

The Advertising Menagerie

Carol made one of her more dramatic entrances; the door flew open, she strode inside and starting talking immediately. The two men turned, smiled politely, but still finished their conversation; effectively they ignored the breathless rush of excited words that preceded her. But Carol seemed not to notice or maybe she simply didn't care - more probably she didn't want to wait for or even expect a reply. Her lips glistened, as usual; they'd been carefully rouged and licked beforehand - the lipstick applied in the car, the moisture added quickly but carefully in front of the hall mirror. And somehow that extra blouse button had managed to release itself again.

Both men had seen the performance before. Her entrance and the hurried movements that followed them were all theatrical gestures - practised movements made in front of full-length mirrors - movements that enabled her abundant breasts to bounce inside a blouse that was always at least one size too small.

"Hello darling" she exclaimed to husband David, and went over to peck him on the cheek. He'd seen the performance hundreds of times and gave a feeble grin.

"Hello Bob, have a good trip?" She came over and gave the visitor a big hug. "Good to see you again." The hug was yet another carefully-calculated gesture - one intended to confirm the size of those breasts rather than the depth of their friendship.

Even with those few, banal words of greeting Carol tried to convey a feeling of desperate excitement - to let her small audience of two know that everything she did was exciting, so it followed automatically that they must be excited merely to be in her presence. It had worked for David - he'd ending up marrying her - so that evening the show would be pitched at Bob, a semi-regular visitor from Brussels who usually stayed the night. That was the reason why the hug had been accompanied by a thrust of

the hips. Later that evening would come the contrived moment alone, the accidental meeting in the kitchen or wherever, when they were came back from the restaurant with quite a few drinks inside them. Maybe Bob would find himself trying to go through the same narrow doorway as Carol, or maybe Carol would find it absolutely necessary to lean right across him in order to reach the ice cubes or whatever.

Bob called it Act II of her performance, and he and David had discussed it several times. Act I took place in the restaurant and/or pub. David knew what she did on those Act II occasions: Bob told him anyway in order to prevent any misunderstandings. However, late in the evening, at an alcohol-glazed moments he sometimes wondered if he could be tempted. Carol was certainly an attractive proposition - she was small and dark and had a perfect, hourglass figure. Moreover she seemed to project her advance acceptance of a pass - to silently express the inevitability of the fact that you wanted her. Here I am, so take me, were the unspoken words she communicated in explicit body language. The practicalities of where and when were less obvious, because hubbie was always in the next room, and even after a few drinks David would certainly miss her presence in bed. But what really stopped him was Act I (more in a moment).

So in Bob's case the show had never worked. She was and remained a colleague's wife, and he had no idea what would happen if a move was made - he suspected nothing. A pass would have been enough for Carol - proof that the performance had been successful was all she required. He also suspected that she was totally faithful when David was away, if only because it would jeopardise her meal ticket.

Only a really determined lecher could have gone for Carol after her Act I performance ... table. In the restaurant she would get onto odd-ball subjects, UFOs for

example, and then announce with deadly and detailed seriousness that she'd come from another galaxy. David would stay silent and look bored; Bob would make, or rather attempt to make between giggles and guffaws, a series of sarcastic questions about the exact planet from which she came, if she'd been beamed down like the proverbial Scotty, and how and when she would be called upon to return. Once her husband suggested that the arrival of the bill would be a good moment to depart, but it was all water to Carol's galactic back.

Both men had made standard responses to her earlier Hello's. David had replied in kind with Hello Darling. Bob lived in Brussels and had flown in that morning. He muttered something along the lines of Fine thank you, in response to the standard enquiry about his trip. What else can one say about a 45 minute Sabena flight to somebody who isn't listening?

Carol had then bounced her way across the sitting room, flopped down in an armchair and made a kind of "phew" sound. Despite his best intentions, Bob had to look across and confirm his earlier impression that the top two buttons of her blouse were undone: they were. And as if reading his thoughts, Carol lent forward to remove her riding boots.

The show had started early.

If the pass didn't work that evening (and until then it never had), it would, he knew, be followed by Act III. This usually involved something like an accidental, naked scene in the morning; the pretend dash from bath- to bedroom when Bob opened his own door. (Like all good actresses, Carol had an excellent sense of timing). He would mutter something like Sorry, she would stop in surprise and then turn, front-facial towards him, before hurrying on. An alternative was to forget to lock the bathroom door and find her, sexily soaped under the shower. And in this particular scene she would also turn in surprise, and make no attempt to cover herself.

Act III was something Bob had never discussed with David, because in the sober light of morning those gestures seemed more serious and determined. But as Carol lent forward that particular evening merely to flash cleavage, he found himself wondering why she bothered with titillation when he'd seen her tits several times.

"God" she said to nobody in particular, followed by, "Gregs, I could use a drink."

Gregs was her husband's nickname and he disliked it intensely. After a few drinks it come out sounding like Dregs and soon somebody would start calling his company Dregs Advertising. Nevertheless David Gregory got up dutifully and went to the drinks trolley.

Carol then turned her attention to Bob, gave him a big smile and still trying to sound out of breath told him, "I've had the most wonderful ride on Henry. You remember Henry from Barnet don't you Bob?"

David reacted quickly to prevent the intended misunderstanding. "Henry is the horse Carol used to ride at the stables in Barnet," he said. "When I got this place she insisted that we buy the bloody thing and ship him down here."

"Gregs that's not fair," she retorted. "He's not a 'bloody thing' and you know how unhappy Henry was in that terrible stable in Barnet."

David shuddered slightly as he sliced through a lemon, and the look on his face clearly indicated what he thought of Henry's psychological condition.

There was a short silence and then Carol made exaggerated foot movements. After that she got up and then jumped up and down a few times, indicating that her calf muscles were playing up. Bob would have liked to ask her if the problem wasn't one of nipples straining at the leash, but didn't comment.

"Henry costs us, or rather me, a bloody fortune," David said when he came back with her drink. "God knows why you can't rent a horse like everyone else. The stable have even offered to buy him, so it's not as if you couldn't go on riding Henry whenever you wanted."

Carol took the cut-glass tumbler of gin and tonic, pouted and sat down. "You know that Henry's recovery program would be ruined if anybody else rode him. That was the big problem in Barnet." Then she pretended to be on the verge of crying.

"Could I have a drink David?" Bob asked, moving to intercept what was obviously a well-established domestic routine. Clearly a change of subject was called for, but at that precise moment his mind went blank. "How's the new garden?" he asked without thinking.

It was a stupid question, because neither of them had the slightest interest in gardening. David only lived in the country because it was part of his personal advertising image: pied de terre in town in the week (sans Carol of course), then down to the country at weekends. That's what successful advertising people did and therefore what Gregs did.

In order to lend substance to his trivial question Bob stood up and moved across to the French windows; maybe he was seeking to find the answer for himself. It was a sizeable but simple garden that somebody obviously made an effort to keep in shape. The lawn was circular and fell away from the patio to the trees at the bottom. However, before the grass reached that destination it was confronted and somewhat blocked by a rather shabby pond. That was not in keeping with the carefully-cultivated country image that David strove for, but a possible explanation was the presence of a solitary, white duck.

"I see you've added a pond," he commented cheerfully.

David proffered Bob his gin and tonic and seemed to shudder again.

"Is the duck yours or is it just passing through?" Bob asked. As a lad he'd been interested in ornithology and still remembered details of geese migration, but was less certain about ducks.

"We had to get the pond put in when we got Caroline," Carol told him. "Isn't she a darling?"

David muttered something along the lines of more bloody expense.

Carol ignored him, got up, moved across to the French windows, opened them and called out.

"Caroline, Caroline, come to Mummy," she shouted several times.

Caroline chose to ignore Carol.

"Is Caroline a tame duck - a pet?" Bob asked.

"She certainly is," Carol replied.

"What do you do with a pet duck?" Bob asked. At first he was genuinely interested, then, remembering their UFO and other bizarre conversations added. "I mean, I know that you pat dogs and stroke cats, but how do you establish a meaningful dialogue with a duck."

As usual Carol failed to notice the sarcasm.

"You talk to her" Carol explained, "but it'll take some time to make friends, because she's frightfully paranoid."

"You've got a paranoid duck?" Bob asked. They would usually be onto their second bottle of red wine before the conversation started to go that far off the wall. This was supposed to be semi-serious, first-cocktail-of-the-day stuff.

"You'd be bloody paranoid if somebody was trying to kill you" David interjected. "The dog is jealous of Carol's latest acquisition in this bloody menagerie and is trying to kill him."

"Her" said Carol "the duck's a her. And anyway Geraldine is only playing."

"Try telling that to the duck," David replied. "Ducks don't lie down with dogs anymore than lambs do with lions."

Once again Bob felt obliged to make a domestic intervention. This was only the second time that he'd come down to their new place in the country. Already he was beginning to wonder if there'd be a third and what excuse he could use.

"Is Geraldine the collie you had in Barnet?" he asked, knowing full well that is was. He usually took the dog out for walk when he stayed there. And he remembered that the collie was very nervous, but then who wouldn't be with Carol in charge of your destiny.

"Yes," Carol replied. "You like dogs Bob, so you'll be happy to hear that she's a lot less neurotic down here in the country."

Nobody talked for a while. Carol and David seemed to be perfectly at ease, but Bob felt that he had to say something. He was used to bizarre conversations with Carol, and after a few drinks they could be quite amusing, but this time they were all cold sober and he wasn't sure how to handle the situation.

"Now that you mention it," he said without thinking, "I do remember coming down one morning in Barnet and finding that Caroline had shat all over your white Indian rugs." Then in an effort to correct this social gaffe he added hurriedly, "I mean that she only did it because something had frightened her."

The gaffe went unnoticed.

"She only did that when we had visitors" Carol explained in a matter of fact manner. "They make her even more nervous."

The fact that they had all come back drunk the previous evening, and that Carol had forgot to let the dog out wasn't mentioned; nor was the implied, but unintentional riposte about visitors. The dog

wasn't 'more nervous" when he taken her out for walks.

"My theory," David said slowly and very seriously, "is that since we got the cat, the collie has gone schizophrenic. She - the collie - is terrified of the cat, so she takes it out on the duck. I've been thinking about it lately. The way I see it, the collie thinks of herself as a highly-strung poodle most of the time, but when the cat puts in an appearance and frightens her, the collie does a Jekel & Hyde, turns into a Doberman and goes for the duck."

"I haven't seen the cat," Bob commented. Or the dog for that matter, he thought. Then he suddenly remembered that he was allergic to cats, so that was going to be his excuse in future.

"He's gone upstairs," Carol explained.

"Who?" Bob asked.

"The cat," Carol replied.

"And the dog?"

"On heat," David told him. "In the dog hotel."

Bob had tried two changes of subject and both had failed. Now the conversation seemed to have jumped suddenly to the Act II final coffee/ cognac scene of the evening. He decided to make a lateral jump as well.

"Does the cat have any problems of a nervous disposition?" he asked.

"Only that he's awfully introverted. That's why he stays upstairs."

Bob would have liked to pursue the apparent logic behind Carol's answer, but decided to keep things simple. "Then how does he get to meet the dog?" he asked.

"He breaks out every now and then," she replied. "You know, he kind of psyches himself up to face the world. We all do."

"And comes downstairs?"

"Yes," David interrupted "and the bloody dog gets scared shitless." The two men looked instinctively at the Indian rugs,

which David had cleaned up in the good old Barnet days. The simple approach had clearly failed. Now Bob had to find out what fantastic Freudian theory Carol could invent to explain the behaviour of their menagerie. "If Geraldine thinks she's a Doberman instead of a Collie when the cat psyches himself up and comes downstairs, which is what David just said, then why doesn't she - Geraldine I mean - chase the cat back up the stairs. Does the cat have a name by the way?"

"Carol's got a theory about that," David said and smiled.

"It's nature's pecking order," Carol explained. "The cat pecks the dog and the dog pecks the duck. It's an irreversible process. Geraldine knows that she isn't really a Doberman and the illusion would be totally shattered if she faced up to Horace."

"Horace?" Bob asked in bewilderment.

"Horace is the cat. Henry is the horse. Geraldine is the collie and Caroline is the duck," David explained. "And this, is my wife Carol."

"What about Henry," Bob asked. "Is he pretty normal?" Not knowing what else to say.

"Oh yes," said Carol, getting up and stretching her arms back provocatively, "his recover program has worked so well that he practically bourgeois. I'm going to take a shower."

David waited till she'd left the room. "Sometimes," he said, "I wish that bourgeois old Henry would come out of his stable and beat the shit out of the lot of them. Shall we have other half and then go down the pub?"

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