

ROOM TO MANOEUVRE
BY
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'Now don't start arguing with Holly as soon as we get inside.'
'She always starts it. She's jealous because she thinks I earn more than her clever Ian.'
'But you don't.'
'She doesn't know that.'

The door opened and Mrs Pollack invited Amanda and Craig inside to the small birthday party. They greeted their neighbours and talked easily while they had a couple of pre-dinner drinks. They all sat down to dinner and had a few more drinks.

Mr and Mrs Pollack, the older hosts, knew of the continual spats between Holly and Craig, but felt on the occasion of a birthday they would be able to contain it. Although Craig and Holly had been neighbours for two years they treated each other with ill will, especially after a few drinks. It was rumoured in the street that Holly Hopper was jealous of the new in-ground swimming pool that Craig Brandon was having built, while Craig was insanely jealous of Holly's new Jaguar.

At the dinner table Amanda Brandon said: 'You must all come for a swim in our pool when it's finished.'

Her husband Craig added, 'And please remember to bring your swim suits.' Then glaring at Holly Hopper: 'We wouldn't want to scare little children with stories of a Loch Ness monster in our pool, would we?' He chuckled at his own joke and finished his drink.

Holly drawled, 'Scaring children is your province isn't it, Craig? Why don't you take that horrible mask off, it's Ian's birthday party, not Halloween.'
Mrs Pollack tried to prevent a flare up. 'Oh I wish you two could be better neighbours. Everyone else in our street is so friendly.'

'Oh, you mustn't mind us,' Craig said. 'Holly's jealous and puerile, that's all. It's something she'll grow out of. One day.'

Holly put on her superior expression. 'You've given me nothing to be jealous of. Your own standards of language, dress, manners, gardening, and culture are all deplorable. It would raise the level in our street if you were replaced by a sub-normal troglodyte. Ian, darling, would you explain to Craig what a troglodyte is?'

Her husband, Ian Hopper, obviously didn't want to get involved in the skirmish. 'Holly, please don't start arguing.'

Craig's wife, Amanda, tried to help. 'Let's have a toast to the birthday boy.' They filled their glasses and raised them. 'To Ian wishing him all the best on his birthday and may he make all the people he loves wonderfully happy.'
Craig stood up. 'Here's to Ian, a man who, while obviously blind, must have more patients than a doctor in Afghanistan, be more forgiving than a priest, be more understanding than Mother Teresa, be more harassed than a taxpayer, and must have suffered more than the Ethiopians.'

There was a heavy silence. No one drank except Craig. Holly looked furious. She said to Amanda: 'You shouldn't allow your husband out without his muzzle and leash. A very small choker chain would be best. He could be tied up at the back door to guard the bin.'

Mrs Pollack stood up, raising her glass she announced. 'Here's to Ian. Now let's go into the living room. We can put on some cheerful music and dance.'

Craig murmured in an audible voice to his wife, 'Wonderful! Holly could teach us some of those medieval folk dances she learnt as a teenager.'

As they moved into the living room Holly countered, 'How lovely, Quasimodo can show us how he dances about when he rings the bells.'

For ten minutes Craig danced with his wife, Amanda. 'Craig,' she said, 'you

and Holly are spoiling Ian's birthday with all this childish bitterness. Couldn't you please try to be a little more civilized?'

'Me? She's the one who called me Quasimodo! The silly old bitch.'

'Craig, she's the same age as me. And Ian still finds her attractive, look at them dancing together like newlyweds.'

'It's sickening, isn't it?'

'Craig, you absolutely must go and dance with Holly. Show everyone that you've forgiven her. Show our hosts that you were only joking, all is forgiven. Show Ian and Holly that you're not really spiteful and caustic.'

'But I am. And I refuse to dance with that ugly walrus.'

'Craig, I mean it! One dance is all that's required. We all have to live in this neighbourhood. If you don't I'll ... I'll tell Holly you told me you wanted to forgive her with a dance but were too shy. In fact I'll announce it to everyone. They'll all laugh.'

'But you'll be bored.'

'Don't make excuses. I can dance with Ian. Only one dance, that's all I'm asking.'

'My God I hate this. It's blackmail.'

'Don't make a fuss!'

When the music paused they went across the room to Holly and Ian.

'Change partners!' Amanda called out.

Holly grumbled, 'Some swap, you get my Ian and I get this creep.'

Amanda pushed Craig forwards. 'Go on, both of you. It's supposed to be a happy birthday party.'

The two couples began to dance, and as they did they moved further and further apart.

With only a slight smile, Craig said to Holly, 'She practically flung me into your arms and said we had to kiss and make up.'

'How convenient. Do you think they suspect anything?'

'Nothing. Do I get my kiss?'

'A kiss? Is that all you want?' She gave him a dutiful kiss on the cheek. 'You certainly wanted a great deal more in bed this afternoon.'

He smiled. 'I told Amanda I was getting the car fixed. Are you wearing the frilly knickers I bought you?'

'Yes, you animal.'

'Sweetie, we must get a cheaper motel.'

Down the other end of the room Ian danced with Amanda. 'Do you think they suspect anything?'

'Nothing. Craig is so spiteful towards Holly he doesn't notice anything. I'm sure he's insanely jealous of her car.'

'How about a birthday kiss?'

'A kiss? Is that all you want?' She gave him a dutiful kiss on the cheek. 'You certainly wanted a lot more in bed this afternoon! What did you tell Holly when you came over to my place?'

'I didn't need an excuse. She went shopping this afternoon, and all she came back with was a new pair of frilly undies.'

END

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