

*'For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts;  
on those who lived faithfully a hidden life.'*

*Middlemarch*. It was the first truly grown-up book my father read to us. He had a beautiful voice, and in the evenings, while my mother sewed or knitted, and sometimes dozed, he would read to us. I just listened, for his readings transported me. I knew that one day I'd like to say words just the way he did.

Phone call from my agent. *'Darling, you got the job!'*

Great part, six months' contract in the West End with an option to renew. And the money was – well, a Godsend. Now I could afford *The Guardian* every day, and it was coming out of the newsagent that I caught sight of the advert: *"Cleaner. Will clean anything for £2 an hour."*

Sounded desperate, and now I was working so hard I could do with some help.

She was Italian, got here just four months ago, very little English, and her husband had been killed crossing the road.

*'We drive on right in Italy... he looking wrong way.'*

Mondays and Thursdays two 'til six. And I insisted - £3 pounds an hour. Which was when she burst into tears.

Six months into the run and audiences were getting a bit thin. So it was no surprise: two weeks' notice.

Problem. We'd become quite close; two women on their own against the world kind of thing. If she knew the show was closing, she'd know I couldn't really afford her. I couldn't risk that. So I pretended the show was still running.

Mondays weren't so bad. I'd leave the house as usual at 5.30, and sit in the Italian Coffee Bar in Holland Park Avenue 'til I was sure she'd be gone. But Thursdays! Matinée Day! Out of the house, of course, before she arrived, one o'clock latest, and hang around, without spending money, 'til – to be safe – 6.15. A book in the Italian Coffee Bar – just how long can you make a cappuccino last? – then maybe sit and read in Holland Park. 'Til we were into November and it got too cold.

Bus - the 452- to the V and A, Natural History and Science Museums – all free. Central Line to the British Museum – also free. Walk to the Serpentine Gallery – sometimes free.

*'Darling, as your agent I'd like to be positive, but you know all the Christmas shows are cast in June. Other than that, sweetie, it's all gone very quiet!'*

When is it ever anything else? I'm going broke. I'm going to have to do something. Coming out of the newsagent – fags in packets of ten now – and I saw the ad: “*Cleaner wanted. Eight hours a week, times to suit. £4 an hour.*” It was ‘times to suit’ that did it. That way I could keep the deception going.

So now we both clean Mondays and Thursdays, and it turns out that I'm seriously good at making up stuff about how the show is going, and the latest company gossip! Like improv class at drama school!

Yes, it's all lies, but they're white ones, so I'm hoping that's alright.

Four months go by, my worst run ever, and now I've got that actor's feeling that I'm never going to work again. I'm seriously depressed, the doc's put me on pills, and I'm finding it harder and harder to keep this charade going. Suddenly I get the phone call.

*'Can we meet ... right away?'*

*'Sure. There's the Italian Coffee Bar in Holland Park Avenue ... I think.'*

She's been offered a job with an Italian couple who work at their embassy. Full time, live-in, nanny to three children, no cleaning, and more money than she's ever earned.

*'I didn't go for it honestly ... my husband work for them back home ... they've just got here ... see if I was ok ... would I like job?'*

*'It's alright – I'm really pleased ... REALLY!'*

We keep in touch, and one day she invites me to meet her employers. Dear God, they live next door to the people I cleaned for. When she's out of the room, he says: *'We go to the theatre a lot.'*

*'Oh yes?'*

*'I imagine even your show is off by now.'*

He knows - of course he does. And then he smiles. *'It is ... our secret.'*

Oh. ... Yes, and now I know it always will be.

**Anonymous ('An Unhistoric Act')**

**Tim Hardy**