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## A Manual for Cleaning Women

by Richard Rewell

She was twenty-two, blond, slim and dwarfed by the much older grey haired ruddy faced bulky woman who stood next to her in the kitchen of the luxurious country house.

“You must follow the manual to the letter my dear girl. Yes?” said the older woman jabbing a fat finger at page thirty of the manual that lay between them on the giant wooden table.

“Yes madam” replied the slim blond who started to remember her old maths teacher and thought that she could have been Madam’s twin sister. No, she pondered. No, the maths teacher could not be a twin. Impossible. At least a ten-year age difference. And dead. Accident in the war. At the tractor factory.

The black limousine ground to an abrupt halt on the gravel outside. Four doors opened. Four doors slammed shut. Four pairs of feet crunched towards the house’s front door.

“They are here” said Madam.” Now see? Part four of the manual. Drinks.”

“Three like theirs with ice. One without” said the slim blond.

“And?”

“To be served with olives” answered the slim blond. Part four, section five. Paragraph eight”

“Excellent my child. This is not just a manual for cleaning women. A woman is expected to do everything and anything here. It’s our duty.”

The front door crashes open. Footsteps on the polished wooden floor boards. Front door crashes shut. Raucous laughter. Bell buzzes in kitchen.

“Go now” said the grey-haired woman as the bell continued its impatient ringing and the slim blond thought how it reminded her of the bell back at the conservatoire where she used to dance. Bombed. Destroyed. A life never to be seen again.

The bright garden room looked out at the forest of swaying birch trees as four men sat in floral armchairs talking and laughing. A knock on the door.

‘Come in. We won’t bite’ giggled the man with a moustache as his companions obediently began to giggle with him just as the door opened and the slim blond woman entered.

‘Old farts,’ thought the slim blond as she served each man his prescribed drink in accordance with the Manual. She felt uncomfortable as Madam’s words came back to her “A woman is expected to do everything and anything here.”

Very much later that night the slim blond woman looked down at the sleeping man with the moustache. He stirred, opened his eyes, smiled lecherously and threw back his sheet whispering, “this is not in the Manual, but it’s expected.”

“Didn’t read that bit,” said the slim blond woman who grabbed a pillow, rammed it onto the man’s face and smothered him to near death.

Gentle footsteps along a corridor, silent opening of the kitchen door, one flash from a car’s headlights through the birch trees and then a faint drone as the vehicle moved off to a destination known only to the occupants. Pursued only by the rising sun.

Sunlight flooded through the window onto the moustached man as he lay paralysed upon his bed mouthing something indecipherable as his three friends and Madam looked on.

“It’s a stroke” said Madam gleefully.

“He’ll be dead by lunchtime” smiled one of the men and chuckling he turned to Madam “I bet that’s even in your bloody manual.”

It wasn’t, but the man was dead by lunchtime. His name? Josef Stalin.