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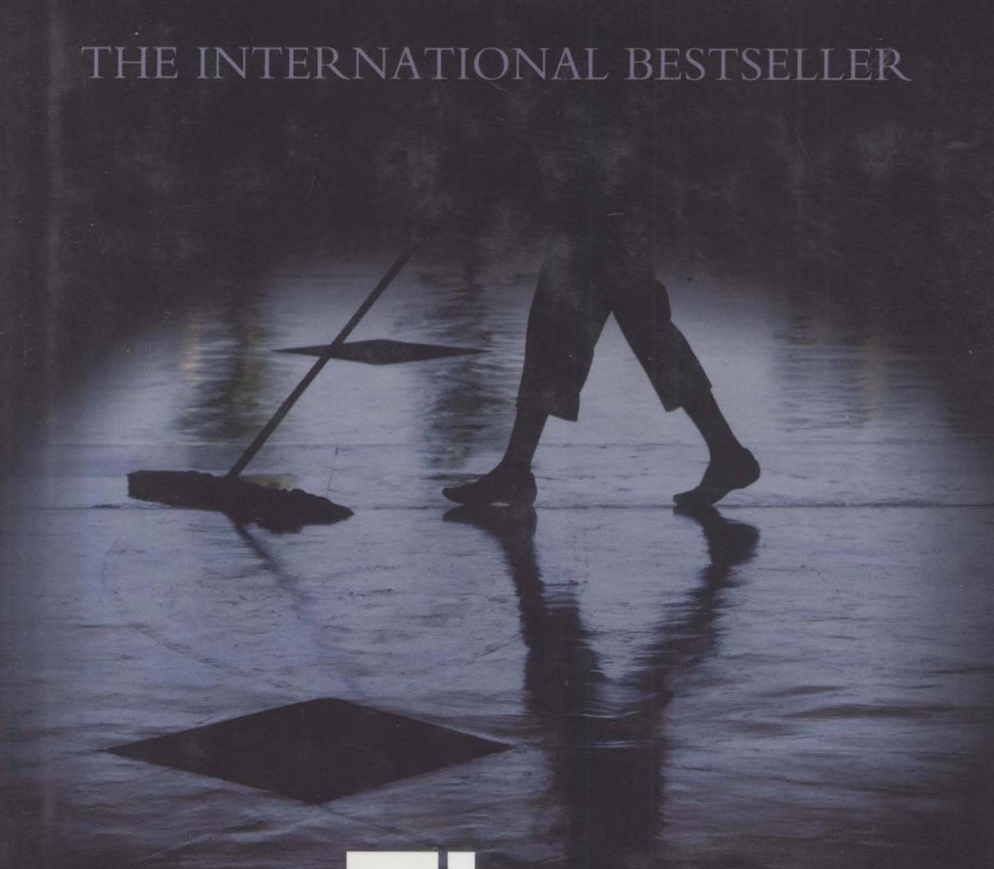

The NIGHT CLEANER

Florence Aubenas

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Translated by Andrew Brown

polity

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Preface

It was the recession. Remember? It happened a very long time ago, ages and ages ago, last year.

The recession. People talked about nothing else, but they didn't really know what to say about it, or how to gauge it. They didn't even know where to look. Everything seemed to suggest that the world was collapsing. And yet, all around us, things still seemed in their places, apparently unaffected.

I'm a journalist: I felt I was facing a reality which I couldn't explain, because I couldn't get my head round it. Words themselves failed me. Even the word 'recession' seemed to me, all of a sudden, as devalued as the shares in the stock market.

I decided to head off to a French city where I have no attachments, to look for work, anonymously. It's a simple idea. Many other journalists have put it into practice before me, with great success: a white American man became black, a blond German became a Turk, a young Frenchman joined the ranks of the homeless, a middle-class woman swelled the numbers of the poor, and there must be others I have

forgotten. But I allowed myself to be carried along by the situation. I didn't know what would become of me, and that was what interested me.

Caen seemed the ideal city: neither too far north nor too far south, neither too big nor too small. And it's not too far from Paris, which I thought might be useful. I came home only a couple of times, for a flying visit: I had too much going on in Caen. I rented a furnished room.

I preserved my identity, my name, and my ID, but I signed on as out-of-work with just a baccalaureate in my pocket. I claimed I'd just separated from a man I'd lived with for some twenty years; he'd provided for all my needs, which explained why I couldn't show that I'd done any work outside the house all that time.

I became blond. I kept my glasses on all the time. I didn't receive any allowance.

With more or less certainty, more or less insistence, a few people paused when they heard my name: a social service advisor, a recruiter in a call centre, the boss of a cleaning business. I denied that I was a journalist: I just had the same name, I claimed. Things went no further. Just once, a young woman in a temping agency rumbled me. She was following the rule book. I asked her to keep my secret, and she did so. The vast majority of the men and women I encountered didn't ask me any questions.

I'd decided to stop once my quest was accomplished, in other words the day I got a permanent contract. This book

relates this quest, which lasted almost six months, from February to July 2009. The names of people and businesses have been deliberately changed.

In Caen, I kept my furnished room. I went back there this winter, to write this book.

Paris, January 2010

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Scraping the Barrel

In Cabourg, the house of Monsieur and Madame Museau is located in one of the new districts situated away from the beaches and the sea wall, far from the crowded streets and the five-star hotels, sheltered from all the hustle and bustle and the pretty touristy bits. Here, in this unremarkable, comfortable suburb, those who live in Cabourg all year round can flourish.

It's February, and the sky is dark and oppressive. On this particular day, Monsieur and Madame Museau are waiting for a housekeeper – she's supposed to be arriving at 2.02 p.m., on the bus from Caen. It hasn't been easy, deciding to employ someone for this kind of job, and they have thought long and hard about where to interview the applicant. The living room seemed too formal, the office too cramped, the dining room too intimate, and the kitchen too disrespectful. Finally, they've gone for the conservatory, a draughty room that they don't usually open except in summer.

Today, Monsieur and Madame Museau's conservatory is the only window lit up on the façade of the house overlooking this tranquil street. As a result, they can be seen

from a little way away, through the big bay windows, as if on the bright stage of some theatre. He is standing up, wearing his jacket, unable to keep still, roaming round the table. Sometimes he stops to jot something down on a notepad lying on the table in front of him. His wife gets up and comes back with a pullover. She is wearing make-up, and has done her hair with some care. They pull up a chair opposite them. He looks at his watch. She does, too. Monsieur Museau glances outside, just as I am turning onto the white-gravelled path between the garage and the hedge. He turns to his wife, no doubt to tell her, but she is already on her feet. The door is open even before I've had time to ring the bell.

'Are you the housekeeper?'

This is my first job interview since I started looking for work, in Caen, in Basse-Normandie.

In the conservatory, Madame Museau motions me to the empty chair.

Monsieur Museau had given me advance warning on the phone. 'We're both retired. Actually, if you know what I mean, Madame Museau's always been a home body.' He'll be doing the interviewing, he declares, simply because he's not used to it happening any other way. 'I know all about hiring people, I've managed up to five hundred employees, I ran various businesses. You know Bernard Tapie,* the businessman? I've had the same career.'

* A well-known businessman, TV personality, and former Socialist government minister who spent six months in jail for corruption.

With his ravaged face, he imperiously weighs me up. He talks about his health, two heart operations – he's quite willing to give me the details. The conclusion comes with a brutality that he savours. 'With everything I've gone through, I'm not going to be around for long.'

I feel it's only right to protest, but Madame Museau interrupts me straightaway. 'Oh yes, with everything he's gone through, he's not going to be around for long.'

'At the moment, we're still doing a lot. Madame Museau does the ironing. She looks after the housework. She does the cooking. She does everything. But, well, I'm saying *at the moment*. We'll be doing less and less. And when I'm not here, Madame Museau will be left.'

'Perhaps I'll be the first to go . . .' remarks Madame Museau, like a threat.

'Anyway, just remember that Madame Museau herself would never have hired you. She'd just never have thought of it. I'm the one that's looking ahead. I organize things. I take the decisions.'

'You talk too much.'

Her handsome features barely move. She must have put up with a lot from him, never able to get her own back.

Monsieur Museau goes on, as if he hasn't heard. 'We've decided to take someone one while we're still okay. I've drawn up a list of the good points of the job we're offering. First, you'll have your lodgings. We'll put you up in the room of one of our grandchildren. There's a single bed.' He looks me up and down. 'That'll be fine, you're the right

size, you'll fit. And anyway, things can change perhaps, later on.'

He laughs to himself, scrutinizing me one more time.

Then he resumes. 'We'll clear out all the junk from the room. Do you have a lot of stuff? I guess not. We'll put some furniture in, we've got all the necessary in the house. Too much, actually. Second good point: you'll have your board. Madame Museau does the shopping in the supermarket, right next door. You can go with her. She buys things, you can tell her, "That's what I like." She'll put it in the basket. Do you see what I'm saying? It's informal. Sometimes Madame Museau will tell you, "I'm tired," and you'll go and do the shopping by yourself. She also likes going to Carrefour. It's further away, but it's bigger. It means she gets to see people. Madame Museau does the cooking, but you can give her a hand. You can lay the table. You'll tidy up after, you'll take the plates away, but you'll eat with us. How shall I put it . . .? I don't want to have someone in the kitchen and then us in the dining room. No, never – I really don't like that.' He hesitates. 'I'm a bit of an old so-and-so, aren't I? My wife tells me: "You have a cold, hard way of talking." Well, it happens. It's only to be expected. I've had up to five hundred people working under me. Did I mention that? Yes? And for Bernard Tapie too – I told you? I was in the building industry.'

'You're talking about yourself as usual,' concludes Madame Museau.

'Anyway, let's get back to your *life résumé*, as I've decided to call it,' says Monsieur Museau, as if he hasn't heard a thing.

He picks up the page of notes in front of him, and asks me for my date of birth. He jots down: '48 years old, sign of the zodiac: Aquarius.'

He goes on: 'You did the literary *bac*, right? What did your father do? Civil servant? Yes, but where? There are all kinds of civil servants. Then you say you were a cleaner. You didn't need to work. You've just separated, that's why you need to start looking for another job. You don't have children. But what about him – any children? He hadn't married you, of course? On what date exactly did you separate?'

On the sheet of paper, Monsieur Museau writes: 'Separated five months ago.'

He continues: 'Are you still seeing him? Have you remained on good terms?'

He notes down: 'Good terms.'

Monsieur Museau reads it all through, and ponders. 'Basically, he used you: you did everything, and then, when he didn't need you any more, it was goodbye. That's about it, right? And he must have found another woman by now.' His analysis satisfies him. He carries on, as if thinking to himself: 'She's younger, I imagine, perhaps much younger. Well, I'm going to leave you with Madame Museau now, she'll show you upstairs, your room. We've got four children, two are in Paris, a daughter and a son. They've got good jobs. What does Christophe do? I've forgotten. A telephone company, I think. My daughter is very active. She's a Museau. Christophe is a Resthout, like my wife – you can see what she's like? – but Christophe is all right. All the children are all right. The

youngest lives with us. Her name's Nicole, like the woman who comes to do the ironing, but we call our daughter Nicky. She's an estate agent in Lisieux, she's thirty-seven. When I'm poorly, she gives me a hand. She won't leave. Too scared. We try to kick her out. It'll be too late in ten years' time, you know. Let me tell you a story so you'll understand the situation. Madame Museau had a friend, a long time ago. What was her name, that friend of yours?'

Madame Museau doesn't like having this story told. She looks sulky, and tosses her pretty head.

Monsieur Museau seems particularly glad to be embarrassing her. 'You called her Fifi, right? You won't say? Fine by me. Anyway, Fifi lived with her mother, she looked after her, she did everything. Her other brothers and sisters had left. When they came to visit, their mother would take them to one side. She told them, "You know, Fifi's trying to poison me. She puts things in the food she cooks me. She's going to inherit everything, you won't get her out of here."'

'When people get old, they don't know what they're saying,' Madame Museau breaks in. 'Anyway, you're telling the story all wrong. Nobody can follow it. You mix things up to suit yourself.'

Monsieur Museau flaps his hand to shut her up. 'We don't want there to be any difference between our children. I absolutely want Nicky to have her own apartment in Lisieux. She'll leave once we've got a housekeeper. There. I've had my say.'

Madame Museau escorts me through the house. She has

always polished the broad red tiles – very shiny – in the hallway herself, and made sure that everything is strictly tidied away. 'Now I don't feel like doing it at all. I ask myself, why bother?' Without her husband around, she cheers up, and even permits herself a smile. She opens the door of 'Monsieur Museau's office', on the ground floor. He lives here – everything suggests as much, the crumpled sheets on the bed, the folders scattered around, the computer permanently blinking on standby.

Upstairs, we quickly walk through Nicky's room, where, in an overwhelming stench of tobacco smoke, there are piles of chocolate bars, tottering heaps of magazines, and clothes screwed up into bundles. Madame Museau is in a hurry to show me her own territory, behind a white door at the end of the corridor.

'How much would you like to be paid?' Monsieur Museau has popped up behind us, calculator at the ready. Madame Museau gasps in surprise. He is delighted. 'Scared her! Scared her! Did you see how scared she was? Shall we say 1,000 euros? Think about it. On top of that, there are the perks I mentioned, you get board and lodgings. It's your call. I can even go a bit higher.'

He's just taken the car out of the garage. 'That'll do, you've seen enough. Madame Museau will show you her room next time. Come with me. I've decided I'm going to drive you back to Caen.' The engine's already running.

The countryside speeds past, flat and quiet. The weather's turned almost nice.

'I've driven so much in my life that sometimes I didn't even know why I was on this road or that one. I drove straight ahead, thinking: where on earth am I going? I wanted to succeed.' All of a sudden, Monsieur Museau adopts a confidential tone. 'You know, I was in the same situation as you, to some extent. I left home with someone for a while. I left Madame Museau and the children. I came back when I fell ill, but we still meet that other woman. We invite her to our home in Cabourg. She has dinner with us at our table, she sometimes stays for a few days. You'll see her. Madame Museau badmouths me when we have company, but never when we're alone together. She doesn't say anything in front of me. She's reserved. She's used to this situation.' He thinks for a while. 'Right now, Madame Museau must be sitting on her bed, wondering whether I'm not overstepping the line with you.' He smiles, his eyes half-closed, imagining his wife.

'Anyway, you'll be taking Madame Museau out. One of our children died young, you can go and visit the grave, it takes a whole day, it's a change of scene. You know, she never left home. When we had the twin girls – one is very Museau, by the way, and the other's a real Resthout – , she got a maid straightaway, a Polish girl. We called her Piroshka. You can go and see her too, she lives in Louviers. That's another idea for a day out you can have together.'

This schedule has cheered Monsieur Museau up considerably. He puts the radio on. Switches it off. Puts it on again. Sings then speaks. 'I'm homeless – my property's in the name of my children. I've built it all up for them, I love them all,

Museaus, Resthouts, whatever. But I'm still the boss, you know. I tell them what I'm doing. Usually, they don't quarrel. They tell me, "You know what's what, and in any case, you never listen when we talk to you. You do what suits you.'" He laughs to himself. 'It's true. I'm the boss. I do what I want.'

He's missed the exit, at the roundabout into Caen, and now he's furious. 'We natter away and look what happens. You forget everything when you're old. Get out here, you can walk the rest of the way, it's much better than getting the bus, you've been lucky.'

I'd never intended to work at Monsieur and Madame Museau's. I don't want to go into service for individual people, or live in the intimacy of their household – this is the one stipulation I made in my quest for employment. Apart from that, I'm ready to accept any kind of a job. It merely turned out that it was Monsieur and Madame Museau who replied to my request the first. I'd been looking for a job for a fortnight – an eternity, it seemed to me. The days dragged on forever, shapeless, irritating: I was being forced to wait, and none of my attempts seemed likely to succeed. So I didn't resist. I wanted to see what a job interview was like, and to feel that I'd finally got something going for me.

I'd already been round the temping agencies in Caen. They're all clustered round a few streets near the railway station, and they're almost all built on the same model: an empty room with a desk. In one of them – the first, I think, though