

The Cleaner

Written by
Patricia Simpson

2480 Words

8 pages including cover page.

Elspeth Gray smiled looking around the pristine lounge. Every item was in its proper place to the millimetre. Not a speck of disfiguring dust anywhere. The smile disappeared when she looked down at the ornament in her hand. It may have been an eighteenth-century porcelain coffee pot, decorated with flowers. Their petals raised from the surface. To Elspeth those dozens of petals were nothing but dust traps. She looked down and let go of the pot, listened to the satisfying crunch as the dust catcher broke into a dozen pieces in the bucket between her feet.

A soft echo from outside startled her. She glanced out of the smear free, crystal-clear, window and the pure white net curtains. Elspeth shuddered with horror. In the centre of her beautifully manicured front garden was a blue plastic bag, its opening knotted tight. She recognised what it was immediately, using the same brand for collecting their pet's poo.

"Oh no you don't," she murmured, quickly putting the cleaning materials in the cupboard and grabbing her coat, a pair of plastic gloves and a carrier bag.

"Tom darling, I'm just popping out for a while," she called through the open gap in the doorway to her husband's private room.

"Okay, Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he said absently.

She chuckled at his habitual response and gave her usual answer.

"Of course I will."

Then hurried out of the front door to catch up with her target. A brief regretful thought crossed her mind. How she wished Tom would allow her to clean and dust his den but he had made her promise that was his space to do what he wanted. She shook her head and sped up along the pavement. Rounding the corner of the road brought her target into view so quickly she had to pause, pretending to admire the colourful flowers in number twenty-four's front garden. *Not so quick now* she admonished herself. *You don't want to catch him, just follow him home this time.* She had recognised the man from their first encounter a couple of weeks ago. Elspeth's expression was granite hard. The newcomer had wandered passed her house with his fashionable mixed Bitchyshiz whatever dog. Bloody thing had dumped on

their driveway then tried to bite Tom when he had protested. Hmm she was not prepared to allow them a third chance. No, it was time to tidy up.

Completely unconscious of being followed thanks to the distraction of headphones and his mobile phone, the owner and his dog completed their walk. Elspeth watched them stroll up the driveway and into one of the new detached houses forming Jennings' Close. She crossed over the road and casually peered through the un-curtained windows. *Good, no sign of man or dog, they must be in the back room.* She nipped nimbly up to the front door and hurriedly dropped the blue bag in the middle of the doorstep and made a mental note of the house number, six. Elspeth regained the pavement without any sign of neighbours' twitching curtains though she had noted a couple of video doorbells on the way to the house. *Hmm for phase two she would need a good reason to be in or around 'Mr. Turd's' house.* She continued along the road, her mind divided between how to complete her project and remembering they had run out of teabags. She crossed the avenue where she lived and headed for the corner shop. Elspeth had one hand on the shop door when a notice in the window caught her eye. She paused to read it then a delighted smile lit up her whole face. "Oh, how absolutely perfect," she murmured and pushed open the door.

She took out her mobile but crossed the busy road before dialling the number on the card she had got from the shopkeeper.

"Hello, is that Mr Turner, I am interested in your cleaning job if it is still available." Elspeth listened then "It is still available oh that is wonderful. I can start immediately if you wish." ... "Tomorrow? Let me check my diary" she paused a minute as if she actually was checking. "Yes I am free. See you then."

"Tom, I'm back," Elspeth called, closing the front door. She put her coat back on its hanger in the cupboard, collected the box of teabags out of the carrier and placed the carrier back in her coat pocket. Tom greeted her as she wandered into the kitchen.

“Hello love. You didn’t happen to get teabags on your walk, did you?” His voice was muffled by his head being stuck deep in the pantry. He backed out and turned to look at her. “I’m gasping for a cuppa.”

Elsbeth tossed the box of teabags to him. He caught it close to his chest and grinned.

“You are an angel,” he said, then “I’ve boiled the kettle, do you fancy a cup too?”

Elsbeth nodded so Tom set the kettle back on and began unwrapping the teabags while she collected two mugs from the mug tree and set them on the counter.

“Tom, I hope you won’t object love, I was thinking of getting a bit of paid work, just being a Mrs. Daily Cleaner. You know the sort of thing.”

“Oh? Do you think you should love,” his voice was soft, combining both concern and doubt. “After all, you’ve improved such a lot over this year. I don’t want you regressing when you have come so far.”

He put the teabags into the pot and poured the boiled water in.

“More normal you mean? That’s true but it might help if I have that bit more to do. I know we don’t need the money.” She smiled adding, “Besides it might keep your den safe from the hoover and the feather duster.”

They both chuckled

“And it probably wouldn’t be for long. There was an advert, in the corner shop window, from one of the new houses, wanting a cleaner. Only two mornings a week but the pay offered is pitiful, not even minimum wage.”

Elsbeth shrugged, “I thought I would give it a try, after all I can always leave if I don’t feel comfortable.”

Tom handed her a steaming mug then picked up his own, leaning back against the counter. His face was thoughtful. “If you want to go ahead,” he smiled, “especially if it saves my office from the dreaded feather duster. Just remember you have a real job waiting for you to return. One you have a genuine talent for.”

“Yes, I won’t forget, in fact I truly think this will help. I am already feeling happier about returning to work. I just need a little time to complete a small project.”

“Fair enough love. Mind you there’s only a couple of people moved into those new houses yet. Don’t do too good a job, will you? You might end up having to start your own cleaning business when all the houses are sold.” He grinned and saluted her with his mug.

In response she leaned forward and kissed him gently on the cheek before wandering towards the living room, calling back over her shoulder, “I called the mobile on my way back. I start tomorrow on a trial period.”

It was even worse than Elspeth had expected. She had been cleaning ‘Mr. Turd’s’ house for a fortnight. She knew she left it sparkling clean on each occasion but on every return visit the house stank and every surface was covered with something. Dirty plates would be piled in the sink and takeaway cartons scattered over the table and counters. He couldn’t even stack his own dishwasher! When she cleaned his home office, he acted as if she wasn’t there, just carried on abusing the team that worked for him over the zoomy meetings. He terrified them she had seen that in their worried faces. *She could have forgiven him if he’d been a doctor intent on saving lives or, at a pinch, a barrister fighting for justice, hmmm, possibly not. Instead, he was simply a cruel bully reminiscent of the red braces wearing Gordon character in that film Tom had taken her to see when they were just engaged. Making money was all he cared about.*

Everything about him confirmed her first impression. There had been no discussion about ending the trial period or raising his cleaner’s wages. All she did was simply taken for granted as his right. Worst of all, familiar blue bags were appearing routinely in the middle of her front garden. He seemed to like upsetting people he saw as weak, asserting his own power to do as he chose without consequences. As for how he treated the poor dog, no longer dismissed as that Bichyshiz. *No wonder it tried to bite men; the little dog was terrified of them. Ah ha, the time has come the Walrus said...*

It was not one of Elspeth's cleaning days but it didn't matter now. She had made it known to her neighbours that she was trying to do ten thousand steps a day to get fit, and she had regularly passed the video door bells whilst out walking as well as on her cleaning days. She had even got to the stage of being able to say hello to the video bell owners when they were on the doorstep or heading for work.

She let herself into number six and immediately heard her 'employer' ranting on at some poor underling. Elspeth shook her head, surely the employment laws should prevent that sort of thing but he didn't seem to care. She greeted the dog in the hallway and led him into the kitchen, gave him his regular treat from her pocket then let him out into the back garden. She prepared a special coffee for him and headed to his office. He was just ending his rant and shut down the meeting as she entered his room. He turned to her frowning at first.

"What the hell are you doing here, it's not one of your days?"

Elspeth almost curtseyed apologetically but just stopped herself.

"I know but the place seems to get so dirty, I feel as if I am failing you so I thought I would give you a free day to try and get on top of things. I made you a special cup of coffee, the beans are rather expensive. Apparently, they must go through the digestive tract of some animal before they are ready to use. I'm sure you know more about it than I do."

Of course, you do you bragged about having tried them between insults to your team the first day I was here.

She saw his eyes light up and placed the cup carefully onto his desk, watching with satisfaction as he grabbed for the cup.

"I'll come back later for the empty." She remarked softly leaving the room.

Elspeth stood with her back to the closed door and her ear pressed to the cheap wood. She heard him start to call out and then a thump as he hit the floor. Satisfied she went to get the rest of her cleaning equipment.

“Here you are Mrs. Grey, a nice cup of tea, sugar in it for the shock. The family across the road were kind enough to offer to provide refreshments for us”

The police constable looked as if he was just out of sixth form to Elspeth but she gladly accepted the drink, even managing to make her hand tremble realistically.

“Thank you, yes it was a dreadful shock. Who would have wanted to do that to Mr. Tur..ner. I feel quite sick.”

“Not something forensics have seen before either, not with dog poo bags anyway.” He looked at her face and quickly added “Oh, sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

Elspeth had closed her eyes and looked as if she was either going to faint or throw up.

“So sorry, but do you feel up to giving me an initial statement about how you discovered the body of Mr. Turner?”

Elspeth sipped the very sweet tea and stroked the dog that was leaning against her leg where they were sitting in the kitchen.

“Of course, I arrived about ten o’clock this morning. Its one of my regular cleaning days you see. I’ve not long started cleaning for Mr. Turner. He only moved into the area three months ago. I said hello to the dog and got my cleaning equipment out. I had already cleaned most of downstairs so I went into his office. It was unusually quiet come to think of it. Normally he is rather loud and swears at the zoomy meetings. Today there was no meeting and when I went in the computer screen was dark. I put the coffee down on the table and then, and then” Elspeth swallowed hard and sipped her tea.

“Take your time Mrs. Grey, I know it’s upsetting but we need you to tell us.” She nodded and took a deep breath. He wasn’t in his usual seat at the desk, he was in a kitchen chair, near the sofa. His hands were tied at the back of the chair and his head was drawn back.” She shuddered at the memory.

“Then I noticed his mouth. Oh, it was dreadful, the sun was shining right onto him and I could see clearly. His mouth was full of blue dog poo bags. I ... I ran out of the room and looked for the dog. He was out in the back

garden, very wet but safe. He must have been there all the time it was raining last night. I let him in then dialled 999. That's all I can tell you, I'm afraid."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grey. Would you be alright to come down to the station and we will get your statement typed up for you to read and sign? Perhaps you would like your husband to be with you?"

Elsbeth agreed to go to the station but declined to have Tom bothered. She knew he was busy with his own project for the moment and not to be disturbed.

Six months later Elspeth watched the For Sale sign go up outside their house. The police were no nearer catching whoever had killed Mr. Turner and she and Tom had decided they wanted a fresh start somewhere else. After all it didn't matter where they lived, she could design a new garden and hire someone to keep the house clean. Elspeth had returned to her chosen career three months after the discovery of Mr. Turner's body. Her little project had proved she was still capable of tidying up anything her bosses required. As for Tom, he was happy to have the prospect of working together again in the future.