. She sits day-dreaming, a million miles away, but her face looks blank

rather than pained, so Maria hopes her thoughts are easy ones. She switches on the radio because Elsie often responds to music.

Then she phones around trying to arrange cover for the next day. No one wants to do her overnight job, so she asks the cleaning agency to rearrange it for Wednesday, if the client's happy. Elsie's various trips to the doctor and other emergencies over the past few months have occasionally led to these last-minute changes of plan, but the other cleaners are usually more than happy to take on her jobs for the extra money. As far as her colleagues are concerned, nothing much has changed.

For Maria and Elsie everything has.

When she returns to the kitchen, Elsie is sitting quietly stroking Sweetie's ears until Spotty tries to join her sister on Elsie's lap and there's a kerfuffle about who gets possession, resulting in both cats jumping down in a huff.

She sits a while longer, then joins Maria at the sink, reaching up to pat her shoulder.

'Where have you put your pills?' asks Maria. She doesn't get a reply.

It's only when she's making Elsie a second mug of tea that Maria finds the pill bottle in the fridge next to the milk.

The news comes on the radio – a story about 'the rise of sourdough'.

'Ooh, I love new bread,' muses Elsie. 'Fresh bread straight from the oven . . . that smell! Shall we have toast for breakfast?' she asks, her voice high like a little girl's.

Perhaps forgetfulness is a blessing.

5

Elsie's nephew Del arrives mid-morning on his way into work.

Elsie looks up from the puzzle book she's tackling. Word searches are good for her brain, according to the Admiral nurse who specialises in 'cases' like Elsie's.

Maria is bleaching the kitchen cupboard doors. Again.

Elsie calls through to the hall, 'All right, Del?'

A fragile peace exists between the two of them. She says to Maria, 'Let's have a brew.'

'How's she been?' Del asks Maria, placing his briefcase on the side. He gives off harried-accountant vibes. Balding; crooked teeth; hardly any lips – not blessed in the looks department is Del.

'She had a bad night,' she replies, which hardly covers it.

Elsie likes her tea brewed in the ancient brown teapot then sloshed into her favourite Sex Pistols mug. 'Love me

a bit of anarchy,' she grinned when Maria first commented on it. 'Love winding Del up. One of the capitalist elite, my darling nephew,' she sniffed.

The delightful Derek has been round much more often since Elsie's needs and mishaps have increased. He does indeed *bang on about money*, which is one of Elsie's main complaints, but he works for Barclays, so he's hardly Elon Musk.

When Maria first made tea for Del, Elsie whispered, 'Give him that decaf bollocks, babe. Me and you'll have the good teabags.' Said decaf was a mistake buy – Elsie had picked them up in a two-for-one deal. The best-before date had long expired.

Maria was taken aback by the way Elsie treated Del, although when he threw his Coke can in the bin rather than the recycling, she clocked at least one of the reasons Elsie didn't like him.

The other, more incendiary, reason is that, as Elsie often complains, 'He's forever on at us to sell up and move to them warden flats down Archway.' Elsie screwed up her face, as if the flats stank. 'Either that or he wants to ship me off to some bloody care home. The shifty little git's just after a slice of the proceeds from selling this gaff. And I will not be told where to end my days, by him or any other bugger, thank you very much. I'm staying put. It's mine, this place. *Mine.*'

Maria wasn't sure where Nick, the estranged husband, featured regarding ownership of the house. He had lived