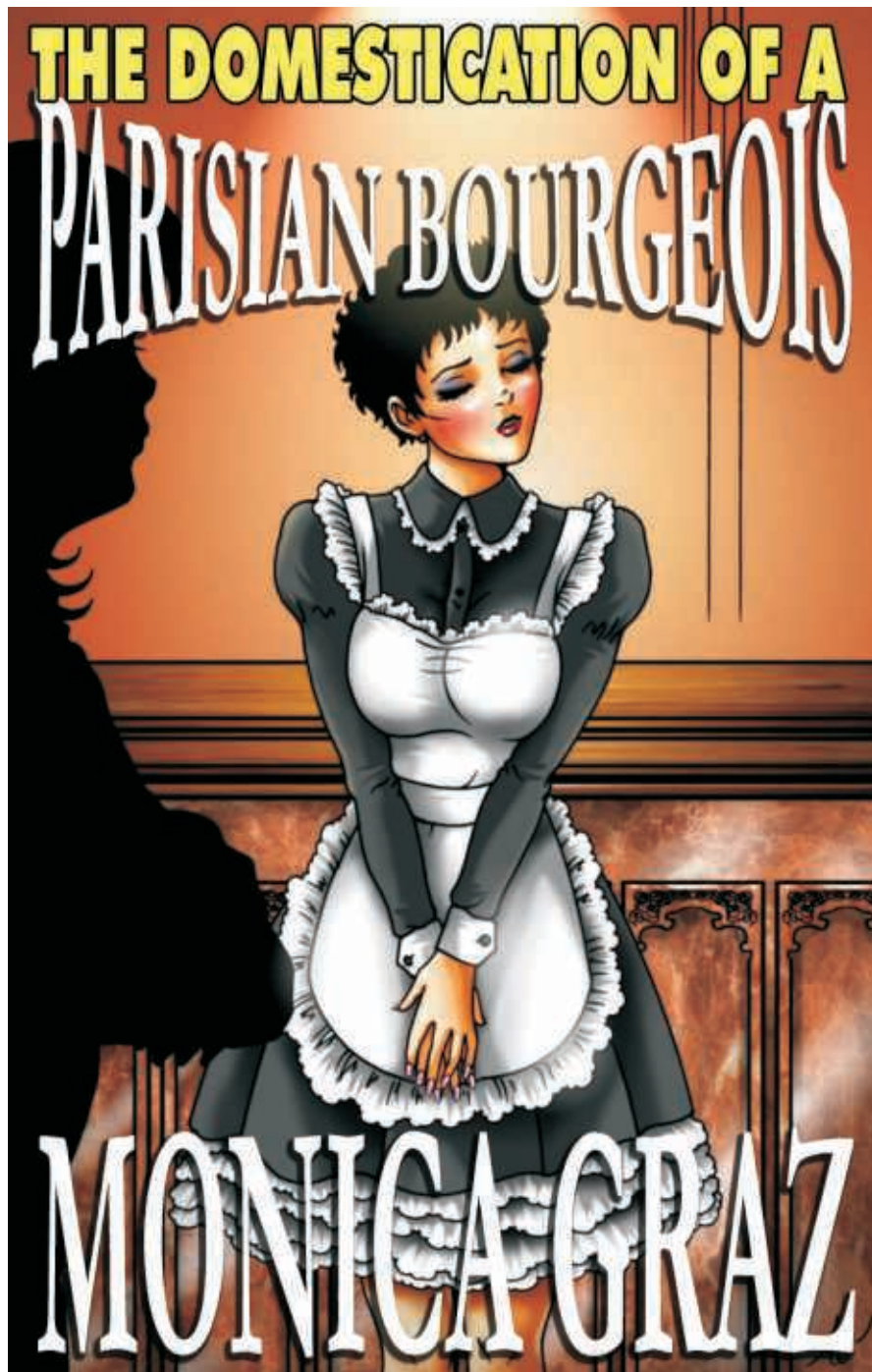




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Author's Note

The story is happening in Paris of the early 1970s and is based on real facts. At the time Portugal was still a very poor country and not a member of the European Union. Lots of poor girls and married women were coming from there to work in France as factory workers, cleaners and maids. Many of those girls were working as live in maids in many Parisian bourgeois houses or apartments. If they were working in apartments they had their own separate rooms at the top of the building, usually in the 6th floor, at what was called 'la chambre de bonne' (maid's room). Of course there was no elevator in those buildings of the late 19th century and the maids were going down from the back service stairs to the kitchen door of the apartment they were working. They were not allowed to use the front entrance of the building even when they were out of uniform and not on duty. For them there was the back or side service entrance to come and go, the same way that the garbage was coming down as well. All those apartment buildings had a live in concierge who had a little place to stay either by the entrance or in the basement. The concierge was usually the 'terror' of all live-in maids because she was checking on them all the time, reporting back to their employers.

So the term Portuguese maid/housekeeper or 'femme de menage Portugaise' was synonymous to a poor backward peasant girl or woman often illiterate, coming from the rural areas of Portugal to work in the sophisticated Paris. The rich bourgeois Parisians had the tendency of course to look down on them.

At the time there were lots of specialised shops in those rich Parisian suburbs, selling 'domestic workwear' for those in live in service. Those shops were called 'boutiques de blouses et tabliers' (overalls and aprons shops).

In today's Paris, as elsewhere in the Western world uniformed live-in maids are a rarity. Portuguese women are rich and elegant and go to Paris for their shopping and the 'blouses et tabliers boutiques' are nearly gone.

THE DOMESTICATION OF A PARISIAN BOURGEOIS

by Monica Graz

CHAPTER 1 Initiation or how I become a substitute female maid!

My wife left me, my beloved Annabelle abandoned me!! I simply can't believe it! It finally happened and it happened just like that. Yesterday she announced to me that she had an affair with a fellow doctor and they were moving out of the country to start new parallel careers in an exclusive private clinic in Milan, Italy! I simply can't believe it, my wife decided to leave her beloved Paris for an Italian city, even if that is Armani's Milan?

Later I understood that this was planned well ahead and it was I in my notorious innocence and naivety that couldn't pick the signs. She packed only her preferred clothes and personal things in a haste and left yesterday evening directly for the airport where they had a late flight to catch. She said that she didn't need anything else from the house, which belonged to me anyway, through family inheritance. But in a goodwill gesture, as she said, she left loads of her old clothes behind and everything that we bought together for the house the five years we stayed together.

We parted as friends without unnecessary scenes. We both were low-key people and we didn't like screams and abuses. She even managed to convince me that she wasn't good enough for me. She wasn't the type of woman I needed etc. Probably she had a point. I really don't know. Of course after she was gone a terrible emptiness overtook me and I started crying bitterly on my own. It took me some time to calm down and only after I took a sleeping tablet was I able to go into a deep dreamless sleep.

I opened my eyes quite late the next day. It was past ten in the morning and I could hear the familiar noise of the vacuum cleaner from the floor below. God I forgot! It was

Violetta our Portuguese cleaning lady. I felt uneasy that I had to explain to her what happened. She was coming to the house 3 times a week and we were quite happy with her. All of sudden the feeling of emptiness came back to me. I was still thinking in terms of US, but I was alone now! Tears started welling in my eyes and I desperately tried to control myself.

Soon I was in the dining room where usually breakfast was served when Violetta was around. She saw me and I must have looked quite a sight because she stopped what she was doing and came towards me, a concerned look on her face. She looked very neat in her light blue overall dress and her matching bib apron and headscarf. My wife was a firm believer that a domestic in the house should look the part, nothing fancy, just a practical maid's uniform.

"Bonjour Monsieur, you look terrible this morning, is everything all right?"

"Non Violetta pas du tous, everything is not all right," I said and tears started coming up again.

"Pauvre Monsieur, please tell everything to Violetta"

And I started and I told her in detail what happened, sobbing softly at the same time.

As I was talking she took me by my hand and we went to the living room. We sat together in the couch and she started holding my hand as I continued my monologue. When I stopped I started crying again. God what was happening to me? Was it that strong sleeping tablet that made me so emotional? She put her hand around my shoulder and pulled me towards her. Soon my head was resting on her shoulder and I closed my red eyes for a moment of rest.

Suddenly I felt her warm lips kissing my cheeks and forehead and then she kissed me on the mouth in an unexpectedly passionate manner. I was completely taken by surprise but I felt at the same time an increased sexual excitement. She then wiped my wet eyes with the edge of her apron, something that excited me even more. She started talking to me in a quiet but firm manner, definitely forgetting her position in the house. She spoke to me as a friend rather than a servant, "With the little I know you are completely secure financially. You own this wonderful property and you have a steady income from your grandfather's trust. You are 37 years old, you don't have to work for a living and you can organise your life anyway you want."

She stopped and looked at me rather sternly I must say, as if she was accusing me for having all those benefits in life.

I looked back and all of a sudden I realised that I needed that woman. I said without hesitation, "Look Violetta. Would you like to stay the week with me to help me get over this terrible crisis I face, even if you think that is not that serious?"

She answered back immediately as if she knew the answer even before I asked. She said, "I'll stay in one condition, we have to establish a different relationship, not the one of employer and employee to start with. I am Violetta for you, but you are Jean Marie for me."

I blushed a bit when she mentioned my double name. Coming from an upper class family I had several names, in fact my full name was Jean Marie Philippe Batiste D'

Armagnac. But for my friends I was simply Jean. Now Violetta was using my second name Marie which is feminine but is common for boys in France as a middle name.

"Of course I accept Violetta," I eagerly said and at the same time I was wondering what she meant with this 'to start with'.

"In that case," she continued "you have to give me access to your wife's wardrobe. You said she left plenty of her clothes behind and I have only my working clothes with me. I think also that I'll be a guest in this house for the rest of the week, so no more housework for me. Do you agree Jean Marie?"

I blushed again, this woman had a way of intimidating me that I hadn't noticed before, and a whole new persona of Violetta was in front of me.

"Of course Violetta, there are plenty of clothes in my wife's cupboards, she is not going to use them anymore, you can choose anything you want and I think you are about the same size. Please let's go upstairs and sort things out."

We reached the master bedroom and to my total surprise she started undoing her apron and overall dress. She saw my look and said casually, "I think I'll have a bath first before I dress in my bourgeois lady's clothes. Would you be a pet and run a bath for me, and please add some of the nice bath oils your wife was using, I want to smell like a bourgeois lady from now on."

I followed her instructions like a robot. I was about to finish filling the tub when I heard her voice from the bedroom, "Jean Marie, could you come here for a moment?"

I went back to the bedroom half expecting to see her naked, but no she was wearing one of our bathrobes. She looked mischievously at me, "I decided to test your good intentions, I thought that when I'll be having my bath you can go down and finish the housework that I left undone. Would you like to do that for me?"

I was about to refuse it, proposing something of the type 'I can wait for you to finish your bath and we can do it together like partners.' But she didn't give me the chance.

Instead she continued, "and don't tell me that you don't know how to do things because I know and your wife confirmed it to me that on the days I wasn't around you were doing quite a few things in the house. After all your wife was the professional bread winner in the family and you were a sort of house husband."

I blushed again and said meekly, "Ok Violetta, I'll do it, tell me what you want me to do."

I thought I saw a triumphant glimpse in her eyes but she kept her cool and said in a 'giving instructions or orders tone of voice', "Just finish the dusting and vacuuming in the living, dining area and then do the kitchen properly. Do the dishes, clean the tops and mop the floor thoroughly. Ok pet?" Now she started calling me pet.

I started to go out of the room but she stopped me again, "Did you forget something Jean Marie?" I turned around looking puzzled and with a big grin she indicated to the pile of clothes on top of the bed. "You forgot your working clothes dear!" And she was pointing to her overall dress, apron and head scarf.

This time I did turn red from embarrassment. "But Violetta I don't have to be dressed like you to do the housework, I can do it in my T-shirt and jeans."

She got red but from pure anger and said to me abruptly, "Listen to me Jean Marie, either you do it my own way or I'll get dressed and leave this instant and you will not see me again!"

She stopped to catch her breath. Boy she was angry now, and continued, "I have been doing that all my life and I am over 40 now, cleaning houses and offices and public toilets and being a hotel maid and doing anything menial you can think off. I am fed up of being a Portuguese maid. Maybe you can get the feeling what it is like not to be a rich bourgeois person and be in the other side of the fence."

She stopped again and looked at me. I looked back at this angry but sincere face and suddenly I felt a strong compassion for that woman. I felt her strength of character through her rage. I felt her willingness to try the forbidden, for her, the fruit of the bourgeois world. Probably she is right; probably I should see how the other side lives and works. I decided to play her game, I wanted this woman to stay with me, I needed her. I simply nodded to her that I agree and I took the pile of clothes and started going out.

She stopped me again, "Oh no Pet, you don't leave this room unless you are properly dressed as the cleaning woman you are going to become. So start removing your clothes and hurry up, we don't have all day."

By now I was defeated; I couldn't cope anymore with the strength of character of this woman. Within seconds I was standing naked in front of her and within a few more minutes I was dressed under her instructions. Black cotton panties and vest, black thick pantyhose, and the overall dress that buttoned in front. Those were her clothes, the clothes she was wearing just before. I could smell her body odour in them, nothing repulsive, just a combination of cheap eau de cologne and her mild sweating.

"And now the 'piece de resistance mon cheri', Violetta said smiling broadly, "come here I will tie your apron." I approached and she adjusted the large matching working apron on top of my dress. She criss-crossed the bib straps behind my back and fastened them to the strings with two small buttons, then she firmly tied the strings in a big bow in the back. She pointed to the door. "Well, this is your obligatory uniform for working in the house Jean Marie. Run along now like a good maid and finish your chores and then report back here, I want to continue our little conversation and plan the rest of the day."

It took me an hour of intense work to finish what I was ordered to do. I was mopping the kitchen floor when I literally smelled the new Violetta's presence in the room. I turned around and she was standing by the door looking at me. God how she changed! She was the epitome of elegance wearing a dark grey silk suit, a light grey blouse, fine stockings and elegant medium heel shoes. My wife's expensive Chanel 5 perfume was filling the air around her. And there I was opposite her the epitome of a servant, sweat running down my forehead, my apron front splashed with water, resting my rubber gloved hands in the mop stick.

I looked admiringly at her. "You look fantastic Violetta, I can't believe the change, you are even more elegant than Annabelle my bourgeois wife."

She answered back casually, "That proves my theory Jean Marie that finally the garments make the priest and not the other way round. And look at you, after an hour's housework you look all the way the part of a Portuguese 'femme de menage'. We have to work with your hair a bit and do some other adjustments to enhance your femininity."

I looked at her aghast, but a peculiar excitement ran through my body like an electric current. I managed to answer in a rather meek tone of voice, "But what are you talking about, what femininity? I am not a woman. I simply agreed to help with the housework and I dressed like this to please you."

She looked intensely at me, "We might as well sort things out here and now! Jean Marie, I have a proposition to make to you. Would you consider to change positions with me and become a 'femme de menage', a maid, a cleaning woman for a year and I will be 'la femme bourgeoise', a woman of the high society. You will find out where I come from and I will be able to fulfil my dream and live the life of an upper class lady even for a limited period of time. Imagine, it can be like a sabbatical year for you, you will be able to experience things totally outside of your own milieu, even outside your own sex. For me it is a lifetime ambition to know the world of luxury and wealth, a world where you come from but I know it from the servant's side. For you it is going to be a complete reversal of roles and positions in life."

She stopped and looked at me, I could tell she was completely taken by her own words, she was already so near to fulfil her dream, she was already dressed the part and she was enjoying it immensely. But what about me, I was confused as I was trying to think hard for an answer. I knew already that it was either her terms or good-bye Violetta for good.

What did I really have to lose? My life was in shambles at the moment with the departure of my wife. I was not working and I was financially independent. I had no immediate family and very few friends, as a matter of fact most of those so-called friends were my wife's friends and I knew very well that they were going to disappear from my life. And that was going to be an experience, probably a hard one but an experience anyhow. And why did I have this inner excitement that was transmitting sexual signals to my body? Did I really get a sexual pleasure out of it?

I must have blushed all over because Violetta looked at me inquiringly and asked, "What is it Pet? Do you consider my proposal? You realise of course that by this stage there is no going back. It is either my proposal or I am out of here and your life."

I looked at her, took a deep breath and said, "Oui Violetta, J'accepte votre proposition!" and I continued more excited now after I said the ok, "But how is it going to work and we have to talk about lots of practical matters like"

She stopped me with her hand, "Now let's make your acceptance more formal and from now on I am Madame Violetta, or simply Madame for you and your are 'ma femme de menage' Jeanne Marie or simply Maria, so please repeat, "Oui, Madame, J'accepte de devenir votre femme de menage pendant un an!"

Blushing all over again and excited at the same time I repeated, "Yea Madame, I accept to become your cleaning woman for a year!"

"Very well Maria, I am your employer from now on!!" she said triumphantly and continued; "Now you asked before about practical matters, you are right we have to sort them out. First of all you will put our agreement in writing and send it to your solicitor. Not everything of course, just write simply that due to a prolonged absence abroad you are authorising me, Violetta Perreira dos Santos to handle all your financial affairs, pay all the bills and run the household paying the domestic staff (that is you!) etc., etc. Then you send a note to all people that you think they might contact you, telling them that you are going abroad for an indefinite amount of time to recover from the shock of losing your wife to another man. Also you will apply to your bank to issue credit cards in my name. Of course I'll take your credit cards, and your car keys, you will be driving a private car only in a driver's capacity, otherwise public transport for you. You will receive all the money that I earn from my various domestic and cleaning jobs which you are going to undertake from now on." She stopped seeing me getting more and more uneasy.

"But Viol... I mean Madame how am I going to appear in public as a woman, I am not confident enough and...."

"Leave that to me Maria, I'll organise everything for you. I have lots of contacts and trusted friends among the Portuguese community of maids and cleaners, soon you will be part of their world." She looked at me again and became more formal, "Now finish what you are doing here and run upstairs to clean the bathroom I just used and tidy up the bedroom. I have a few phone calls to make, and then we'll talk again."

I was blushing again when I said a more formal 'Oui Madame', my first maid's response to a command by my new employer.

She turned and walked back to the living room her heels clicking elegantly. She was 'la patronne' now.

CHAPTER 2

Meeting Conchita the concierge

She was talking to me fast as I was standing in front of her dressed now in her old street clothes! I simply replaced my overall dress with her prisunic cheap outdoor dress. I kept the underwear and black pantyhose and added a pair of flat moccasins that belonged to my wife. It was remarkable that being a small person myself, barely 1.70m in height and 70 kilos in weight I could easily fit in Violetta's clothes, something that pleased her immensely because obviously I was about to inherit her whole trousseau! The shoes were a small problem, she was a size smaller than me, but luck again, my wife's shoes were an exact fit and she certainly left several pairs behind.

As I said, she was addressing me, "Now Maria, I talked to my friend Conchita da Silva, she is the concierge in one of those posh buildings in Passy (that was one of the most expensive inner Parisian quarters in the prestigious 16th arrondissement). She is also a hairdresser occasionally; she is going to fix your hair in a more appropriate manner for your current station in life, as a Portuguese cleaning woman and maid. I asked her to perm your hair and dye it a dark brown. Your current long blond and straight hair is too elegant for what you are going to become." She loved putting me down emphasising my new position in life. Funnily enough, I was getting an excitement out of it as well.

She continued talking to me, "instead of paying her she will ask you to clean the public spaces of the building, entrance and stairs up to the 5th floor. She will lend you some working clothes. She has a collection of flower patterned nylon smocks that I am sure you will love. Don't worry, she will tell you exactly what to do. Now you can put on my old coat. It is hanging in the broom cupboard by the entrance. Inside the pocket you will find an old scarf, just tie it around your hair and then we are ready to go."

I got panicked dressed like this and going out from the front door in the middle of the day. It was barely past 1.00 o'clock in the afternoon. It just dawned to me as I was looking at my (ex Violetta's) small cheap wrist watch that it was only three hours ago that I was still my old self a young Parisian bourgeois. And look at me now, a middle age low class woman leaving her employer's house.

Violetta interrupted my thoughts as she approached me and adjusted the scarf in my head, "You must learn to wear the scarf the Portuguese way. That will be a standard item when you are outdoors and out of your working clothes. Most women of your status are wearing it, so you better get used to it. And something else, it hides up to a point your less feminine features though I am not worried about them. You can improve a lot there. Wait till Conchita finishes with you. Come on let's go. I'll drive you, this time I'll spare you the embarrassment of public transport, but this is only for your first day. 'Allez ouste!' "

We arrived in front of the elegant 19th century residential building in Avenue Victor Hugo. She was an excellent driver and she knew how to drive around the maize of Parisian streets quite well. How on earth a 'femme de menage' was so competent in driving? Another mystery about Violetta. What was her real past, I wondered? She interrupted my thoughts, "Allez, out of the car, I leave you here, just walk to the side door where 'concierger' is written and ring the bell, Conchita will let you in. Run along now, I'll come and collect you in about 3 hours. I'll probably telephone before and see how you are doing. Good luck Maria!"

She practically pushed me out of the car, my ex car, and sped away. I practically run to the door and rang the bell, looking sideways to see if someone was coming. The door opened and a formidable lady appeared in front of me. She looked at me from head to toes and said casually in heavily accented French, "You must be this bourgeois, Violetta mentioned, who wants to become a cleaning woman. What a weird decision?"

I looked at her aghast and surprised. I said hastily, "Can I come in please, I feel uncomfortable in those clothes in public."

She looked at me again and laughed a rather loud but good-hearted laugh I must say. "Mais oui, come in, but if you feel uncomfortable now, imagine how you will feel later when you will be down on your knees scrubbing the landings between floors, ha, ha, ha!" She continued laughing.

Inside her minuscule apartment I could see her better. She was a big woman, a few centimetres taller than I was and also fatter. She had the derriere of a woman of her class, big bottom in other words, but also she seemed a strong woman, her body was somehow muscular. She was wearing black pantyhose and a knee length blue nylon smock patterned with flowers. You could see below the smock her black skirt and her cheap plastic

sandals. She turned again to me and said, "Look, Violetta said to me that you decided to exchange places with her and become 'une femme de menage, une bonniche', is it true?"

Obviously she wanted to test me and see if I did things on my own will. How could I say that I was partly pushed into this? Not really, if I was strongly against it I wouldn't have been standing right now in front of her dressed as I was. I looked at her and said, "Yes Conchita, this is true, I want to live a true experience of a cleaning woman, a maid, as you said it. Can you help me?"

She relaxed and smiled at me broadly. "Of course I can help you 'ma petite', let me look at you, remove your coat and scarf, let me see you face. Look at those hands; they are so soft, so not used to menial housework, 'par contre' look at my hands pet."

She was holding her hands in front of me. I looked at those big hands, skin cracked and wrinkly, the nails with remains of a vulgar red nail polish. On impulse I took those hands and held them in mine. She squeezed them and dragged me towards her. Soon she was kissing me passionately in the mouth, I was aroused and excited; God those Portuguese women were coming from another world, so unpredictable and spontaneous, no bourgeois false modesty there!

She started undressing me and I did the same to her, she removed my dress, fairly easy for her, I had to undo the buttons of her nylon smock, the zip of her skirt as we were fondling each other in our similar black underwear and pantyhose. We did make love to each other but like two females, she didn't let me penetrate her, instead she made me caress her bosom and her private parts until she started moaning uncontrollably. Finally she made me come inside my panties. It was an explosive and powerful climax of the most unusual kind!

CHAPTER 3

Changing my looks, speaking Portuguese

"Come Maria, we have work to do!" Conchita pushed me out of bed in a firm but not unkind manner. "But first I am going to lend you some clothes. Your new Patronne Violetta wants you to look exactly like a Portuguese cleaning woman and we can't disappoint her, can we?"

I had such a wonderful love session with her that I couldn't refuse anything and after the entire whole situation started to intrigue me both mentally and erotically.

Soon I was sitting in a kitchen chair with a not too clean tea towel over my shoulders and Conchita was working on my hair like a very competent hairdresser. I was dressed like her twin sister! Black voluminous cotton knickers, or panties if you prefer, and a matching bra, over my flat chest mind you, an old full slip that has seen better days, an equally old black rayon skirt and thick black stockings that I had to hold with elastic garters just above the knee. On top I was wearing an old but clean nylon smock or overall (une blouse nylon) that had a pattern of dark red flowers over a light blue background. The smock buttoned in front, had long sleeves and was coming an inch or two above my skirt hem. Finally a pair of cheap plastic sandals was adorning my feet. What a sight!

She cut my longish blond hair and layered it in a more feminine manner, then dyed it in a dark brown colour and treated it with a special liquid. Expertly and quickly she put rollers of various sizes. Finally she covered them with a scarf in order to let it dry and set. Obviously I was having a sort of homemade perm! She made a point of placing the scarf in my head in a special manner 'style a la Portugaise' as she said. I was witnessing for the last few hours a shocking transformation. Only this morning I was a blond elegantly dressed Parisian bourgeois and now a few hours later, a peasant looking woman dressed in the clothes of a shabby looking 'femme de menage' was standing in front of the hallway mirror in Conchita's minuscule apartment. Peculiarly enough I was content in my present position.

"Before work we have to eat something, you must be starving and I am too" said Conchita with feeling. And she continued, "Go and do the dishes and then set the table. I'll finish the cooking. Here, put this apron on." She picked from a hook an old and dirty looking apron and threw it to me. It was a faded blue full apron in a striped cotton material that also had seen better days. Without protest I tied it around my waist and then I adjusted the bib straps that crossed in the back and buttoned in the apron strings. The picture of the cleaning woman was now complete.

I asked for a pair of rubber gloves to protect my hands but she refused them in a rather cross manner. "Violetta thinks that your hands are too soft and need a bit of housework training. In fact she asked to me to not give you any glove protection for later when you will be cleaning the public stairs of this building. I am afraid that in your new sta-



tion in life soft bourgeois hands are not acceptable, 'allez au boulot Maria' the last sentence meaning something of the type 'come on we haven't all day Maria!'

We had a hearty meal accompanied by some red wine. We were chatting and giggling like two schoolgirls. At one point Conchita got more serious and said to me, "I know that Violetta will be able to change you physically, it is already happening, but you have to try and change the way you speak. You speak too correctly, too properly if you know what I mean. You have to develop a coarser way of speaking, to make mistakes, and use more vulgar words, try and copy my way of speaking. You have to sound uneducated like me that I wasn't even able to finish the primary school." She stopped and looked at me as she was sipping some of her wine and then continued, "For instance when you speak of Violetta you can't use her first name anymore, you should refer to her always as 'Madame', she is your employer now. I know you will be able to do it if you try. Then we will become true friends." She said the last phrase in an intimate manner insinuating all sorts of future amorous adventures or at least this is the way I imagined it.

I decided to drop my small secret bomb. I started talking Portuguese to her, "I agree with you Conchita but probably I would sound more authentic at least to French people if I speak Portuguese. Then they will accept me more as what I appear to be at the moment!"

She opened her mouth in astonishment, "Wow, how on earth can you speak Portuguese, Violetta didn't mention anything to me?"

I looked at her in a conspiratorial way and continued in the somewhat childish Portuguese I was speaking: "I never mentioned it to Viol.... I mean Madame, you see until this morning I never came close to her. She was mostly dealing with my wife." I stopped this time for a sip of my wine and continued, "You see I spent 4 years in Portugal as a teenager, my father was the French ambassador there and I went to a French school in Lisbon but we had to learn Portuguese as a second language and of course I had quite a few local friends. I know that at the moment it sounds a bit spastic the way I speak, but with a bit of practice everything will come back."

She looked at me still astonished but she recovered quickly and said always in Portuguese, "Well my dear Maria, this little revelation of yours makes things a lot easier for the transition to your new status in life. Wait till Violetta hears the news, she will be thrilled!" She said that last phrase with an emphasis that took me by surprise. I don't know why, but I was thinking more and more that my whole transformation as it started in the morning and continued in great leaps was not as spontaneous as it appeared to be. Was something behind the whole story that I didn't know? But did I really care? I decided that at the moment I was enjoying what I was doing and I couldn't care less if there was a dark conspiracy behind it.

Conchita interrupted my thoughts, "Come on Maria, let's clear the table, then you can do the dishes and tidy up the kitchen. We have to rush now; you still have a lot of work to do out in that staircase."

CHAPTER 4

My first cleaning job

"You will find everything you need under the stairs, right outside my apartment door." Conchita dragged me out of her apartment, I followed reluctantly I must say. After all, this was going to be my first public appearance as a 'femme de menage'. I was still wearing the clothes she made me wear before, including the nylon overall and the cotton apron. My newly cut and dyed hair was still in rollers and the scarf was modestly covering my head and half of my face. In fact those made me feel more 'undetectable' if this is the right word.

Conchita was addressing me now in a firmer tone of voice, "You pick from under the stairs, broom, dustpan, rubbish bag and dusters. For mopping the landings and stairs you will use this metal bucket. Inside you will find the mop and the cleaning material. Every second floor there is a tap for filling your bucket with clean water. You clean also the windows between floors and you dust carefully the wooden railings. 'Allez, au boulot Maria'."

Without any other word she turned abruptly and went inside the apartment. I was on my own now in a public entrance of a huge building. I managed with some difficulty to pick up all the material and the household utensils as instructed and I started climbing the stairs. My overall and apron pockets proved to be very useful, I managed to squeeze in the dusters, bags and cleaning material. As I was climbing struggling to carry everything without dropping them on the way I realized how any 'class' or 'style' you have as a human being is lost as you try to cope with serious manual work. I was halfway up when I heard voices and the familiar sound of heels on the stairs. From the sound and accent I understood that two bourgeois ladies were coming down the stairs. I stopped on the next landing and made space for them. They were elegantly dressed and a strong Chanel No. 5 perfume filled my nostrils. They completely ignored me as I was standing in a corner of the landing, but I heard them talking to each other as they overtook me, thinking that I wasn't able to understand a word of what they were saying. "I haven't seen her before" one lady said. "Probably she is one of Conchita's cronies; you know how she picks them when they arrive from Portugal."

"Yes", the other lady agreed, "This one seems as if she just arrived and she gets the 'staircase treatment' from Conchita, probably in exchange for getting her hair done, I saw the curlers under the scarf." "No doubt that soon she will be working as a live in maid in the neighbourhood, you know how well Conchita operates her unofficial domestic agency and how..."

By that stage I lost the sound of their voices; they were too far down the stairs. But it intrigued me once more what I heard. My feeling that a sort of 'organized plan' concerning me was in full development and was even stronger now. But again my inner reaction was the same. I couldn't care less. What would have been the alternative? Simply sitting at home feeling depressed and miserable for the loss of my wife.

Finally I arrived exhausted on the sixth floor. I deposited all I carried in a corner and I filled the bucket with water, rinsing the mop several times. It was badly washed the last time it was used. The water was cold and was picking at my hands that I wiped hastily in

my apron. Soon I was about to learn that the apron was going to become one of my most useful 'tools' in my new position as a cleaner/maid. Also it was going to become the symbol of my new station in life.

I started sweeping first and then, as any 'femme de menage' I went down to my knees and I started washing the floor with the mop, pushing the bucket forwards as I was moving. My knees were hurting and gradually I started discovering the most comfortable kneeling position without thinking how I looked. I was becoming more vulgar in my movements and positions by the minute. At that moment I heard Violetta's voice behind my back, «I love the way you display your knickers to the world Maria!"

Always on my knees I turned to face her, feeling all red and sweaty. She was even more transformed now. She had been to the hairdresser herself, because her hair was styled in a very fashionable 'bourgeois lady' manner. Her grey suit and high heel sandals (my wife's elegant clothes) made her look like a fashion magazine model. Next to her I felt like I was coming from another world, down to my knees, wearing the old and used over-all and apron. I could smell her delicate expensive perfume. I was wondering what she could smell of me. A combination of sweat and cleaning material perhaps?

She started talking like 'une vraie patronne', the real boss that she was now, "I have too many things to tell you," she said. I started getting up from my kneeling position. She stopped me with her hand, "You just stay as you are and simply listen. You finish under Conchita's orders the cleaning of the staircase of this building. I give you an appointment to meet me 16.30 hours exactly at the shop 'Blouses et Tabliers' Ave. Victor Hugo No. 145, not at all far from here, in order to choose your new working clothes. Tonight you officially start your new career in service. I invited some people over and you are going to be dressed in a proper maid's uniform to serve them. Tomorrow you are replacing me for the Orly Airport cleaning.

I arranged with the cleaning van, they will pick you from the train station at 5.00 AM. I gave my locker key to Ginette, a colleague of mine who knows everything about you. You will find the uniform to wear in my locker and Ginette will explain everything to you."

I was full of shame but excited also as I was keeping my head up to look at her from my uncomfortable kneeling position. She continued totally undisturbed, "I think that within the next five days you will know and understand everything about your new position in life, your new uniforms, your new friends and colleagues, your new working environment.

She turned to go as abruptly as she appeared. The last moment she remembered something because she said to me in Portuguese this time, "I hear from Conchita that you can speak Portuguese fairly well. This is a pleasant surprise to me because lots of the future procedures, in order to secure your new status and position in life, will be now simplified. For instance when you meet me at the 'Blouses et Tabliers' boutique I'll talk only Portuguese to you and you will be answering very briefly with a yes Madame or no Madame. I'll explain to the sales girls that you are a new arrival and your French is practically non-existent." She left without waiting for an answer.

CHAPTER 5

Getting my new working clothes

The time is 16.45, the place 145 Avenue Victor Hugo. I wait, as instructed, in front of the working clothes boutique for over 20 minutes now. Violetta finally arrives driving my car; she leaves the car in front of the shop and the parking attendant rushes to collect it. I am certain she telephoned before for an appointment.

They open the door for her and as she goes in she makes a sign for me to follow. I rush in behind her; the sales girl examines me from top to bottom without saying hello or even smile at me. I must admit that Conchita didn't even let me wear Violetta's dress I had on this morning. She asked me to keep the old black skirt on and she gave me an old pinkish blouse that certainly had seen better days. It must have been a product of the late fifties with lace bordering the collar and long sleeves. I looked seriously poverty stricken. I could see that they knew I was there to be fitted with my new working clothes and the bourgeois lady was the one paying.

I heard Violetta talking to an older lady, probably the shop owner or manager, "Yes, she is my new 'femme de menage', she just arrived from Portugal. I want the lot for her, overalls for housework, proper uniforms for serving, some practical aprons and caps. Also a couple of simple dresses for outside wear, she has virtually nothing." She lowered her tone of voice, but it still was loud enough for me to hear, "I don't want anything expensive, simple working clothes, some underwear also and thick stockings or tights." She stopped to look at me and then she turned with a smile to the lady, in a louder voice again, "I actually forgot, Maria can't really understand French, just a few basic words and that's all. So, what I was saying is that she is used to a very low level of life, so we don't have to spoil her immediately. Let her find out later for herself."

The manager answered back in a very polite manner, because she could see that a large order and profit was on its way, "Of course Madame, we will give your new maid all she needs. We will make her look very smart and neat. Could you please tell her to go upstairs in the fitting room, one of my assistants will be there shortly with some clothes for her to try on."

They offered an easy chair to Violetta to sit comfortably and they sent me upstairs to the changing/fitting room.

CHAPTER 6

Conspiracy theory?

"In about half an hour the caterers will be here, so hurry up girl and finish mopping the entrance floor. You don't want them to see you down on your hands and knees, do you, Maria?"

I looked up from my kneeling position to Madame Violetta. She was very elegantly dressed again, using another dress from my wife's large collection. I have to admit that this woman had a flair for elegant clothes. She was coming from a poor background yet she knew how to be a lady.

I managed to answer in a polite manner, "Yes Madame, I'll be finishing here in a couple of minutes and then I have to go to the kitchen and start sorting out the cutlery for tonight's dinner. How many guests do you expect Madame?"

I said that and all of a sudden a feeling of panic went through me, like I have been electrocuted. Who is coming tonight, how many people are invited to 'my own house'? Am I a complete fool? What I am doing here down on my hands and knees taking orders from my ex domestic, dressed as a poor servant myself. Should I act now and stop this masquerade before is too late?

Violetta's antennas picked immediately my uneasiness because she acted instantly.

"Maria, stop this instant what you are doing and come to the living room I want to make clear to you a few more conditions concerning our mutual agreement and arrangement."

She turned and left walking very elegantly in her high heels. I finished mopping the last corner and managed to stand up with some difficulty. I now started realizing how painful it can be to try and work down on your hands and knees. I had a quick look at the hallway mirror, fixed my little cap and straightened my apron and walked fast towards the living room.

She was sitting in one of the sofas and as I came in she motioned me to go and sit down at the sofa opposite her. In her usual manner she went straight to the point.

"You shouldn't normally be seated, in particular in this room, but I feel I should tell you a few more things about our mutual arrangement, which so far works to my full satisfaction."

I was quite conscious how I was seated, at the edge of the sofa, keeping my legs together and my hands neatly on top of my white apron. I was already feeling that it was somehow not correct to sit in the living room opposite my new employer. It is amazing what a servant's uniform can do to you. But on the other hand I was eager to hear what Madame Violetta had to say.

She continued in her very assured manner, "As you have noticed Maria lots of things happened in only a few hours, your transformation is amazing, you look so much like a proper housemaid now. And of course nothing could have happened without your full cooperation. Do you agree so far?"

I answered in a quiet but definitely affirmative way, "Yes Madame, I agree so far and I do not regret my decision to swap positions with you Madame!" I said it spontaneously and that pleased her because she continued more enthusiastically now,

"I am very glad you still feel so positive, but I can tell you that gradually this is going to be more and more realistic and I hope you will be able to cope with it. You are here to stay as Maria the maid for at least a year, and you are going to feel more and more pressured in your new station in life. Nobody ever said that being a domestic servant is going to be easy so I truly urge you to maintain the same positive attitude towards your new found role in life even when you will be feeling tired and worn out and humiliated and defeated, because I am afraid you will get those feelings and quite soon, in particular when you start appearing in public as a domestic. Do you understand that?"

Another question for me and another instant answer, "Yes Madame I understand fully that in the future I am going to have strong feelings about my new lowly position in life, but I truly hope that the novelty of it, plus my naturally submissive nature will allow me to face it as bravely as I can manage. You know Madame by now that I like being 'une personne soumise'

There it is, I said it finally! I accepted in front of Madame Violetta that I am a submissive; I never said that to anyone so openly, even to my own wife, though I suspect that she knew it for quite some time. Of course Violetta's phrase hadn't gone unnoticed to me before 'being the maid for at least a year'. Did she have in mind, a longer period possibly? Here it goes again my conspiracy theory.

She must have read my thoughts in her usual super perceptive manner because she continued vigorously, "Well, Maria, I want to be completely frank with you at this point, I wouldn't be able to initiate any of the things that happened to you today if I didn't have those long talks with your ex wife. She said to me that you were always a bit effeminate, you always liked housework and you always made a point of wearing an apron when working at home. In fact I know where you keep your collection of feminine clothes, mostly aprons I must say!"

She stopped and looked at me sharply, as I became increasingly red and looked at her in disbelief. Now all the pieces of the puzzle appeared to be in the correct position. Violetta had prepared quite methodically for today's transformation and in some sort of agreement with my wife. God this was beyond belief!

She understood again my uncertainty and confusion because she continued in a haste, "Yes Maria, I accept that I manipulated things towards the direction I wanted them to go, but I repeat again, nothing could have happened without your full participation and collaboration. And Conchita confirmed that to me, she said you were like putty in her hands, and by the way I gather you had quite a time with her."

I blushed all over again and said in a meek voice, smiling at the same time "Yes Madame, I enjoyed Conchita's company in bed and I appreciated all her efforts to transform me to a convincing 'femme de menage'. I briefly stopped playing nervously with the edge of my apron but I continued before Violetta had the chance to resume her speech.

"But may I ask you Madame what exactly my wife said to you? I never realized that she knew that much about me, I thought I kept some of my secrets well hidden."

She looked at me a bit annoyed now, "I don't intend to open that discussion with you now Maria and I said what I had to say. Probably some other time I'll be more obliging to you." She stopped and looked at her beautiful wristwatch, another piece from my wife's collection.

"It's getting late girl, the caterers will be here shortly, so before they ring the bell let me tell you a few things about my guests tonight. Four people are coming, two gentlemen and two ladies. They belong to the 'milieu artistique' of Paris, they know nothing of Violetta the cleaning lady, they know me as Violetta an eccentric and rich lady of mixed parentage, Portuguese father, French mother who shares her time between her Parisian mansion and her family house in Lisbon. They are invited to my Parisian mansion tonight and you are Maria 'ma soubrette Portugaise', my Portuguese maid. They are very open minded, some

gay some lesbian, I leave it to you to decide who is what. You don't have to say much, in fact I'll be addressing you only in Portuguese, so you don't have to worry about being read or ridiculed."

A huge feeling of relief overtook me and I instantly became calmer. I managed to say to my new Mistress in a voice full of gratitude, "Oh thank you Madame for telling me that, I already feel much calmer now and..."

She didn't let me finish, but in her usual manner, she simply said to me, "All right girl, here are your final instructions, you receive the food from the caterers then you set the table for six, it's your former house anyway so you know exactly where everything is. Then you go and change to your black and white uniform and two inch black shoes. I expect you to be ready to receive our guests by 8.00 o'clock sharp. Off you go now."

She dismissed me abruptly as usually but as I was rushing to the kitchen she added something more.

"Don't forget your job at Orly tomorrow, I'll give you more instructions about that after the guests depart later tonight, then tomorrow evening we will sign together some papers. I took the initiative and asked Maitre Gareau to prepare a general 'Pare of Attorney' and some other paperwork so we can make more official your new status and my introduction to 'la grande vie bourgeoise'. But more about it tomorrow girl!"

She did throw her bomb at the end! She had already contacted Maitre Gareau, our family lawyer? And how she managed to do that without asking me? I suspected again my wife's finger there; she must have given her all the necessary information and contacts to deal with all that paper work which always was a great nuisance for me anyway. My wife was handling all those matters usually.

As I was entering the kitchen the doorbell rang. I took a deep breath and rushed to the door. The caterers must have arrived. As I was opening the door I remembered to use my heavily accented broken French, I was just the Portuguese maid after all!

CHAPTER 7

Serving dinner properly dressed

The first guests arrived a bit after eight. I rushed to the door to let them in, two very chic and elegant ladies came in and with a brief 'bonsoir' handed me their coats and bags. Mme Violetta rushed behind me to welcome them with a kiss on each cheek, the French way. I could smell her Chanel no5 very strongly.

"Bonsoir Monique, bonsoir Annette, ca va bien?" she said in a very friendly manner, leading them towards the living room, 'la grande salle' as my ex wife was calling it, a very elegantly furnished room with a taste indicating 'old money' without any touch of the 'nouveau riche' vulgarity.

I was following behind as instructed, ready to take an order for drinks.

The ladies were looking around admiringly, "Wow, what a house 'chere Violetta', Monique said, with true admiration in her voice, "You have some very nice pieces here, real 'objets d'art'.

"And look at those paintings in the wall" added Annette. She stopped and looked at a small gouache painting above a 19th century dresser, "Wow, this is a Picasso, come and look at this Monique, a true Picasso of the early period!"

Mme Violetta, gave me a questioning look, as if asking me, 'is this really a Picasso?'

I nodded silently as she approached them with a big smile, "Yes, it is a small Picasso, my father bought in Lisbon before the war, nothing big though, there are quite a few of those small Picassos in private collections, you know what a workaholic Picasso was, I bet he did that in an hour."

She is good I thought to myself, she is very quick and adapts wonderfully in any situation.

"Would you like something to drink ladies", Mme Violetta asked them as they sat down.

They both asked for a glass of white wine and Mme turned to me and said in a slow voice, as I was an imbecile, "Two glasses of white wine for the ladies Maria and bring also some of the little hors d'oeuvre you prepared before."

I curtsied as elegantly as possible, but with a certain hesitancy saying "Oui Madame, tout de suite Madame."

As I was heading for the kitchen I heard her saying to her guests, 'Yes, she is new here, yes she needs quite a bit of training, yes she is Portuguese and her French is elementary.'

Within the next half hour three more people have arrived, a middle aged couple Mr et Mme Buboïs, as they announced themselves, a very pompous and arrogant bourgeois couple, and a gentleman in his early forties, Mr Gaston Patou who obviously was flirting with Mme Violetta.

I served them all drinks and as they were chatting happily in the living room I organized the last details of the meal. It was quite tricky, because I had to keep everything warm and inviting looking, thank God I knew that kitchen so well.

By the time they sat down to eat it was past nine thirty.

I was indeed very busy and fully alert during dinner, but I have to admit that Mme Violetta helped me a lot, guiding me continuously and very expertly.

'You can clear the table now Maria, you can bring the main dish now, please fill the wine glasses, Mr. Dubois needs some bread please, etc, etc

I was very relieved when they all went back to the living room and Madame asked me to prepare coffee for everybody.

As I was getting ready to start the dishes, I heard a little bell ringing, I hastily dried my hands in a tea towel, removed my working apron, and rushed to the living room where I found them all sitting comfortably.

"Ah, Maria, there you are," said Madame in a patronizing manner, and continued, "I know your French is not good, but Mlle Monique wants to know if you have any friends or relatives in your village back in Portugal in need of coming to work as maids in Paris. Mlle Monique runs a small agency of domestic help and she often thinks that the best way

to find new people is through domestics who already work here. Do you understand what I just said to you girl?"

I felt all the eyes on me! Mme Violetta did it again. She put me on the spot in front of all those people. I had to say something and I had to sound foreign and a bit stupid.

"Oui Madame, je comprends" I said in my softest and stupidest voice, "I can check with my relatives Madame, I have two cousins a bit younger than me who probably would be interested, I have to write a letter to them Madame."

I said all that with a heavy accent using one or two Portuguese words, which Madame translated to the others.

Mlle Monique turned to me and said also in a slow voice, influenced by Violetta, "That would be good Maria, but please do it as quickly as possible, I have a few excellent clients requiring domestic help the earliest possible and the market in Paris at the moment is not good.'

At this remark, the arrogant bourgeois lady, Mme Dubois turned to Mlle Monique and said, "It is true my dear, good help is so hard to find those days, and you can't get anymore a nice provincial French girl, you have to use those uneducated foreigners who are not always trustworthy, the other day..."

At this point Mme Violetta turned to me and said, "Thank you Maria that will be all."

"Merci Madame", I said curtsying as Mme Dubois continued her accusations against foreign domestic workers. I could feel more and more what it meant to be in the other side of the fence.

CHAPTER 8

End of my first day as a domestic

By the time the guests had left and I tidied up the kitchen it was well past midnight and I was dead tired. It certainly had been a long and exhausting day for me and as I was putting the last glasses away Madame entered the kitchen holding a small envelop.

"You did very well tonight Maria, though the guests said that you are a bit crude and rough, I explained to them that you are new in Paris and you are very eager to learn and become a well trained domestic."

I blushed as I answered with a polite 'Thank you Madame'

"Now then", she continued more firmly now, "Tomorrow is your Orly day and you have to get up very early. You take the night bus at the corner of our street; it passes exactly at 4.30am, for the Gare de Lyon, where you get off. There you will be picked by the cleaning van that goes to Orly. Ginette will look for you. The cleaning van has a sign at both sides, 'N & M Badoit – Cleaning Services'."

She stopped momentarily and handed me the envelope she had been holding, "There is an Orly Pass Card in your new name which is Maria Magdalena Delantal. The photo is missing, but as soon as you arrive at the airport Ginette will take you to one of those automatic machines and then she will take the Pass with the photo to the Airport Maintenance Office (AMO) for proper stamping and registration."

She stopped because she saw me looking concerned and worried again. How on earth she was able to provide for me an Airport Pass to a name not legally existing? Of course she understood my worries because she said immediately, "Maria Magdalena Delantal exists officially and has a file with the French police as a legal immigrant. For reasons that don't concern you at this moment she left France for Portugal, 'through the back door' as we say in the immigrant argot, meaning that she left the country without a Passport control through borders, so I have her passport and you simply take her place. I will shortly organize for a Passport for you as soon as I have appropriate photos."

That terrified me even more because I managed to say in a very worried tone of voice, "But Madame I might end up in prison for forgery of important legal documents, plus I will be constantly vulnerable in case I am stopped by the police for the regular inspections in the Metro or the train or in other public spaces, you know how paranoid the French authorities are with illegal immigrants, in particular after the collapse of the French Algeria. I think...."

She stopped me again with her hand and said in a very strict manner now, "Now listen to me girl, you must realize that you are entering the world of cleaners and maids and lowly domestics that usually are exposed to Police controls and harassment, but this is exactly what I have been trying to tell you all along, you have to feel to your skin what it means to be a lowly laborer, a domestic, a cleaner, you have to feel to your skin what it means to be afraid that the police might catch you and find something wrong with your papers, you must feel the fear of it, otherwise, you simply act as an impostor and actor. Do you understand Maid Maria?"

She emphasized the last phrase so strongly that I had to back off, she had such a strong character this woman I



certainly was not a match for her. I managed to say again rather meekly, "Yes Madame, I understand what you say, but please Madame could you promise me that you will be behind me and protect me if something goes wrong? After all you are my primary employer."

That last phrase I said spontaneously and instantly I was worried I was asking too much, but surprisingly enough Violetta said to me in a rather sweet tone now, "But of course Maria, I strongly believe that any correct employer should stand firmly behind their staff, domestic or other and try to provide security and protection."

Again she managed to convince me and pacify me.

Soon after that she said good night and departed for her luxurious bedroom as I was taking up the steps to my small and cold new room. I was going to spend my first night as a maid in my new uncomfortable room. And I realized of course that I barely had the chance for a proper sleep. Four hours was the most I could hope for.

Soon I was tucked in my small cot, wearing a cheap cotton nightie of Violetta, keeping my bra and breast forms on to get used to them, as instructed accordingly of course. I never felt so physically tired, practically all my body muscles were aching. I fell asleep very shortly, among mixed and confusing images and thoughts of what happened to me during the past fourteen hours.

CHAPTER 9 Cleaner at Orly Airport

I got off the bus at ten to five in front of Gare de Lyon main entrance. I was very conscious of my appearance and how I was moving, but nobody else seemed to pay any attention to me. I was one of the many men and women, mostly menial and domestic laborers, going to work so early in the morning. Dressed in one of ex Violetta's, former cheap dresses, a coat, flat shoes and a head scarf, tied firmly under my chin 'the Portuguese way', as I was taught by Conchita, I was standing hesitantly on the pavement, looking for the cleaning van. It was a miserable damp day and I was getting a bit worried. The cold was quite penetrating at five in the morning.

All of a sudden I heard a fast beep and a little van stopped in front of me, a side sliding door was opened and a female voice from inside said quickly, "Bonjour, vous devez etre Maria, le remplacement de Violetta?"

I answered immediately with a " Yes, I am Maria, Violetta's replacement", feeling quite relieved that they turned up and the next moment I was sitting, quite squeezed, among five women plus the driver. A mixture of soap, cheap perfume and garlic made my nostrils quiver in a searching way, new unfamiliar odors for my bourgeois sense of smell.

The woman next to me said in a rather husky but pleasant voice, the voice of a smoker, "I am Ginette, Violetta talk to me about you, I am going to be your 'guardian angel' for today, we are going to work together, this is the Airport policy anyway, the cleaners work in pairs. You shouldn't worry, for as long as you follow my instructions and keep your voice low you will be fine."

I managed to answer back in a equally quiet and husky voice, "Thank you Ginette, I'll try to be as correct as possible, I am aware that hundreds of passengers' eyes will be looking at us, something that makes me quite nervous."

She said in a more animated tone, "Let me tell you a secret girl, I do this job in the airport for several years. After sometime you realize that nobody really looks at you, nobody except for your supervisor probably. The passengers are looking through you, you don't exist for them since you are part of the furniture of the departing lounge! Cleaners are invisible, so you shouldn't worry about that. By the way do you have your Airport Pass Card?"

"Yes Ginette, I have it in my bag, Madame Violetta, gave it to me last night."

She smiled mischievously, "I see Violetta trained you well, you are already thinking of her as your bourgeois employer, she must be thrilled." She stopped to blow her nose, something that slightly annoyed me and continued, "By the way, you mustn't forget that your are a Portuguese woman recently arrived and your French is elementary, so if the supervisor appears to check on us let me do the talking. If he asks you directly simply say, 'Oui Patron'. He likes to think of himself as the big boss.

After that we stayed silent until we arrived at the airport. We went through a back gate and after walking in some basement corridors we arrived at a room with lots of lockers and toilet facilities. There was an inscription at the door, 'personnel domestique feminin'.

Ginette took me to a locker, produced a key and told me, 'This is the old Violetta's locker, now yours for as long as you work at the airport, here keep the key and don't forget the number 168; I am going to change now and you do the same, white sabots, very comfortable thank God, blue overall dress, checked matching apron and head scarf, then we go for you photo."

It took me only a few minutes to change; I removed my dress keeping my slip on. Then I put the overall dress on which buttoned in front and that smelled slightly of Violetta's body odor, which this time was a bit exciting for me. I tied the apron with a bow as symmetrical as possible, I was learning my lesson now and I looked at Ginette at the other end of the room to see how she was going to wear the head scarf. It was a head triangle of the same checked material as the apron and the dress' collar. I adjusted it to my head; I locked my locker and put the key to my apron's pocket. I was ready for work. I couldn't fail to notice as I looked at myself in the only mirror inside the room and I thought that both the dress and apron had seen better days, they weren't dirty, but I could see permanent discoloration marks of chlorine. This was really the uniform of a true working cleaner.

Ginette motioned me to follow her. We walked fast to a corner of the corridor where an automatic photo machine was standing, she pushed me inside fed the machine with coins and soon I was holding my first photos as a female domestic worker. I looked at this rather severely looking person with the dark curly hair and the head scarf and I felt a strong trapping feeling, I was slowly but surely dragged to my new persona and now I was about to get my first identification papers.

Which in fact happened within minutes. Ginette grabbed the photos and the card Violetta had given me, left me standing there and within five minutes she was back with the card inside a plastic folder properly authorized and stamped, which she pinned on the

top of my dress. I looked at it. It was my new airport pass in the name of Maria Magdalena Delantal. It was valid for a year. I had my first official accreditation as a Portuguese cleaning woman!

It was past six o'clock by the time we emerged with Ginette to the main Departure Hall with our cleaning equipment. I had to go in front with a huge mop doing the sweeping and the emptying of garbage bins. Behind me Ginette with a bucket on wheels and another mop was washing the floor.

The Hall was already quite full; lots of flights were going to depart within the next two hours so we had to work around the standing and sitting passengers and their luggage. That was quite tricky because I had to zigzag around them saying very often in my softest possible voice, 'Pardon Monsieur, pardon Madame, attention Mademoiselle'.

Ginette was right, they never looked at us, they simply moved slightly and continued their talking or reading or whatever else they were doing, I felt invisible and that made me feel more relaxed and less worried. But I never stopped being conscious of how I was dressed or what I was doing. The idea that I was acting as a female cleaner in the biggest Parisian airport gave me strong 'stomach butterflies' of pure excitement and a continuing feeling of disbelief that this really was happening to me. This woman with the faded blue dress and apron, mopping floors and emptying garbage bins was it actually me? Endless times in the past I had used this airport for traveling all over the world and now I was here as a mere cleaner!

The voice of Ginette brought me back to reality, "Attention Maria, le Patron arrives, "

I looked around me and I saw a big burly man approaching fast, "Bonjour Ginette", he said looking at me at the same time.

"Where is Violetta today? And who is this new face?"

"She is Violetta's replacement Patron", Ginette answered back and continued in a voice that she obviously tried to make it sound pleasant, "Violetta is not coming back for some time, she has other commitments at the moment, but Maria here is going to replace her. She is fresh from Portugal and her French is rudimental, but I am next to her explaining everything; she is a good girl and she will learn fast Patron."

"So Violetta is going up in the world isn't she?" he said in a rather accusing tone of voice, "I guess cleaning at the airport is beneath her isn't it?" He looked at Ginette expecting an answer,

"It is true Patron, she found a better paid job and naturally she took up the offer, but I am certain Maria here will be an excellent replacement."

"I certainly hope so Ginette, sometimes those peasant Portuguese women are a bit thick in the head." he said and he started departing, but suddenly he turned towards me and said, "I'll keep an eye on you girl, I hope you adapt fast and next week I'll assign you to toilet cleaning with another cleaner, everybody has to go through that phase as well, do you understand me girl?"

I was blushing all over as I answered back quickly with an "Oui Patron", as Ginette instructed me, curtsying slightly at the same time.

He departed rather pleased with himself as Ginette was telling me off, "You didn't have to curtsey to that brute Maria, you are not in the house facing your Mistress, but on the other hand that pleased him, he felt that you respect him and he liked that.

"But Ginette, he wants me to clean the toilets next week, I don't know how I can cope with that, it is a very disgusting job."

"Well girl, this is part on being a domestic cleaner, you do as you are told, and believe me you get used to it after sometime. After all those years, life taught me that everything is relative in this world."

By the time that our shift was over at twelve noon I was dead tired since I was on my feet, standing, walking and working, for over six hours with only a fifteen minutes break for a watery tasteless coffee.

We changed back to our street clothes and Ginette instructed me to take back my uniform to wash and iron it. Cleaners had to look after their working clothes in those days.

We had lunch at the airport canteen, at least that was one of the benefits of the job and lunch was included in our contract.

By two thirty in the afternoon I was in front of my house, or rather Madame Violetta's house where I was working as a maid now, I shouldn't forget that. I took from my bag the back door key that I now possess and I entered the kitchen, wondering what was in store for me next.

CHAPTER 10

Signing papers – new status

Nobody was at home, but I found a note on the kitchen table that I read immediately, 'Maria, I'll be back after five o'clock, go to your room, change to your blue working uniform and try to fix it, it needs a good cleaning. You will find some changes there, I am sure you will like it. Then unpack the clothes from the two suitcases you will find there, and put them in your new cupboard and drawers, those are my old clothes, I know they fit you, and they belong to you now. You will also find some shoes from your ex wife's collection, since my shoe size is smaller. Then you can have a rest and I want you down in your black and white uniform after five o'clock waiting for me.

It was signed, 'Mme Violetta'.

I rushed upstairs very intrigued and curious. As usual, Madame Violetta was full of surprises. The room definitely looked changed, workers have been in and of course they left the usual mess, but I had now hot water, the first thing I checked, I had a new plastic cupboard for hanging clothes and an antique looking piece of furniture with four drawers. Finally the room had been freshly painted. Workers must have been busy from very early in the morning to manage to finish so quickly. That woman never ceased to amaze me.

I changed quickly to my blue working dress and apron and started cleaning the room. I did that with lots of gusto, it was my room now and I wanted it nice and comfortable.

Then I unpacked and arranged all my new clothes, that they were Violetta's hand me downs, except for the array of my new uniforms of course. Everything was there for the

working girl, from sensible underwear to cheap skirts and dresses and tops and scarves and a few bags. As I was finishing unpacking I found another plastic bag left in a corner. Inside it, I found my collection of aprons, the one I was keeping in the house in the back of my cupboard downstairs in my old bedroom, together with a small note from Violetta again, 'Those are the only items from your old collection of clothes that you are allowed to keep, all the rest of your former clothes and personal belongings I removed from the house, so you will not be tempted. I believe nothing has been left behind to remind you of your former self. Of course everything is kept safely in a warehouse somewhere in town so don't get panicked girl, Mme Violetta'.

But I was panicking again! She was such a devious lady my Madame, everything was so methodically done, within twenty four hours I practically ceased to exist as my former self in all aspects. I had to think again.

I had another hour before her arrival, so I lay down in bed trying to form a strategy. But what sort of strategy? Everything that happened so far was accepted by me without the slightest protest, so what strategy? Deep inside I liked what was happening to me, or to put it differently, I didn't oppose it, knowing that any other alternative at this moment of my life would have been very gloomy and nerve breaking for me. So be it, I thought once more!

I was in the kitchen, dressed as instructed, black and white uniform, lacy cap and my two inch shoes when the door bell rang. I rushed to open the front door knowing that in should be Madame.

I opened the door eagerly, ready to curtsy, and there was Conchita standing in front of me smiling broadly.

"What happened, where is Violetta?" I managed to say looking at her and not inviting her in.

"Don't you say hello to your old friend Maria? You do look very proper in that uniform, a proper maid for a proper bourgeois lady. And by the way, you should have learned by now to call her Madame Violetta in front of others, she is not your equal anymore, she is your 'patronne now', remember girl?"

She stopped and looked at me with a false accusing look, then spoke again, "aren't you going to invite me in girl?"

"Of course Conchita, come in, I am just stunned, I wasn't expecting you."

"Well girl, you must have understood by now that Madame Violetta is a very unpredictable lady and full of surprises, but I'll explain to you all in a minute and after you offer me a cup of coffee."

We went to the kitchen, I thought that would have been appropriate with a person of Conchita's status, she wasn't a bourgeois lady, she was a concierge, she belonged with me in the back of the house.

I made coffee for both of us and we sat at the kitchen table to talk, we did some small talk first, she asked me about my work at the airport and if I liked Ginette, she made a comment about my hair that looked quite appropriate for a Portuguese maid and finally opened her bag and retrieved a dossier with some papers. Then she became serious.

"Madame Violetta, gave me this dossier with papers for you to sign. She is with Maitre Gareau at the moment waiting for me to go back to his office within an hour. She thought that you wouldn't like to appear in front of Maitre Gareau dressed like that and since you have no other clothes anymore she decided to tell him that you are in bed with the flu and also stressed because of your wife's departure. Mr Gareau agreed to help, but you will have to call him and tell him over the telephone that you agree with what is written in those papers and you signed everything on your own free will. He has known you for many years and he would understand any impostor. He even said to Violetta that he was going to ask you some personal questions that nobody else would be able to answer, in order to be absolutely certain that he is talking to you."

She stopped to look at me and I grabbed the chance to say something, "Just slow down a bit Conchita, you go too fast here, you are telling me that Maitre Gareau will accept the validity of my signature, after he speaks to me in person?."

She was a bit confused, after all she wasn't an educated woman and not as clever as Violetta, "I think so Maria, don't ask me very much, I just repeat what Violetta instructed me to say to you."

I sympathized with her, she wasn't the right person to do that, but in the other hand she was the only one that knew me in my present condition and obviously a person that Violetta could trust completely. I said to her, "Let me have a look at those papers please."

She handed me several documents saying at the same time, "Madame said to me that everything written in these documents is based on what you agreed to yesterday with her and she wouldn't do anything to cheat you, so you don't have to study them carefully now, she will be back later with a copy for you fully endorsed, which you can study at your own free time." She stopped and looked at me seemingly pleased. She was proud that she was able to be so articulate.

I looked at her with concern, and then at the documents, one was a 'Formal Notary Authorization' or FNA document, very essential under French Law. It was four thickly written pages, I went quickly through them; basically Violetta had full authority to run everything belonging to me on her own free will without any other consultation. The document covered all my assets, 'immobilier and mobilier' as the French called them. I carefully read that the duration was for a year, unless the signing parties were going to renew it no more than a month and no less than fifteen days before its expiration date. I found that reasonable enough.

The next document was a 'declaration de proprietaire' a declaration of mine that I was letting her to reside in my house exercising full ownership rights. That was a tricky paper but again the duration was for a year. Basically what I understood in this document was that she had the right to use this house without the obligation of paying rent to me, yet again I wasn't 100% certain.

Finally there was a document I found quite bizarre. Under this document, I was giving Madame Violetta the full right 'to put me in a working mode' in other words I was declaring in this document that I had the intention to work for 'at least a year' and I was allowing her to decide what kind of work would be suitable for me, taking into consideration

that for many years I was outside the working world and I sort of lost my capability of acting as a useful and professional person.

I looked again at this document and I thought that probably Maitre Gareau would oppose it, because I was basically appointing Madame Violetta as my Guardian, though I was not a minor. I felt a bit indecisive about that, on the other hand Maitre Gareau might think that this would give me a good push to go out to the professional world again, not knowing of course that I was already belonging to the immigrant domestic force of this country.

On impulse I stood up and headed for the telephone at the hallway saying to Conchita at the same time, "I am calling Maitre Gareau now Conchita, I'll be back with you in a few minutes," making it clear that I didn't want her to follow me.

I was soon talking to Maitre Gareau, using again my cultural and very Parisian bourgeois voice, "Bonsoir Maitre Gareau, I am sure you are wondering why I decided to"

I talked to him for about fifteen minutes. He did ask me some personal questions and he did ask me how I feel after my recent separation with my wife. I explained to him that at this difficult period of my life, Madame Violetta Perreira dos Santos is the best that could have happened to me. She is completely trustworthy and she has my full confidence. I might go abroad for a long period of time, but I might also stay behind and in that case I would like a push to try and become a useful citizen again and Miss Santos would have been an excellent person to give me ideas and initiatives. Finally I was completely prepared to sign the documents in my hands.

He was quite convinced at the end and he wished me well, mentioning that we were going to review the situation in a year unless something extraordinary happened in between.

I went back to the kitchen, signed the papers with the feeling that I must have missed plenty of 'fine print' in them, but I couldn't back off now, too late for that. I gave them back to Conchita. She stood up immediately understanding that somehow I had sealed my fate now because she said to me, "You are one of us now girl. Welcome to the world of maids, cleaners and domestics."

She started to go, but remembered something as she was opening the front door, "And Maria, please try to remember when you talk to people, to use your vulgar and less articulate accented voice. You are good at that. I could hear you talking to the lawyer using this upper class voice and accent, that definitely has to go, you are one of us now. I'll talk to your Mistress, maybe I'll see you soon in my little apartment, you can do some housework for me and then we can have some more fun together."

She winked at me and disappeared closing quietly the door behind her...

CHAPTER 11

New status confirmed and finalized

It was well after seven in the evening when Madame came back. I was sitting in the kitchen table thinking about my predicament, if I could call that, the confusing situation I created for myself, on my own will!

She let herself in with her own front door key and I barely had the time to stand when she emerged to the kitchen full of energy and good mood. I managed to curtsy awkwardly saying, "God evening Madame, I am glad you are back, I was getting a bit confused sitting here on my own."

She looked at me with an amusing, but also critical look, I sensed she was checking my appearance, but also she was thinking how to proceed verbally from now on.

She opened her big leather bag, one of my wife's practical but expensive items and removed a plastic folder and put it on the kitchen table, "Those are copies for you, of the documents you signed earlier Maria." She paused and looked at me in a more austere manner, "You are a clever enough person to realize that I virtually control all of your assets now including you personally, because I see you as an asset also Maria, you are completely under my authority now, certainly for the next year!"

I looked at her with a worried look of the 'what have I done' type and in her usual quick manner she picked it because she decided to lecture me once more.

"Please, bring me a glass of white wine and serve one for yourself and join me to the sitting room. We might as well have a final chat before you really and truly start being a domestic." She said that with a finality that frightened me, but I had no choice anymore, my fate was in her hands and the sooner I adapted to that fact the better.

I was sitting rather uncomfortably at the end of a chair trying to keep my knees together in a feminine manner and resting my hands on my aproned lap. She was sitting comfortably in the sofa sipping her wine and smoking a long cigarette, looking very secure and elegant. "Probably this is the last time I allow you to sit in here, normally you should rest only in the kitchen or in your room, in particular when I am home or we have guests." She looked at me in a slightly ironical manner continuing, "I know of course that you can be anywhere in the house when I am not around, I can't control that can I? I've been in your position myself, remember?"

She had a sip of her drink and this time went straight to the point, "As I already mentioned to you girl, you are going to replace me in all my jobs and commitments, in other words you will be doing exactly what I was doing until yesterday morning. You know of course that I used to come three times a week in this house, which means you will be working as a maid here the same days. Twice you have to be at Orly as a cleaner and one full day you will be working as a dishwasher at a posh Parisian restaurant, 'Chez Prokov', I believe you used to go there quite often with your wife, in fact this is how I met your wife and she decided to employ me."

I nearly fell from the chair I was sitting, I felt my cheeks getting all red and I managed to say in a panicked and almost annoyed voice, "But Violetta,...I mean Madame, you can't do that to me, I am a close friend of the manager and all the waiters know me and every time I am there they treat me like royalty, no I don't think I can accept that, it is a bit too much!"

She didn't lose her calm, she didn't even raise the tone of her voice, "Obviously Maria you don't fully comprehend your condition, you are not able to decide for yourself anymore, you are my employee and I can delegate your services anywhere I like, read carefully what you signed before you go to bed tonight."

She abruptly stood up and before I had the chance to react she came in front of me and slapped me hard in the face twice, I lost my balance and nearly fell from the chair, but she managed to hold me in position. This time she yelled at me, "Listen to me maid, you don't have the right to oppose me or contradict my decisions, I will decide for you, am I clear?"

I felt the tears coming up very quickly, I started crying and I barely managed to say to her, "Yes Madame, I understand Madame, I am sorry Madame." As I was saying that I managed to stand and I retrieved some tissue paper from my apron pocket to wipe my eyes and blow my nose.

She softened as quickly as she turned mad just an instant ago and went back to the sofa. She had another sip of her wine and asked me to sit down again and drink some of mine.



"I am sorry I was a bit harsh to you just now Maria but I want to define very clearly our respective roles in this new relationship, I am your employer now, you are my hired domestic, the quicker you accept that the better for you."

She lighted another cigarette and took another sip of her drink, "And if you let me continue, you will see that when you go to work to Prokov, nobody and I mean nobody, even your ex wife will be able to recognize you, by then you will look much more convincing than now. You see, you are not going to work there, until I am completely satisfied that you really are ready for that."

I felt ever so relieved when I heard that last sentence and though my cheeks were burning from her slapping I managed a weak smile full of gratitude, "Thank you Madame for making it easier for me, I guess I have an extra reason now to try even harder to become a true Maria." I

stopped and then I added on impulse, "But Madame, I am worried about my voice, this is the hardest part of my transformation, I know that I can play the Portuguese ignorant woman, with a minimal knowledge of French, but I still feel a bit vulnerable in that field."

"I thought of that myself Maria, you are going to have some phonetic lessons with a lady specializing in the field, she usually works with transsexuals, there are certainly ways to improve your voice, just be patient."

I looked startled at her, this woman never ceased to amaze me. She even thought of a voice teacher, how far she is thinking I can go? My conspiracy theory surfaced again, I got the feeling once more that everything was very carefully planned and so far I was right. My wife talked with Violetta, Maitre Gareau was contacted in advance, Conchita was mobilized, even a voice teacher. What next!

"And of course Maria," Violetta continued, "You will need other physical improvements, what Conchita did to you yesterday with your hair was only the beginning."

Here we go again I thought, more plans are coming out.

"Tomorrow I'll take you to a special beautician to take care of you and before you start worrying again, nothing permanent is going to happen to you. All the alterations to your face and body will be reversible."

I was panicking once more, what face and body alterations she is talking about, what

She saw me uneasy again and sighed, "I wish you could trust me more Maria, I don't intend to harm you in anyway, I want you to feel secure and comfortable in your new role and position in the society. I expect you wouldn't like yourself to be ridiculed like some freak, you must be as true as possible, don't you agree?"

"Can you tell me please in more details Madame what those changes are?" I managed to ask in a genuinely frank voice.

When she finished talking about ten minutes later I felt singularly excited. I was going to have a full makeover in a special 'salon de beauté', not to become a pretty bourgeois lady, but to become a convincing female domestic. I was going to have breast forms glued permanently to my skin, permed hair easily maintained, pierced ears with cheap silver studs, a 'cache sex' to hide any unwanted volume in front of me and other 'improvements' I was going to find out tomorrow.

Violetta finished talking to me in those words, "in twenty four hours from now you will be sitting here looking like the female I want you to look. Don't expect to be Miss Pretty; you will simply be Miss Mop, feminine but rough looking, like any female domestic normally looks."

CHAPTER 12

Makeover

The 'Salon de Beaute de Mme Beatrice' was a very humble looking establishment somewhere in the back streets of the low middle class 14eme arrondissement. Mme Violetta very kindly drove me there at about nine o'clock in the morning. She abandoned

me by the entrance and left quickly simply telling me that she would pick me up after I finish.

I was dressed in one of my new cheap dresses, low shoes and the usual head scarf. I still felt very vulnerable alone in public. I rang the bell by the entrance and a big rather vulgar woman opened the door letting me in rather abruptly, "Come in, come in, you are late and I have to work on you for several hours and I still have to clean the mess in this place."

I followed her in a big room with several hairdresser chairs, and all the necessary paraphernalia. She continued talking to me, "I know all about you Maria, Mme Violetta told me everything so don't be shy, we have to make you look convincing for the job you are going to do in the future. We go a long way back with Violetta but I have a feeling that she is becoming 'une grande dame' now, with no time for her old friend Beatrice, she will be going to the expensive places of the 16th or 17th. She is so sharp and ever so ambitious our Violetta." She said that last sentence chuckling.

Another of Madame's contacts I thought to myself as I was standing in the middle of the room feeling uneasy. Mme Beatrice saw that and said instantly, "You might as well give me a hand to clean this place before I start working on you, Natalie my assistant didn't come to work today telling me that she is sick, a big lie mind you, I know she spent the night with her boyfriend and God knows what time they went to bed."

As she was talking she moved to a cupboard and removed a pink overall from a hanger, "Here, put this on and pick the broom in that corner and start sweeping the floor."

I spent a whole hour cleaning the place as Mme Beatrice was organizing her tools and implements. It was past ten o'clock as I sat on the chair. I was very grateful because she offered me a 'petit café' before she started working on me.

Five hours later I was nearly ready. I had my hair permed once more, this time professionally, in an even darker colour, my lovely blond straight hair has gone for good. She pierced my ears, plucked my eyebrows to a vulgar line that no society lady would accept, removed all unnecessary hair from my face, arms, and legs, and glued my breast forms telling me at the time, "You need a special solution to remove them Maria, which I can obtain when your Mistress tells me so. There is no way that you can remove them yourself."

Another nail to my coffin I thought to myself or simply the 'road with no return?' I was thinking that realizing, somehow surprised, that a feeling of resignation was taking over me. My initial worries and reactions were gradually replaced by a 'so be it' tendency.

I was still wearing my pink overall helping Mme Beatrice to tidy up the place when Madame turned up as elegant and fresh as ever. She greeted Beatrice the French way, kisses in both cheeks and turned to look at me, continuing talking to her, "Well, well, you did a great job Beatrice, she looks 'tres reelle' very close to what I had in mind."

She looked at me again realizing that I was wearing a pink overall dress on top of my street clothes and continued talking to Beatrice, ignoring me completely for the time being, "I am glad you made her do some work around the place, she needs at the moment all the practice she can get as a domestic and cleaner."

Beatrice made no comment but turned to me and said, "You saw Maria where I keep my coffee facilities, please go and make a fresh pot of coffee, I am sure Madame Violetta would love some and so would I."

I simply said, "Oui Madame" thinking that ever since I switched to my new station in life I was receiving orders from virtually everybody including the concierge and the hairdresser. I also realized that the lower class people are less polite and ruder to domestics. I only have to remember how I was treating servants all my life as a rich upper class person, indifferently but always in a polite manner.

I started making the coffee in the small kitchenette at the back of the shop. I was sorting out cups and saucers when I noticed a small white apron hanging behind the door. On impulse I took it and tied it firmly around my waist. It was not in a pristine condition but somehow I felt that I could do it. For the first time in my life I could put an apron on without worrying about people seeing me, on the contrary I was expected now to wear one. I put everything in a tray and I carried it carefully to the two ladies sitting in the salon's waiting room chatting amicably. I could tell they were old friends.

I was blushing all over when I started serving them. They both noticed my apron but Madame spoke first, "You are such a natural Maria in this role, and for that reason you make my task to transform you so much easier."

Beatrice who was also impressed by my servile attitude said to Madame, "Aren't you lucky Violetta to find such a domesticated creature. I wish I had her here in my shop, I could train her to become a shampoo girl and of course she would keep the place in perfect order. This assistant of mine, Natalie is such a slob; I have to tell her off all the time. All she cares about is boys and how to go to bed with them."

My Mistress laughed in a good hearted manner and said to Beatrice, "I can see you would like her to work for you dear, but I am afraid her program is full at the moment, she has to look after my house, two days cleaning at Orly and another day working in a restaurant as a general cleaner and dishwasher." She stopped briefly to light a cigarette and continued in a matter of fact tone of voice, "But I keep your offer in mind for the future, I can see that it would be good for her to get some experience as a hairdresser's assistant, it can be an asset for a good domestic."

Once more I noticed they were talking about me without including me. I was simply standing in a small distance, accepting the natural role of a maidservant waiting for the next order to come. I was dying for a cup of coffee myself but I didn't dare to ask.

Beatrice must have felt that because she turned to me and said, "Aren't you going to have some Maria? I don't think your Mistress would object to that."

I thanked her and rushed to the kitchenette to bring another cup and saucer. I realized as I was walking that my body's center of gravity was somehow different and then I understood that my permanent breast forms were slightly pushing the upper part of my body forward. I pulled my shoulders back and walked taking smaller steps. That somehow made my body movement more comfortable.

CHAPTER 13

Madame lectures me again

As we were driving back, Madame was somehow skeptical and not that chatty, I was doing the driving in the 'Chauffeuse' mode without the proper uniform of course and she was sitting comfortably in the back seat of the expensive BMW that used to be my car only a couple of days ago.

She broke the silence as I was about to take a left turn towards my ex house, where I was employed only as a domestic now, I shouldn't forget that. "Keep going straight please towards the 16th, there is a change of plans, I don't really need you tonight, I think you can spend the night with Conchita, you would like that wouldn't you Maria?"

A deep excitement like an electric shock went through me and I nearly lost control of the car. She noticed that of course and said somehow sarcastically, "Of course you like it, but please drive more carefully if you want to arrive safely to Conchita's place.

"Of course Madame, I am sorry Madame", I managed to say concentrating to the driving.

She continued talking to me in an even voice as if she was thinking loudly, "Don't even think for a minute Maria that you are ready for your new role, and don't even make that mistake that will probably cost your exposure and public humiliation."

I felt terribly uneasy by what she was saying, she was using again the carrot and stick method, praise first, criticism after. I was about to ask her why she is so negative since I am trying so hard to please her, but she kept talking in the same even voice.

"Don't panic, you are on a good road and I already told you your two principal assets, you are naturally submissive and perfect for the role you are destined and also you are soft featured and have a small build for a man and practically no body hair. But this is not enough. You can not act as a woman of your supposed humble origins and uneducated nature within three days, you need a lot of training for that and you need to change your way of thinking and acting on a day to day basis."

She stopped to light a cigarette; I realized she was always smoking when she was trying to tell me serious things. She inhaled the smoke deeply and continued in the same tone, "And of course this is where Conchita comes in, I really rely on her to reform you, she is exactly the right person for that and you already noticed it yourself. She is the right class for that, she can tell you all the secrets of the women of that class and background, she can mould you to be like her, or at least this is what I hope will happen."

Another pause. I took the chance to say something back, to interrupt her monologue. "But Madame, I like Conchita and I am willing to cooperate with her, in fact we will be talking in Portuguese from now on in order to fit more to my new role. And of course..."

She rudely interrupted me again, "Let me finish please what I have to say and then you can make comments. I know very well that you enjoy the sexual context of your encounter with Conchita, but I somehow encouraged that because it can be part of your training. By being intimate with a woman of that style in a hopefully Lesbian relationship you will

learn a lot from her as well, you will learn to talk in a vulgar manner, you will learn to use dirty slang words, you will learn to feel to your skin what you really are from now on, a lowly domestic female servant a 'bonne a tout faire' as the French very cleverly say, 'a maid of all works'."

What she was saying managed to excite me in a sinister way, probably it was the sexual element, but somehow it wasn't only that. It was the feeling of total dependence, the feeling that I belong to someone and I am not responsible anymore to decide for anything major. Madame Violetta was the one to decide for me and somehow I was accepting that more and more eagerly.

She finally finished her small speech as we were approaching Conchita's tiny concierge's apartment, "I know Maria that you have a sharp and educated mind and you can make your own judgments about what I say to you, and I certainly don't want you to become dumb and stupid because you are a maid now, on the contrary I want you to stay clever and alert and feel continuously what is happening to you, to an upper class bourgeois. And probably in a few months from now when you will be a fully trained domestic you will be able to make comparison with your previous life and comparison between the usually privileged male sex and the usually subjugated female sex... You know already that I tried all my life to escape from that type of 'servitude' as I call it and I feel that I manage so far quite well thanks to your cooperation.. The question is will you want to escape a year from now from the same 'servitude', or your submissive character will keep you tied to that life?"

She finished her speech with a vital question addressed to me and I certainly had no answer to that. But my previous excitement gave way now to a fear for the future. Where I will be and what I will be doing a year from now? If so many extraordinary things happened to me in three days only, God knows what a whole year can bring!

Madame clearly wasn't expecting an answer from me to her last question. In a couple of minutes I was stopping the car in front of the grand building where Conchita was the concierge. I stepped out, opened the back door for Madame and she came to the front seat and took the wheel saying to me, "Have fun Maria, but I want you tomorrow to the house by ten o'clock, the speech specialist is coming for you."

She drove off accelerating the expensive car as I rushed to the side door of the grand building and rang the bell looking in an uneasy manner around me. The public exposure was still very traumatic for me, Madame was right; I had a long way to go.

In a minute or two the door opened and the familiar big figure of Conchita appeared in front of me. She smiled warmly saying in an excited manner in Portuguese of course, "Look who is here, my new maid friend from Portugal; what they have done to you girl, you look different."

She grabbed my arm and dragged me in closing firmly the door behind her.

CHAPTER 14

Six months later – Chez Prokov

“Maria, come quickly with your bucket and mop, the Chef needs you urgently, the kitchen floor is very messy.”

“Oui Monsieur Alphonse, right away Monsieur”, I answered in a heavily accented husk voice to the Maitre, as I abandoned my pile of pots and pans and rushed to get my mop and bucket.

It was my third time in the restaurant and all my initial fears of being recognized as my old self have been considerably receded. Mr. Alphonse the Maitre and all the waiters had not a clue who I was, they all treated me as what I appeared to be, the Wednesday general cleaner and dishwasher. I had to work the morning shift from 7.00am to 4.00pm with half an hour break.

Dressed in coarse cotton overall dress, rubber gloves and apron and wearing special clogs and a mob cap I looked like an inmate from prison in the days of ‘les Miserables de Victor Hugo’!

My only consolation was that I was working together with Ginette the fellow cleaner from Orly Airport. I felt comfortable with her, she knew what she was doing and she always was covering up for me.

I certainly was at the very bottom of the pecking order in the whole restaurant. I was at the beck and call of all people working there. I kept my head down as I was trying to be as accommodating as possible. Ginette was considered more senior than me and on top of that she was French. I was to their eyes a coarse Portuguese immigrant worker. By that stage I had legal papers as a foreign domestic worker and I had to renew my ‘carte de sejour’ every six months queuing with hundreds of other foreigners at 6.00 o’clock in the morning in the ‘Prefecture de Police’. I had to take my day off when I had to do that.

In more than one occasion I could see old friends and acquaintances of mine eating at the main dining room. I could see them secretly from the kitchen door as I was mopping the floor.

This was the hardest day of the week for me, I was totally exhausted when I was back in the house and yet I had to prepare dinner for Mme Violetta and serve it.

I certainly wasn’t getting any pleasure out of this job and I was trying to bring it up as a topic of discussion with Madame. I would like to quit. But my few attempts so far were firmly rejected. Her usual reply was, ‘I was doing it for many years Maria and Ginette, is still doing it, so you will continue going there until I decide otherwise’.

I found Ginette rather anxious and excited when I arrived to work at 7.15 that particular Wednesday morning, my fourth time ‘chez Prokov’. The weather was miserable that day and the public transport took longer.

“Come on girl you are late,” she told me as I stepped in from the staff entrance in the back. “Mr. Alphonse is crossed with you,” she continued, “Go quickly and change we have lots of work to do today, there is a doctors’ function, the whole restaurant is booked and closed to the public.”

We soon were working cleaning the main dining area, started organizing tables to accommodate groups of eight. The two waiters were starting work at midday so Ginette and I were struggling to do the work supervised by the maitre Monsieur Alphonse.

At about ten o'clock we had a break for a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Mr. Alphonse came in looking rather worried. He addressed Ginette, he used to ignore me, thinking that as an ignorant Portuguese 'servante' I wouldn't be able to understand him anyway.

"Ginette we have a problem," he said in an agitated voice, "Maurice, one of the waiters just telephoned and said he is down with high fever, probably a bad cold; we are seriously sort of staff now and today out of all days that we have about eighty doctors to feed."

"Probably we could help with the serving Mr. Alphonse?" Ginette said spontaneously, we can stay longer if needed, I am certain Maria wouldn't have an objection."

I felt a bit uneasy. What about Madame Violetta, I had to prepare her dinner, I started saying something in my accented French, "But Ginette, Madame Violetta wants me back by 5.00, I have to start dinner, you know how particular she is and..."

She interrupted me abruptly, "Don't worry about that girl I'll talk to your Mistress, remember, she is an old friend of mine," she said meaningfully.

Mr. Alphonse looked at Ginette again, "Do you thing Maria would be able to actually serve? She seems quite rough to me."

He put me down again without even addressing me.

Ginette said, "Don't worry Maitre, Maria will be delivering the trays and I'll be doing the actual serving, she is a strong girl, probably stronger than your waiters."

"I know, I know" Maitre Alphonse said, "She is washing all those heavy pots and pans all day, her muscles are quite strong by now." Then as if he remembered something he added, "But I need you two in proper black and white uniform, you can't serve wearing those dirty overalls and aprons, so I ordered to be delivered soon two full uniforms. You can change after you finish with your messy chores."

We were ready, looking quite decent in our black and white uniforms when the first guests started arriving. As the Maitre said to us there would be quite a few foreign delegates, mostly from Italy and Spain.

Our uniforms were quite practical, step in black dresses and pretty rounded half white aprons with a nice frill around the edge. Ginette helped me with my makeup and I was quite pleased with my looks. For the first time in the restaurant I felt like a human being, I was looking forward to start serving drinks in a little while.

I had an extra reason to be excited; Ginette flirted openly with me when we were changing to our serving uniforms. She started fondling me as I was standing in my underwear trying to fix my unruly black curly hair. I was totally unprepared for that because we never had the chance before to be intimate. I was cautious not to offend her, she was married and also a close friend of Mme Violetta, I wouldn't risk anything for that reason.

She started fondling my private parts whispering to my ear, "I never had the chance to tell you how much I love girly boys like you, I would love to seduce you like Conchita did before, but I am afraid we are very short of time."

I managed to answer in my husky sexual voice that I developed the last few months as Maria, "Oh Ginette you excite me so much. I'd love to be seduced by you but Mr. Alphonse might knock at the door any moment now, the guests will be here soon." And then I turned and kissed her in the mouth, a long passionate kiss.

She brought me back to reality with a hard spank in my bottom, "You are right girly boy, no time for that now, but one day we will get the chance to be more intimate, would you like that, two fellow maids seducing each other?"

I felt a strong sexual jolt with those words but I managed to control myself by saying, "Yes dear Ginette, I'd love that but we have to be careful, you are a married woman and I have Mme Violetta to think about."

"You shouldn't worry about that Maria, nobody really pays attention to two lowly female domestics like us, it's only a matter of time until we find the right moment. I want you to look forward to that." She said that as she gave another squeeze to my private parts and patted my bottom

She insisted on a darker complexion for me when she helped me with the makeup, after all I was a Portuguese migrant woman and I had to look the part.

CHAPTER 15

The party Chez Prokov

People kept coming for nearly an hour. The Maitre was organizing the sittings and we were serving drinks, either a glass of champagne or soft drinks.

I was bringing the trays full from the kitchen and Ginette and the male waiter, Georges was his name, were serving. I was standing behind in a safe distance from the guests but close enough to watch what was happening.

French, Spanish and Italian was spoken freely and the atmosphere was quite jolly.

Suddenly I saw them at a far table! My wife and her new partner, the doctor, were sitting at that table. They were sharing it with Italian doctors, I could hear Italian spoken, chatting amicably and laughing happily.

My feet started trembling and I must have had a funny expression because Ginette asked me rather sharply, "What is the matter Maria, have you seen a ghost? You seem terrified."

I hastily explained that my wife and her partner were in the restaurant and I discreetly pointed at the table. What I am going to do Ginette? I certainly can't appear in front of them like this." I said in a panicky mode.

"Now, calm down girl, nobody can recognize you as you look at the moment; simply try to stay away from their table. Don't worry, I told you that before at Orly Airport, nobody really looks at cleaners, domestics or waitresses, we more or less are invisible to the large public, we are there to clean serve and be quiet so I shouldn't worry at all if I were you. Okay?"

Her soothing and firm voice managed to calm me to a point. I still was trembling though.

Mr. Alphonse approached with a mean look, "What you are up to you two, stop chatting like this we have work to do, soon we will start serving the meal. Come on, move it!"

The next two hours we were really busy. My arms were hurting from carrying from the kitchen all those heavy trays. I realized that day that being a waitress is a very strenuous and demanding job. It certainly is much easier to clean or cook at home.

I was always aware of the presence of my wife and her partner and I tried to stay as far as possible from their table.

At one point Mr. Alphonse came abruptly to me saying, "Maria, stop serving for a while, go immediately to the ladies toilets and do some tidying up, I just got a complain from a lady; do it now please." He said with urgency in his voice.

I hated that job but I had to follow his orders. I picked some implements and toilet paper from the cleaning cabinet and went to the 'Ladies'. My God what a mess; haven't they used a toilet before those elegant lady doctors?

I finished as quickly as possible and as I was picking my cleaning materials to take them back two ladies came in chatting amicably in French, one of them was my wife Annabelle!

We came face to face looking at each other. I saw something in her eyes, contempt, amusement? I couldn't say, but at this moment I knew that she recognized me. I felt totally embarrassed, I couldn't say a word, I simply whispered 'excusez moi Madame' and left as quickly as possible.

I heard her saying to her friend, "Thank God that maid has been here to clean the toilet, I simply hate to go to the 'ladies' when it is messy."

I went back to my serving duties without saying a word to Ginette. I saw her with the corner of my eye going back to her table. She completely ignored me, no sign of recognition whatsoever. I started thinking again; probably she didn't recognize me after all.

And then I realized that I couldn't care anymore. Even if she recognized me this is who I am at this stage of my life, a maid, a cleaner, a domestic and this happened on my own will. This is who I am and I couldn't change it at least for another six months, thinking of the agreement I had with Mme Violetta.

CHAPTER 16

Eleven months later

I was having my morning coffee break in the kitchen when I heard the front door bell ringing rather persistently. I wasn't expecting any deliveries and Mme Violetta was using her own key. Who could have been at this time of morning?

I adjusted my white coiffe (my maid's cap) and my full white apron and rushed to the door. I was confident enough by now, nearly a year later, to face all kinds of visitors. I opened the door and froze...

My wife Annabelle was standing there, a big smile in her face, looking as beautiful and elegant as ever.

"Oh la la quelle changement Mon dieu!" She exclaimed and then continued in a cheerful tone of voice, "Bonjour Maria", Violetta told me that you would be in today doing your chores, may I come in?"

I managed to whisper, "What on earth are you doing here Annabelle, I thought you were abroad, I am sorry I am dressed like this, I can explain..."

She ignored my uncomfortable whisper and pushed me aside as she came in saying at the same time, "Don't worry dear, I am very aware of your situation, in fact I have been watching your progress with great interest. Make me some coffee and I'll explain everything."

"So you knew all along who I was a few months ago at that dinner 'Chez Prokov'", I said rather aggressively.

"Of course I did", she answered rather indifferently, adding at the same time, "You looked quite efficient working next to Ginette that day, I was very impressed by your performance and eagerness to please."

By that stage we were in the sitting room. She turned to me as I was about to go to the kitchen to make coffee, "In fact that day I realised fully how well you were adapting to your new position in society, that day I finally fully believed Violetta who always was very certain about your preferences in life."

I went to the kitchen in a state of shock. My wife was aware of Violetta's movements, probably was the one who organised everything and pulled the ropes behind the scenes. I had to find out. Her appearance here today was going to be catalytic.

"The house looks very much the same Maria; though I must admit it looks better cared than before, thanks to the new live in maid obviously." I heard her saying from the sitting area, finishing her sentence with a chuckle.

Two hours and several cups of coffee later my wife (we were still legally married as she reminded me) finished her fascinating narration.

I was so completely transfixed by everything she mentioned that she had to bring me back to reality, "Are you in a trance mode Maria? I am going up to our old bedroom I need a few things from up there, don't worry Mme Violetta knows; I'll be back in a few minutes, probably you can fix something for us to eat, its past my lunch time and I am starving."

I watched her going up but my mind was still transfixed in what she said. Deep down I was pleased for one thing; my 'conspiracy theory' was fully justified. Everything was carefully planned between my wife and Mme Violetta.

Annabelle detected my latent femininity and submissive nature and Violetta was only too eager to accommodate; she really and truly wanted to change her life and go up the social ladder and that was the one in a lifetime chance.

When I asked Annabelle why she wanted to do that she was not very specific, in fact she was rather vague I thought. All I understood was that at the time she was in the middle of a turbulent relation and when she decided to abandon me with the good doctor she only thought that this would be a great diversion and knowing my moody and depressive character this change of roles would be eventually beneficial for me.

And all of a sudden I thought that she was probably right after all. Wasn't I satisfied with my current life, nearly a year later? Wasn't I more healthy and energetic and eager to please? Annabelle had a point after all, probably this exchange of roles with Violetta saved me for a very serious break down!

I rushed to the kitchen to prepare something for a light lunch. By that stage I was excellent in improvising a quick lunch or dinner; Mme Violetta trained me well in that direction. As I was working I realized that I knew nothing about Annabelle's current life, private and professional. She hasn't mentioned anything so far about herself; was she based still in Milan? Was she together with her doctor/lover?

All of a sudden I sensed something and turned to face the kitchen door. My wife was standing there watching me, a big grin in her face. I blushed as I looked back, I still felt uncomfortable in front of her dressed as a simple female domestic.

"I have been watching you for a couple of minutes now, I am simply amazed!"

"Amazed with what?" I answered back rather boldly.

Annabelle ignored my rather 'impertinent' answer and continued, "I am amazed how naturally you move around in your feminine persona; Violetta was telling me how natural you are in your role as a maid and cleaner and I always thought she was exaggerating. Now I know for myself how natural you can be."

I decided to continue being rather bold with her, her presence in this house was intriguing me. "Why are you here Annabelle, aren't you living in Milan anymore, aren't you together with your doctor anymore?"

She looked at me rather annoyed now, "you are rather bold for a maid, Maria; Violetta was always telling me how proper and docile you gradually became during the last year." She stopped and looked at me again.

"But I am not going to chastise you now, not for the time being anyway and after all you are entitled to a full explanation, since what I am about to say implicates you as well; So lets have something to eat, I can see you prepared a wonderful salad. We can talk during our meal; we can sit here in the kitchen table, after all this is where we were taking most of our meals as a couple."

In about an hour I knew why my wife paid me this visit. She was coming back to live in this house! Her romance with her doctor friend collapsed, he stayed in Milan and she was coming back to Paris. She contacted her old hospital and they were eager to have her back.

She was more or less anticipating all my questions as she continued talking to me. In the meantime we were in our second bottle of wine.

"As I was telling you Maria, Violetta will move out of course, she will be paid very handsomely for her services and she will take with her half my wardrobe, anything she was using the past year belongs to her now. She will be able to establish herself as a professional. She is seriously thinking of opening a domestic employment agency; she will be good at that."

She had another sip of wine and I managed to ask her, "And how do I fit in your new project Annabelle? Surely you don't expect me to continue act as the maid in this house when you move in. I better contact Maitre Gareau, he should..."

She interrupted me rather abruptly, "Don't you worry, I will contact Maitre Gareau when the time comes but we have to decide certain things together first, we are still legally bound, remember?"

She stopped and looked at me. She made me feel uncomfortable again. I wasn't feeling at ease with her; somehow I was organizing my life without her for nearly a year now, thinking that she was out of my life forever. I looked back at her; she was a very attractive woman, the epitome of Parisian elegance. A funny feeling of nostalgia started emerging, was I still in love with my strayed wife?

She started speaking again, "I am going to ask you some simple questions now Maria, not as your wife but as a doctor. Don't forget that my first degree was in psychiatry; cosmetology and surgery came later."

When she looked at me again I was all of a sudden very aware of my feminine looks and way of thinking and acting, I felt my bra firmly enrobing by permanent breast forms, my uniform dress touching my thighs, I felt my makeup, plucked eyebrows, pierced ears, painted nails, permed hair.

Annabelle as if she could read my mind said to me, "Do you feel comfortable in your present role, or to make it more specific, do you get a pleasure (no matter if it is sexual or intellectual or both) from being Maria, a female domestic worker?"



she stopped briefly but added immediately, "I want a truthful answer Maria!"

The familiar stomach flickering that indicated excitement of all sorts was back in me. At the same time my acquired servant's docility was taking over, "Yes Madame," I answered lowering my eyes slightly blushing, "I enjoy my present position in life, I enjoy being a maid, doing housework, cooking, shopping and acting like any female servant. I feel a fulfilment in that role. I can't explain it and probably doesn't make sense to a normal human being but this is the way I feel and I can't stop that!" There I said it; I had it out of my system again!

She was smiling at me now, "That was cool Maria, the way you just spoke was so truthful; I can see now why Violetta had such an easy task, you are a natural submissive and you enjoy cross dressing, so the result is that you can be an exceptionally conscientious female servant."

She looked at me seriously again, "Do you want to continue being a servant in this house working for me this time? The conditions might change slightly, we will discuss practical matters in detail, but essentially you will continue being Maria the maid looking after this house and my guests."

I was feeling nervous again, all sorts of questions were in my head; which guests? What about our old friends? What about a boyfriend for Annabelle? What if...

She anticipated my questions again, "I know how you feel at the moment Maria, you are not certain where you stand with me, I am not Violetta, I am a professional doctor, I'll have important guests in this house, But I can tell you right from the beginning that I am not going to embarrass you in front of people that you don't want to be embarrassed. And let me add a personal touch here, I am still fond of you Maria, I never disliked you or hated you as a person, I simply understood soon after I married you that I married a soft and kind person, someone who wasn't exactly correct as my other half, but some one whom I would love to have next to me in a different capacity. And we have the chance to do it now!"

I was thinking hard again; Annabelle was asking me to coexist with her again but in a totally different capacity! Would I be able to accept such an unexpected proposition? And what would the consequences be? With Violetta was different, I knew there was somehow an 'expiry day' to our mutual arrangement. But with my wife?

She continued talking more excitedly now, looking me directly in the eyes, "I feel it ever so strongly Maria, I sense it with my feminine intuition, you want to accept my proposal but you are also thinking about your future as a human being, you probably hesitate to give up all your assets and become a completely dependent domestic worker."

This time I managed to find my voice and said eagerly, "This is my ultimate fear Annabelle; I am quite comfortable in my present role of maid/housekeeper/cleaner but I am worried about my future, I need some reassurances that I somehow have an escape route in case of a serious change of mind and/or an unexpected event like for instance your untimely death!"

She looked at me with a smile in her face, "I thought of that Maria and I agree with you; you do need some reassurances, since we are heading for a much more permanent mutual agreement verified by our notary Maitre Gareau. I already had a talk with a spe-

cialized lawyer; his suggestion is to make a trust in your name which you will be able to access when you turn fifty, something like an early pension scheme."

I looked at her sceptically, "But what if I change my mind earlier, Annabelle, I am only in my mid thirties now. What if I decide to come back to the bourgeois world, which I abandoned so happily a year ago?"

"Ah", she said mischievously, "You must feel a bit of a pressure there Maria, you have to accept certain constraints if you want to keep the dream going. Your dream is to live as a female domestic worker? Then you have to stay in that world the years to come, all you must remember is that you are not going to die poor and destitute!"

I looked at her excited and worried at the same time; she knew that I would agree, she could see it in my eyes. As I was about to say yes she added something that made me feel a lot better.

"I'll tell you what Maria; I know that eventually you will not turn down my proposition, but I can add here something even more positive for you. Do you want to hear it?"

I simply said eagerly, 'Please tell me Madame.'

"Violetta told me that you are not very happy with your work at Orly and 'Chez Prokov', I can let you off the hook there." Seeing that she had my full attention she continued, "You will be working in this house three days a week, as before, the other three days Saturday included you can be employed as an apprentice-assistant to Mme Beatrice's beauty shop. I know you would love it there. Also you will be learning something useful outside your maid's duties. Sunday of course will be your day off."

The familiar excitement was back, my life was about to take another course and Annabelle was orchestrating it! In fact my wife was orchestrating everything from the very beginning as I could clearly see now. I had the impression that this was simply the next phase of my life as Maria Magdalena Delantal, planned and executed by my ever so clever and organizing wife!

She simply confirmed my thoughts as she continued talking, "Of course you will maintain your Portuguese identity as Maria Magdalena Delantal, in fact I'll give you an employer's document so you can go to the police and renew your 'permit de sejour', I want everything to happen by the book."

She looked at me again, "Well, what do you think girl? Do you agree with me? Do you want me to proceed with all the paper work Maria?"

I had to give an answer. I decided to make it look a bit more dramatic, I stood up fixed my dress and apron and said formally with a slight curtsey, "Yes Madame, please proceed with the paper work, I trust you completely to organize all the necessary steps and..."

She interrupted me as she rushed to hug me, "You will not regret that Maria, you will become my devoted servant and confidante, in fact I'll train you to become my lady's maid, you will look after my clothes and help me dress and undress, would you like that?" She played with my ear with her tongue; she was making sexual advantages on me!

I was besides myself with excitement as I answered with a cracked voice full of emotion, "Yes Madame, I would love to be your lady's maid, I would probably be able to be your personal hairdresser as well since Mme Beatrice is going to train me."

She looked at me in an amused way, "Don't rush Maria, you need quite a serious training to become a competent hairdresser but knowing you this will happen fairly quickly. Violetta was always telling me how apt you are in all feminine domestic skills. Probably I'll send you to attend sewing classes as well, would you like that?"

Another exciting prospect, Annabelle was clearly reading my mind!

All I managed to say was, "I'd love that Madame!"

She suddenly looked at her watch, "I better go now Maria, I have to rush to an appointment with the Hospital manager; Now that I secured your employment prospects I have to secure mine as well; I have to earn some money in order to pay my domestic staff!" She laughed pleasantly with her last remark.

She picked her bag and started going as I rushed to the front myself to fetch her coat.

She looked at me again appraisingly. Her parting words were, "In the next few days you continue working as usual following all your obligations and commitments, I'll let you know through Violetta when I'll be moving in. I will prepare also all the necessary paperwork for you to sign. We will talk very soon Maria. Bye for now."

She turned abruptly and left. I barely had the chance to say a simple 'au revoir Madame'.

CHAPTER 17

Twelve months later

I heard the crystal bell ringing from the living room. Mme Annabelle was calling me. I had a quick sip of my unfinished coffee; I adjusted my apron and head piece and rushed to her.

"You called for me Madame?" I asked politely with a slight curtsy.

"I have a surprise for you Maria, I will organise an informal dinner party on Saturday night for about six to eight people and I want you to take care of all formalities."

"What sort of a surprise Madame?" I asked with genuine interest.

"The surprise is the guests invited, you know all of them, it has been Violetta's idea." She said mischievously.

"Who are the guests Madame, if I am allowed to ask?" I asked rather humbly but with a genuine interest in my voice.

"Well, it will be Violetta and her boy friend of course and your friends Conchita and Ginette and Mme Beatrice your other employer; that makes six of us plus you of course. A true effort of fraternisation of the classes I suppose." She added the last bit somehow ironically I must say.

That was a surprise indeed! I had to prepare a dinner party for my fellow maids?

I asked cautiously, "And how I am going to interact with Conchita and Ginette Madame? They are fellow domestics like me. Am I supposed to serve them as well?"

"Of course you will Maria, you are the maid in this house and they will be my guests, it is obvious isn't it?"

She looked at her expensive wrist watch, "I must rush, it is Monday and I have a heavy schedule in the hospital today. Prepare a suggestion of a menu for me to see it tonight, so you can do the shopping tomorrow on the way back from Mme Beatrice's shop."

She picked her bag and she started going to the front door but she remembered something and turned back again, "And speaking of Mme Beatrice, I already asked her to give you Saturday off so you can concentrate in the house, I want everything to look perfect."

She turned and left without another word.

I went back to the kitchen to finish my coffee and plan my day. I started thinking the last month's events.

Dr. Annabelle Louise d'Armagnac is formally my main employer now. I work as a live in maid – 'bonne a tout fair' in her private house which used to be my property in the past. All paper work was done with the assistance of her solicitor and Maitre Gareau the family notary. I am now officially Maria Magdalena Delantal a Portuguese national with a French 'Permis de sejour' renewable every six months.

Mme Beatrice the beauty shop owner is my second employer. I work there three days a week, Tuesday Thursday and Saturday as an apprentice hairdresser.

I am collecting minimum legal wages from both my jobs, I have a full medical care and my working clothes are provided by both my employers.

Mme Violetta moved out of my life and as 'ma Maitresse' Mme Annabelle mentioned to me she started her own work running a domestic agency. I am certain she will do very well. She has the connections, she can bring young girls from Portugal to work as maids, and she knows the Parisian domestic scene quite well.

The Parisian domestic scene which I started knowing quite well myself, but from the other side, the side of a menial employee, the side of a female servant.

I got used to be the last in the pecking order in whatever I was assigned to do, either I was working in Mme Beatrice's beauty shop or being the maid in Mme Annabelle's house. I gradually stopped thinking that the house used to belong to me and I simply was acting as the 'hired help'.

But I never felt better in my life. I was a picture of health and all my fears and depressions that were pestering me in my previous privileged and boring life were completely forgotten. I genuinely enjoyed my current rather humble and less complicated life.

I looked at the kitchen clock. God is already 9.00 o'clock, I better rush, I have my house chores to do and then plan dinner.

I'll try and talk to Conchita today, I haven't seen her for over a week and I certainly miss our sexual encounters in her tiny apartment.

CHAPTER 18

Fraternisation of the classes

"Isn't Maria a jewel? She is so proper when she serves and her cooking skills improved dramatically. I never would have expected that from such a rough peasant Portuguese girl. I'll use her as a model for the girls I bring from Portugal to work in Paris." Mme Violetta said and everybody around the table slightly applauded!

I blushed all over as I was moving discreetly around the table filling the glasses with an excellent quality Chablis. I simply didn't know what to say.

For a moment I believed Mme Violetta, I felt that I really and truly was a rough Portuguese girl who managed to improve as a maid within a year from her arrival from the village. And for that matter everybody else around the table seemed to believe that. Who could remember now that only a year ago I was a refined bourgeois Parisian Gentleman?

I heard the characteristic click of a spoon to a wine glass. Ma Maitresse Mme Annabelle was about to make an announcement.

"I want to thank very warmly all the ladies gathered around this table tonight, Violetta, Beatrice, Conchita, Ginette and of course our only male presence Mr. Gaston though he was not directly involved to the project."

She stopped to have a sip of her wine and continued, "I want to thank you ladies for this extraordinary project you all managed to pull through so successfully. The transformation of my ex husband Jean Marie Philippe to this sweet and demure though still a bit rough person Maria Magdalena Delantal, my Portuguese maid and hairdresser assistant to your shop Beatrice."

Another sip of her wine and Mme Annabelle continued as I was standing uneasily behind her at a distance of one metre my hands folded together in front of my white apron as I was trained to do when serving at dinner parties.

"When Violetta suggested the transformation I was very sceptical if the whole project could work, in fact I was so immersed at the time with my new life in Milan that I practically gave Violetta 'carte blanche' to proceed under one condition."

She stopped and looked at all of them around the table and then turned and looked at me with a rather benign smile, "The condition was," she continued, "that under no circumstances Violetta should force anything to Jean Marie; every step of that transformation should have his full cooperation. And this is exactly how it happened."

She turned towards me and said, "Maria come to my side please so I can see you and if I say something that you disagree with, please feel free to say it."

"Of course Madame," I answered politely as I moved to the side of the table.

"The first few months I was learning the news from Violetta and I must admit I had a difficulty in believing her. She was describing to me a very compliant Maria who was extremely obedient and eager to proceed in her new station in life as a female domestic. Remember Violetta?"

"How can I forget Annabelle, you were totally sceptical, you simply couldn't believe me."

"And then," Madame continued, "I went to that lunch event in 'Chez Procov' and I saw Maria serving with you Ginette guiding her brilliantly. At that moment I knew that Violeta was right, Maria was acting as a genuine female servant and waitress. All her movements, her body language were the right ones, she belonged to that world. That day I decided that Maria was going to be my new maid when I would be back to live in Paris again. Somehow I knew already that my affair with my fellow doctor was going nowhere and sooner or later I would be again free to come back to the city I love most."

Mme Annabelle stopped and turning to me she said, "Do you have to add anything to what I said so far Maria? Do you feel that what I said in more or less objective?"

I was blushing a lot, a sudden shyness was overtaking me but I managed to say, "Je suis tout d'accord avec vous Madame," everything you said is absolutely true and I must say in front of all of you in this table tonight that I never regretted, not for a second, my decision to be what I am now, I feel that I never was anything else in my life!" I was quite emphatic as I said the last sentence.

"In that case Maria, get a glass of wine and join us to the toast I am about to make." Madame added merrily.

In seconds I was holding a glass as Mme made her toast

"To Maria and whatever road she chooses to follow in the future."

"To Maria, everybody said in unison."

I felt touched, those were my friends for life, or this is how I felt at the moment; not friends exactly, my social status was not exactly right for that, but two were my employers already, two fellow domestics and Violetta, was my mentor the one who initiated the whole 'project' as they called it.

I raised my glass and said in my husky touched voice, "Thank you all for your support and help. I wouldn't be standing here today feeling totally natural in my present station in life without your help, thank you again."

I left my glass at the edge of the table and I gave a small curtsy with a big smile in my face.

All of then applauded one more time.

Mme Annabelle became formal again, "Now that the small ceremony is over, you can start cleaning the table Maria, we will have coffee in the 'Grande Salle'"

"Of course Madame" I said formally with a small bob

"And probably your friends might want to help you with the washing up later; you will have the chance to catch up with them in the kitchen."

That was it I thought; that was the end of the fraternisation, the domestics were ordered back to the kitchen.

"Of course Mme Annabelle," answered Conchita and Ginette in unison as they started getting up from the table.

In a few minutes the social order was back to normal. Conchita and Ginette were helping me in the kitchen wearing big practical aprons to protect their evening frocks; the others were in the 'Grande Salle' expecting the coffee to be served in a few minutes.

All three we were in great mood joking with each other. Conchita loved to call me 'Empregada' meaning maid in Portuguese. Ginette was correcting her calling me 'Boniche' the equivalent in French. They both were openly flirting with me.

At that moment I felt I was a lucky person. I was lucky that my life took that turn. I was lucky that Violetta understood my proclivities better than me and pushed me towards the right path, I was lucky that my ex wife Mme Annabelle, hired me as her maid.

I know that I sound a bit mad for 'traditionally thinking' people but I am happy where I am now, I feel that I belong to this world.

##

epilogue

This is the end of the story of Jean Marie Philippe Batiste d'Armagnac a Parisian upper class bourgeois who willingly gave up his identity to become Maria Magdalena Delantal a Portuguese domestic worker working as 'bonne a tout faire,' maid of all works for his/her former wife Dr. Annabelle Louise d'Armagnac a prominent cosmetic surgeon.

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