

THE QUEEN'S CHAMBERS

A Play by

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CAST

ELLA Hotelier: Ex-Drag Queen, dressed accordingly, and in his late sixties.
GRAHAM A tidily-dressed middle-age man.
DENNIS A tidily-dressed middle-age man.

GENRE Comedy (15+ age suggested).
SETTING The licensed lounge of a seaside Gay Guest House.
TIME The present day.
DURATION Approx 90 minutes playing time.

ESSENTIALS (STAGE + PROPS) A well-stocked public bar. Gin bottles (min 2). Glasses (min 3). Small Coffee Table. Sofa. Armchair (Spotlighted in Scene 2). Fireplace. Two doors leading off – one not seeable through by the audience when opened. Doorbell sound.

NOTES Act One: 3 Scenes. Act Two: 1 Scene. There are no major scene changes. The play is very nearly a monologue for Ella, where with so many asides the audience can almost feel a part of it. For the experienced performer, it lends itself to the frequent ad-lib. Act One: Scene Two is a monologue.

ACT I

SCENE ONE

(The lounge of a seaside B&B with various furnishings including a fireplace, a well-stocked drinks bar, an armchair and a sofa between which there is a coffee table. In line with the armchair there is a closed door on either side. The door Stage Left should not be seeable through by the audience when opened. A half empty gin bottle lies on the floor near to the fireplace. Off: a doorbell rings once initially, and then several times.)

ELLA

(enters: door Stage Right, flustered)

Alright! Alright! I'm coming! I'm coming! Or I might have been if you hadn't rung that bloody doorbell!

(exits rapidly: door Stage Left,)

GRAHAM

(pause, then off:)

Ella Vanoll?

ELLA

(off:)

Yes it is a bit, darlings, and so am I. Ella Vanoll — the one-time world famous female impersonator extraordinaire. You must be Graham and Dennis! My, you have changed! How many years is it? Decades it must be! Decades! Please, do come inside and make yourselves at home.

(enters: door Stage Left, followed by: GRAHAM and DENNIS)

So, you found me in the end! And you're not the first to have had that pleasure, I must say!

(an aside glance)

Oh, dear! Hush my mouth! It's just my little joke, sweethearts! But never mind, welcome to my humble abode! This is the public lounge, my lovelies. A little camp, but not too twee, don't you think?

(waves hand inviting for Graham and Dennis to sit)

Do park it on the Chesterfield, sweethearts, while I go in search of a fresh gin bottle. I won't risk using the one on the floor. We had a bit of a party in here last night, and as usual Swallow Sweetly drank far too much. She passed out over there, in front of the fireplace, and with six of us unable to shift her — she's a whole lot of woman is our Swallow! — we had to leave her to sleep it off down here. Without going into it in any great detail, she has this kind of a party trick she likes doing, and I'm positive I put that gin bottle back on the bar before turning in last night!

(an aside glance, then minces towards the bar to pour three gin and tonics.)

GRAHAM AND DENNIS*(together, walking over to the sofa and sitting down)*

Thank you.

ELLA*(preparing three gin & tonics)*

I'm sorry about all the confusion on the phone earlier, darlings; it seems someone gave you the wrong address, didn't they? It's easily done, though. There are so many people who affectionately refer to this as the Queen's Chambers, when in fact, to give this establishment its proper title these days, it is the Queen's Guest House.

As you toddled up the steps you may have noticed the sign above the door simply says: Queen's, and I really ought to apologise for that not being more helpful. You see: it is entirely due to me previously running the business as a hotel, but for a whole host of reasons, most of them to do with some petty new rules and regulations thought up by a bunch of local council silly-arses with nothing better to do, a change of name became necessary and I have yet to update the rapidly painted-out 'Hotel' word with 'Guest House'. Like quite a few other things you may notice while you're here, I promise you: I will get around to doing it, one day.

*(returns to hand Graham and Dennis their drinks.)***DENNIS**

Well, thank you! This is most unexpected!

GRAHAM*(with a look of surprise)*

You are very kind!

ELLA*(sitting down in the armchair)*

Es nada! But you seem a little surprised to find me here, sweethearts. Let me reassure you: you are not alone. When most of my old friends come across me here — and quite a few of them have in their time!

(an aside glance)

— they are equally as amazed to discover I now run what is basically a seaside, twelve bedroom, cheap and cheerful, licensed bed and breakfast. It is hardly what they would have expected of such royalty as they once knew me in years gone by. However, I have to tell you: there is a very good reason for me being here.

Of course, darlings, it is not that times are hard for this now decrepitly aging drag queen, for I promise you they are not, but finding something that is,

(an aside glance)

especially when the next big event fast-looming on the horizon for me has the ring of a seven and a nought to it, can prove extremely difficult, if not more than a little tiresome! However I have found that by providing some good, clean, gay accommodation, it does present me with an almost never-ending stream of highly frustrated, often spent all their money and dead-broke, drunkenly staggering back late of a night, gorgeously vulnerable

chicken — and fittingly, it then only takes the mere offer of another drink as a sort of nightcap, with perhaps the addition of a strong bottle of poppers, to entice them into my quarters at the rear!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

(fidgeting and looking uncomfortable)

Er . . . Really?

DENNIS

You don't say!

ELLA

Well, yes. It's all to do with health and safety, you see. I can't have them attempting those stairs in that state, can I? And at my age there's no way I could ever carry them. I mean, it's as much as I can do to lift them off me some nights if they crash out!

(an aside glance)

But naturally I always allow any obliging guys to have a long lie-in the next morning, and when I take them their breakfast in bed, as I do, without fail I see to it that they get an extra meaty sausage. Grateful, I do know how to do!

DENNIS

(hesitating)

You mean . . . ?

ELLA

No, no please don't! Don't be shocked. You shouldn't be! Everybody who gets as old as I am does need to cut a few corners here and there once in a while. I can assure you: they'll be cutting it with little else!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

Really?

ELLA

Well, yes! I mean: take staff, for an instance. The days when I could service twelve bedrooms all by myself have long since passed, so I need people to do that work for me. Nevertheless, there are very few guest houses that can afford to take on staff and pay the minimum legal wage these days. There's simply not the profit in this game to allow it.

Thankfully though, honey-buns, with Blackport being such a gay and vibrant resort, there are always enough young lads turning up here who are only too happy to perform all the arduous tasks for me in exchange for a warm dry bed and a roof over their heads, with meals and a few quid pocket money thrown in for good measure.

Hard up, as they invariably seem to be,

(an aside glance)

I find having these gorgeous young creatures around can be extremely rewarding.

Really, that's what life is all about, isn't it, sweethearts? It is all about giving and taking, therefore I think one should always try to rise to the occasion, and that I invariably do. So, while these charming young guys happily go about their tasks, like giving the rooms the once-over, these days I can just enjoy lying back, putting my feet up, and taking it all in.

(an aside glance)

I really don't know what I'd do without my darling lads now. I find they inject so much into the place — on the whole!

(an aside glance, then looks questioningly at Graham and Dennis)

GRAHAM AND DENNIS

(embarrassingly choke over their drinks while trying to hide the giggling looks they are giving each other)

ELLA

What? Oh, you're laughing at my double entendres, are you? Well, you'll soon find out: Blackport thrives on the risqué innuendo, sweethearts, so just be thankful you are not booked in over the road at the Shunter's Inn! Percy there would have you bent over double by now! In his nigh on thirty years in that joint, I reckon he's popped so many innuendos he could go for a heritage grant to preserve a national monument! Count your blessings, darlings. I've seen it, and it's not a pretty sight!

Still, I really shouldn't be nasty about dear old Percy. After all, he is a good partaker in the twice weekly gentleman's club we hold here in my lounge. It's where we swap notes over a few drinks and put the world to rights, though I must confess: that man can talk a right load of shit at times! Hmm . . . Perhaps most of the time, when I come to think about it!

Did I mention he's only one leg?

(looks questioningly at Graham and Dennis)

GRAHAM

(fighting to compose himself)

No. No, I'm sure I would have remembered something like that, had you mentioned it.

ELLA

Yes. Apparently the silly bugger got a bit careless and left the other one behind in the Falklands. Of course, they threw him out of the army straight after that, and with boring regularity he now reminds everyone: it is the only discharge he's ever had that made him any money!

Anyway, it seems put with what he already had in the bank, it was enough for him to buy the small pub with bed and breakfast rooms across the way and start a new life.

Hopping around like he does,

(an aside glance)

I really don't know how he manages to keep on top of it all over there. It can't be easy for him. I mean: the place never was a gold mine, so in the early days he was trying everything to make it pay. There's not a soul in the street who could ever forget the wedding party he took in one weekend. Was that desperation or what? They say

desperation can make strange bedfellows, don't they? And that was exactly what got him into a whole load of trouble that Friday night — his bedfellow.

GRAHAM

His bedfellow?

ELLA

Well, yes! Percy is Percy, you see, and only Percy could be stupid enough to ply the best man's girlfriend with enough drink to get her absolutely blotto, and then take her equally as drunken beau to bed. The noise that night! I have to tell you: it was truly unbelievable! It had the whole of the street standing outside his pub, including me. We were wondering what on earth was going on.

DENNIS

Really?

ELLA

Yes, it seems the poor girl had come to her senses again around four in the morning, and she immediately missed her partner. Panicking, unable to find him herself, she woke up the whole wedding party to go and search for him, and dozens of still heavily intoxicated, half-asleep idiots began coming and going everywhere, falling around stupidly as they went looking for the guy. Then one of the sops said he thought he could hear some moaning coming from inside a locked room.

It was only minutes then before the poor girl was screaming her head off, wasn't it? Wanting to know what was going on, she began frantically kicking and banging away on Percy's bedroom door. Inside the room, blown to the heavens on goodness knows what, her boyfriend, Trevor his name was, started to scream back at her — but he was screaming out for the girl to go away and leave him alone! Now, according to Percy, the story is: the guy wanted more stump!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM AND DENNIS

(together - shocked)

No!

ELLA

Yes, honestly, darlings! It's what he said! However in case you should feel a bit squeamish and want to throw up, perhaps I should hastily explain: it is very doubtful any such manoeuvre could actually have been taking place between the two guys. After all, up until that night Trevor was to all intents and purposes a gay virgin, wasn't he? So that would make such a feat almost totally impracticable.

GRAHAM

Thank heavens for that!

ELLA

No, darlings, I reckon it was probably nothing more than some happily shared fantasy they were having, or a drug-induced hallucination, the effect of alcohol consumed to excess. Nonetheless, whatever it was, it undoubtedly revealed to Trevor precisely the direction in which his true sexual desires lie!

GRAHAM

Undoubtedly!

ELLA

Poor Percy, though. The next morning he hardly had a leg to stand on, did he?

(an aside glance)

The disgruntled party hurriedly booked out of his pub, some leaving without even paying, and many of them coming over here to stay at my gaff. It's how I came to know the full story, sweethearts.

GRAHAM

Really?

ELLA

Yes, I can remember quite clearly: at the time no one had the foggiest idea what had happened to the girlfriend. She wasn't at the wedding, and could have gone anywhere. But nobody seemed to care that much, and least of all her ex-boyfriend. He, after the ceremony on the pier that Saturday, and the reception hurriedly rearranged for here, booked himself into one of my double rooms, staying on for the whole of the following week, and I have to say: there wasn't a night when he didn't bring some fantastic-looking hunk back with him to sleep over.

Now I don't know it for sure, I mean: I couldn't swear to it, but putting myself out on a limb here,

(an aside glance)

I rather suspect the men he entertained on those nights were all a bit too much for our Trevor. You see: he went back over the road at the end of the week, to Percy's, and he's remained there ever since.

The couple had their commitment ceremony a few years back now, and as these events go it was an extremely grand affair. Everybody who was anybody turned up, and I can tell you: there were quite a few who got legless that day!

DENNIS

(grinning)

And how did you fare?

ELLA

Eh? What's that? How did I fare? Well, sugarplums, I have to tell you: I've never fancied legless, he's not my type you see, but I did manage to sample his Trevor for an unforgettable half an hour!

I have to say: ‘unforgettable’, for there is a man so well-versed in punctuation, should you give him the tease he can come back with something to cross your eyes!

(an aside glance)

I’m not normally one to go for health and safety, as you may well know, but I can remember distinctly thinking at the time: any erection of that magnitude really should come with a safety net, and I found myself looking for one!

More gin, darlings?

GRAHAM AND DENNIS

(eagerly offer up their empty glasses)

GRAHAM

That’s jolly civil of you!

ELLA

(taking the glasses and mincing to the bar)

Right, well don’t go away, honey-buns; I shall be back in two, and then I can tell you all about my journey this far.

(Blackout.)

ACT I**SCENE TWO**

(The lounge is in semi-darkness. Spotlight: Ella who sits sipping a gin in her armchair. Unlit: Graham and Dennis with refreshed drinks are seated attentively on the sofa.)

ELLA

It all started a very long time ago, though sometimes it seems like only yesterday. I was barely ten years old when the new queen visited Winchester. Pretty, young, and slightly nervous, that adequately describes me as I waited with the rest of the school kids, hundreds of us herded into a field by some castle ruins. After an indeterminably long period of boredom, one infrequently punctured by some nearby ill-mannered brat giggling as he inflicted the foul odour of his bodily functions upon us, the royal party finally arrived.

I watched, transfixed, as an army of dignitaries slowly escorted the queen around the field to the tune of a thousand box brownie shutters going off. Arriving at our side of the gathering, she gracefully glided past in front us, dressed all in white as I recall, happily smiling and waving to everyone, with her diamond tiara alive and sparkling wildly in the bright sunlight. Stunned, I can remember immediately thinking: that's for me! I want some of that!

But before going on, perhaps I should first explain a few things: you see, in truth I come from quite a fortunate background, and the only reason I was in Winchester at all at that time is because my parents had placed me in the Bendy Willows Preparatory School for Boys, or Orgy Towers as we called it. There they classed me as a half-boarder, meaning I slept there, enjoying all the fun and frolics of the dormitory on four weekday nights, but returned home every weekend.

Camp Jonathan, one of our young chauffeurs, would pick me up in the Rolls after school at four-thirty on the Friday, whisking me back there for eight-thirty on the Monday morning. I liked Jonathan a lot. I'm sure he was, you know? And that he knew all about me. Hmm, thinking about it now, I would have done. Perhaps I should have done. But I digress . . .

The family estate of quite a few thousand acres lies not a million miles outside Marlborough, with enough horses on it to keep a glue factory going until doomsday. Now, you will need to excuse me here a bit, but for reasons I won't divulge, for many years now I have felt it appropriate to call the old family home: 'What-a-load-of-horseshit Manor'. So, on returning to What-a-load-of-horseshit Manor that Friday evening after the Queen's visit, and unsurprisingly finding Lord and Lady Mucque-it-must-be-hyphenated-Spreader, my dearest mater and pater, were away again for several days, I decided to explore my mother's bedroom, which was situated in the West Wing. She never locked it, unlike father who always locked his bedroom in the East Wing.

I can remember: the fact that my parents didn't share a bedroom amused me greatly as a child, and it frequently left me wondering how I came to be. I would start to visualise weird things, like one of the maids frantically rushing from my father's bedroom, across the landing at the top of the grand staircases and down the lengthy corridor to my

mother's bedroom, carrying a steaming jug of his sperm, a length of rubber tubing and a huge funnel. Honestly, it really wouldn't surprise me to discover I am the result of artificial insemination! After all, they were doing it to the horses all the time!

Anyway, getting back to my story, it took me quite some time to find where mother hid the key to the safe in her dressing room. But then, on nervously opening the vault, the sight that I beheld took my breath away. I mean: it was like she had piled a whole jeweller's shop into her safe. There were tiaras, necklaces, brooches, bangles, rings, and everything; you name it and it was there to beyond belief!

I spent most of that weekend in her dressing room, wearing her jewellery and trying on an assortment of her clothes — ridiculously long on me, I know, but what else could I do? By now I was hooked on all the glam of the sparklers, and you won't need me to tell you: a tiara does in no way go with grey flannelette schoolboy trousers, especially the short-arsed ones we wore in those days!

So, that Sunday evening, realising I may not always have the freedom to explore my mother's trinkets, she wouldn't be away every weekend, I decided to remove one and hide it away, convinced she had so much heaped up in that safe she would never miss it. But I couldn't keep it anywhere in the house; the cleaning staff were so thorough it might be discovered. In the end I decided the roof of the stables would be a good place to stash my prize. No one was likely to look up there. So racing across to the stables, and then putting on the tiara to wear it just one more time, I scrambled up the wooden wall-ladder into the loft.

"Shit!" screamed Danny, the fifteen-year-old stable boy, as he hurriedly tried to stuff what was at hand back into his riding breeches.

"Shit!" I screamed out too, convinced the guy was in dire need of some head, and what better than one with a crown on it?

That was how I met my Danny. We were together through thick and thin for nearly sixty years, right up until I lost him last year. Men's troubles, you know? Prostate the size of a football, they said. Towards the end he had to go into dock to have it milked twice a week. Still, I suspect he got quite a bit of pleasure from the experience. I mean: no one else had been there for ages, had they? Not even me. Well, you don't, do you? Not after a while. It all gets too familiar, like an old raincoat; it's something you need to have around, but you don't really want to wear it again!

I do miss him terribly though, the boring old fart, and I often think back to that night, the first time we did it. We laughed and giggled so much, and then Danny carried some hay up into the loft, threw me down on top of it, and had his wicked way with me. Stripped naked, apart from that prized tiara, it was the first time I let someone go all the way. Needless to say: I immediately got hooked on that too!

Strangely, it wasn't until I was in my second year at Marlborough College that mother missed that damn tiara. Unbeknown to me, bogged down with a load of studying, back at the old homestead the staff were beginning to believe the Third Reich had invaded. My parents were having the whole place searched from end to end, including the workers' cottages and private quarters.

They found the tiara in the stables, up in the loft where I had left it, and as Danny was the only one who had any business in that roof-space, they blamed him, saying that, even if he hadn't taken it himself, he must have known it was there. Well, poor Danny was terrified at what they might do, so he phoned me at the college, in tears, to tell me he was

off, doing a runner. I managed to persuade him to wait there for me, and immediately phoned Jonathan, having him pick me up straightaway.

As soon as I arrived back home there was the most terrible row. Absolutely phenomenal, it was! Blazing! I explained to my parents that it was me who had stolen the tiara, not Danny, and I confessed to them the need I had for it. Well, I have to tell you: Vesuvius erupting would have had nothing on my father that day! He went totally ballistic, and his father too, the silly old sod who lived surrounded by stuffed animal heads and a mountain load of militaria in the annexe.

He, a wrinkled-up prune of an old man with the tag: Albert, little more than a walking skeleton really, on hearing our raised voices had rushed into the room bollock naked, that is apart from a skew-whiff Kaiser Bill helmet perched precariously on his head. It was a ghastly sight to behold, I can tell you! Swinging a huge sword madly around above his head, with his face screwed up threateningly in anger and his eyes like pinpricks out on stalks, the silly old duffer began wildly leaping about the room, on and off the furniture, shouting out at the top of his voice: "Infidel! Kill the infidel!" I'm sure he thought he was up the Khyber Pass at the time! He should be so lucky!

Anyway, it seems the stupid old git couldn't hold his arms up above his head for very long, and as they gave way under the strain of the heavy sword it came crashing down, almost taking off his todger in one fell swoop. I've gotta tell you: it was only like a little shrivelled-up worm, so how the blade ever came to find it I shall never know, but it did. Blood started spurting everywhere, mother immediately slumped to the floor in a dead faint, and father turned to me, angrily shouting, "Look what you've done now!"

Well, Danny and I began packing our bags straightaway, and we were off by the time my father had called an ambulance and resorted to using sellotape in an attempt to hold the old man's dick together. The lazy bugger had first called for Cedric, our elderly butler, to attend to it all, but on arriving in the room to see the old man's half-severed member and his elongated, scrawny, blood-soaked scrotum threateningly swinging from side to side, he'd fallen to the floor too, crashing down on top of mother to join her in a faint.

Anyway, we convinced Jonathan to ferry the two of us to Swindon station, and then there we were: a fourteen-year-old and a barely eighteen-year-old lad, totally lost for what to do. We summed up the choices available to us: the Penzance express to the land of pixies and tin mines, the Red Dragon to the hills and a few sheep-shagging peasants, or the four-twenty-five non-stop express to London and the bright lights.

It was a no-brainer, wasn't it? I wasn't going to wiggle my tush at half a dozen pixies, or a flock of shagged-out smelly sheep. If I was going to wiggle it, I was going to wiggle it at the biggest audience I could find!

I remember the train was packed and we couldn't sit next to each other, only diagonally opposite, and perhaps it was all the excitement of the unknown, but after a while we both got a bit horny. You know what it is like when you're young: you get horny a lot, don't you? You can get desperate. Well, a nod and a wink later, and we landed up having a mutual in the train cottage. But, God! I have to tell you: that was an uncomfortable session! In those days train cottages were just pokey little places, nothing like what they are today, so every time I think back to it I can still feel those bloody water taps trying to work their passage to Paddington! Honestly, it is little wonder the Americans call them faucets!

Anyway, by the time we arrived in London it was pissing it down. We had nowhere to go, and no time to be there, so we hung around by the station exit, the one into Praed Street, waiting for the rain to stop. We'd been there about half an hour, I suppose, just hanging around and feeling more than a little bored, when this guy came up to Danny and asked him: would ten quid do for all night?

Well, you could have bowled me over with a wet lettuce! It was obvious what the guy was after, and as we hardly had any money I was quite expecting Danny to go for it, but he didn't, bless him! He said he wouldn't leave me there on my own, not in a strange town, so the bloke doubled his offer and decided to take the two of us.

The guy was quite young, in his late twenties I reckon, and extremely good-looking. As he bundled us into a taxi, I began to wonder why he should be prepared to pay for us when he was the type that would likely have suitors queuing up for him. I mean, from just looking at his enormous packet, which I couldn't take my eyes off, had I the money I would quite happily have paid him for a bit!

He shut the cab door on us, and was walking round to get in next to the driver, when all of a sudden this big middle-aged guy in a raincoat rushed up, and knocking our bloke to the ground with one hefty barge, he leapt into the taxi instead.

"Sussex Gardens," he shouted out, and without any argument at all the cabbie drove off.

It was only just around the corner, and we were there within a couple of minutes. Holding hands, frozen rigid to our seats in fear, we wondered if the bloke actually realised we were in the back of the cab.

Of course, he did; he knew all along. After paying the driver, he opened our door and said, "Come on, get out. This is as far as you two go on my money, sweethearts. If you walk up to the next corner and cut back to Praed Street, you'll see the hostel. Try your luck there if you're homeless, they'll probably put you to right, but if you hope to stay alive, trust me: don't go plying for trade back at the station, not if you want to see tomorrow morning."

So, swallowing heavily, and realising what idiots we'd been, we both got out and thanked the guy, with me assuring him we weren't plying for trade, it was just that the guy had come up to us and made an offer, and we were nearly skint.

The big guy cocked his head to one side, then screwing up his face as he looked us over, he walked all around us, and then looked again, especially at Danny, before saying, "I know you, don't I? I've seen you before. You look after Paddington Pride for me, don't you? You're Danny Boy."

"Yes, sir," Danny answered. "Or I did until today, sir. I've run away, you see, with the boss' son. This is Edward."

"Run away?" the man spluttered. A mile-wide grin immediately erupted on his face, and frightening me, he began to laugh in danger of busting a gut. "Run away?" the man choked out again, with the laughter tears now running down his cheeks in streams, "Or do you mean: eloped? Oh, dear! Oh, me! Oh, my! Oh, my goodness! Oh, don't! You're killing me! I think you'd better come indoors and tell me all about it, don't you?"

Well, the guy only turned out to be Lord Blabington of some strange place I'd never heard about up north, who having abandoned his falling down stately home of Blabington Hall had become better known to many a London queen as Perky Polly of Paddington!

As soon as we went inside we could see the guy wasn't short of a bob or two. He made us some tea, and laughed mercilessly through our story, before showing us his wardrobe. Well you could have blown me over with the flutter of an eyelash; it was three whole rooms on the top floor!

That evening the guy invited some of his friends over, and I had a marvellous time. We were all making each other up and trying on loads of different outfits. Danny didn't like dressing up, of course, he was far too butch for that, but as we never went in for monogamy he still managed to enjoy himself. Some of the visitors were quite young and adorable.

Once the rest of us had finished playing with the wardrobe we joined the frolicking group, and then both of us had our fill that night. Darlings, it was truly unbelievable! Just when we thought we couldn't do it any more, Reefer Rita turned up and decided to hand them out all round!

Well, neither of us had ever smoked before, had we? I'd never wanted to try it, and with Danny working so many hours around the stables with all that inflammable hay, he'd had little opportunity to take it up, but we gave it a go. Once we got over the initial bout of choking, and were spaced-out, giggling away stupidly at our swimming heads and saying all kinds of daft things, someone, I don't know who, produced a whole bagful of toys. We'd never seen anything like that before! Never heard of such things! But there they were: loads of them, and they ranged from little Pinky Peter all the way up to Ripping Roger. What a night that turned into! Danny wasn't too butch for his share of them, I can tell you! Without a word of a lie, sweethearts: I'm sure we were both walking funny the next morning!

Now, you need to appreciate all this was happening to us around nineteen fifty-seven. You could leave school and get a job at fifteen in those days, but though I looked much older, remember: I was only fourteen and a few months. No one would employ me, and anyway: as what? Danny could find work, of course, but not with racehorses, which was all he knew. There was factory work, shop work, or with much of the bomb damage from the war still needing repair, labouring on the buildings. But I couldn't see him doing any of those kinds of things; it wasn't him, so we had a problem, and it was a big problem. A non-skilled worker would only earn a few quid a week in those days anyway, and that wasn't going to keep us in anything like the style I wanted; it was barely breadline — where would we live?

Fortunately, it was Polly who came up with the answer. It turned out she owned two tearooms, one in Ladbroke Grove and one in the Chelsea High Street, and Lally Lil, a big burly bloke who was once a docker and who ran the one in Ladbroke Grove for her, had just gone down with a two year stretch for cottaging. Apparently the silly old bugger had gone up the West End for a bit of posh and got himself caught.

Of course, we had no idea what some of the London tearooms were like in those days. Coming from the sticks, we didn't know they were just a front for a homosexual club in the basement. You have to remember, this was still a few months prior to the Wolfenden report, and that only said it should be okay for two guys over twenty-one to do it in private behind closed doors. There were no obvious gay clubs or pubs around in the fifties where you could meet someone of the same ilk; it was mostly either the tearooms or the cottages, and whenever the thugs discovered the true nature of these places, they

would often trash them, and whoever was inside. They were some real bad days for anyone who was gay — a word still to be adopted for homosexuals at the time.

Anyway, later that day Polly took us along to the Pollyanna Tea Rooms. Sort of one up from a greasy spoon, it had tablecloths, sold tea and coffee by the cup or the pot, and always had a wide selection of pastries and the suchlike on offer.

She said we could run the tearooms for her and live in a couple of rooms at her place, and for that she would pay us five pounds a week. Easy-peasy, we thought, and though the hours were strange, it was fairly good money. What could go wrong? So we took Polly up on her offer and started there the very next day.

Danny ran the upstairs and was in charge because he was just about old enough, while I looked after the guests downstairs in the basement. Polly said she would pop round and give us a look-in every so often for a few days, just to check we were coping okay. But it wouldn't be busy, she promised.

Not busy? When Polly poked her head in around six o'clock that first day we were in a state of panic! The place was absolutely heaving, and we'd nearly sold out of everything — not that it mattered: by this time everyone was downstairs, and they'd all brought along a bevy or two. It seems the word had spread like wildfire that duey feely omis were now running the joint, and every omipalone for miles was zhooshing their riah and turning up to vada our eeks! We soon learned all the Polari they were speaking.

The upstairs closed at seven o'clock that night, and then we were both able to enjoy the party going on in the basement. Polly had left strict instructions: everyone was to be gone by midnight, let out of the back door into the dark alley in small numbers. Well, with all what had been going on in the alley that night, I don't know how any of them managed to make it out of there without slipping over and breaking their neck! I mean, I'd never seen anything like it! It was awash, darlings, simply awash! Anyway, after clearing the place up, totally exhausted, it was way past one o'clock by the time we arrived home. Polly was there waiting on the doorstep for us, and straightaway asked for our set of keys to the tearooms. I thought: 'Oh well, that job didn't last long!'

But I was wrong. After handing the keys to a bloke standing in the hallway behind her, who then ran out and shot off in a waiting van, she told us we could go in at four o'clock the next day as she was having someone else run the upstairs; we were to be in sole charge of the downstairs. She was having a few changes made to the place overnight, because it seemed we were a huge success!

Well, when Polly took us to work the next day I didn't know what to expect, and my legs turned to jelly. The workmen had changed the whole of the downstairs overnight. With two of the unused rooms cleared of rubbish and lavishly furnished, the doors removed and the doorways extensively widened, the place was now more than three times the size it was the day before. Now it even had a small stage area, spotlighted, and a curtain backdrop with an opening behind to a small room claimed from the end of a passageway. It was a dressing room, and it was stuffed full of fabulous gear!

"I get all the feedback," Polly said, grinning at us. "I heard about the little show you two put on for our guests last night. Well, from now on you can do it properly, in style, and I'll double your wages. You'll need to think up some good names for yourselves, though."

And so, after several changes of mind, Ella Vanoll was born. Danny, who had the equipment to warrant it, adopted: Rip McCavity for a while, but everyone still called him

Danny, so he soon dropped it. We danced, sang, and entertained, teasing the punters nightly, and we did that there for six very happy years, during which time Polly turned the place into a proper licensed gentlemen's club.

It was after the Christmas Special show in nineteen sixty-three, where we performed a very daring and naughty act on stage, one where we were both almost doing it to music with a punter, that a guy came up and offered us five pounds each a night, five nights a week, to do the same kind of act in his Soho club.

We turned him down at first, being happy enough where we were, but Polly got to hear of the offer and said we really ought to take it. We were far too good for her type of club now, she said, and we shouldn't let an opportunity like that to better ourselves pass us by. Five pounds each a night was a lot of money; far too much to let go, she told us. Polly was a good old stick!

We opened at Spangles of Soho as the star turn on New Year's Eve, and the punters were packing the venue to its rafters! The place was positively huge compared to the Pollyanna, where nearly everyone had been a friend, so we were very nervous that first night, especially with the star billing. Well, we certainly did give them value for money, I'll say that! Or at least Danny did!

Onstage, dressed only in his tightly revealing white nylon shorts, as we went through the simulation routine with a couple of guys from the audience, it must have been down to all his nervousness, but Danny couldn't stop it happening. He quickly pulled back from the punter, freezing on stage in an attempt to control himself, but he couldn't, and unable to stop his gyrating hips, there to the screams of hundreds of excited punters he spurted into his shorts! Of course, I simply corpsed, unable to help myself, and making it even worse: there was Danny now, bright red and trying to hide this growing translucent, showing everything, big damp patch with his hands.

I was so sure Geoff, the owner who everyone knew to be very strict and a bit of a taskmaster, would sack us that very first night, but instead he came up to us and said he'd give us an extra quid every time Danny could have an accident like that on stage — but it had to look like a genuine accident, not something planned or helped. We earned quite a few of those quids in the two years we stayed there. Before we'd left, the punters were actually betting each other as to whether or not it would happen on a particular night! It was crazy!

Of course, there was a lot more to our repertoire than just that musical simulated sex act. Dragged up the eyeballs, I'd always sing a few numbers, and usually with as many costume changes. We'd do a couple of comedy duets, and then I'd tell a few topical jokes, frequently lashing out at the audience with my wicked, bitchy tongue. The crowd loved it, and so did Gerry Mates, a gangster who owned the much larger Exclusive Club near Charing Cross Road.

It was very big money he was offering, though he didn't want the sex act, or Danny. We haggled for nearly two months, almost on a daily basis, so intent was he to have me hosting his club. In the end we settled for eighty pounds a week to cover my daily expenses and my manager: Danny, free use of the luxury flat at the back above the club, and ten percent of the door. But when we signed up for all that, neither of us realised the true amount of money that would be forthcoming. It was absolutely phenomenal, and yet Gerry was still way over the moon with the arrangement.

Licensed as a men's snooker club with entertainment, the Exclusive was indeed exclusive, with the ultra-expensive prices keeping it that way. It had a couple of snooker tables, but I never once saw them played on. Frequented only by the rich and famous who could afford to go to such a place, these people came for the entertainment, and they came from all around the globe. We were piling the money away in unbelievable shedloads, buying a brand new car within the first year, a flashy one, and then a four bedroom house as an investment, both of them for cash. Ella Vanoll had arrived in the big time, and she had done it in style!

Gerry became my agent, and with even royalty from some countries as our punters, we enjoyed that kind of high life for over twenty-five years, and frequently went on tours, and made appearances at prestigious clubs in countries all around the world. During this time, towards the end as gay became more and more accepted and openly gay venues started springing up everywhere, we managed two world theatre tours, and made cameo appearances in several films.

And then one day it was all over. Gerry died and his daughter inherited all his clubs, and his vast fortune. We had never seen eye to eye with her. She was a money-grabbing bitch who over the years had robbed her father rotten, so we simply tore up the contract, which thankfully was only a personal one with Gerry, and left.

There were a few television appearances after that, some charity events at various clubs of note, and quite a few Pride celebrations covered, but really we didn't need to work any more, so most of the time we didn't. We spent quite a few years doing little more than taking long holidays, especially the cruises. Danny really loved cruising, and in every sense of the word. There can't be a city in the world where he hasn't picked up some guy for a bit of trade. Then, feeling tired of all that globetrotting, we'd been there and done that for just about everywhere, we decided to retire to here, to Blackport and the simple life. And didn't we pick well?

Really, I think the resort should adopt a new name. For what it has become recently, Chickenport would be far more appropriate. I mean, you can have one in your basket every day here, darlings, no problem at all! You don't even have to go and look for it. Everything you could ever want is on offer, and have you ever known a place so cheap?

(stands up)

More gin, darlings? I'll just fetch another bottle. We can have one more, and then I'd better show you up to your room. You can come down again afterwards, of course you can, there's plenty more gin. It's just that you're on the top floor, and if I have too many more before I take you up there, I may not make all those damn stairs!

(takes the glasses and walks out of Spot, towards the bar)

(Blackout.)

ACT I**SCENE THREE**

(The lounge. Two drinks are waiting on the coffee table. Ella, gin in hand, is seated in her armchair.)

GRAHAM AND DENNIS

(enter: door Stage Left)

ELLA

(from resting eyes, suddenly looks up)

Well, there you are again! I've poured your drinks in readiness. Was everything alright with the room? Clean and tidy enough?

GRAHAM

(walking to sofa and sitting down)

Very nice, thank you!

DENNIS

(following Graham)

Most excellent!

ELLA

Oh, that's good, I'm so pleased. The lads do know how to service them well, don't they? And not only the rooms, I have to say! Oh, there I go again with the jokes, darlings. You'd think I was still performing, wouldn't you? I just can't seem to get it out of my system after all those years. But from treading the boards to running a boarding house, I guess there's not a great deal of difference when you come to think of it. I mean, they both involve keeping the punters happy, don't they?

GRAHAM

I suppose they do, really.

ELLA

Of course, you'll find this is by far the best accommodation in the street. Did you happen to notice the brand new soap in the en-suite? We always put new soap and loo paper out for every guest. Don't worry about the toilet rolls having a logo on every sheet; it's just that one of the lads does some part-time work for a hotel in town, one of a large chain, and he regularly gets me them at a discount. They are still the best quality, of course. You'll notice the tea, coffee, and milk on your courtesy tray are of equal top quality, as they come from the same place. The chocolates too, but I don't put them on the pillows anymore; not since the heating went wrong that time and they all melted, sliding down into the beds. It looked most unsavoury, I can tell you! You couldn't make out what was what!

(an aside glance)

No, you'll find the chocolate is now kept in a pretty little saucer on your bedside cabinet, next to the glass that we thoughtfully provide for your teeth. There's one glass there, and another one in the en-suite bathroom, sweethearts. I insist on that because I know some people do like to pop their teeth in and out while they're entertaining in bed, don't they?

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

Do they? I didn't realise.

DENNIS

It must be handy, I suppose, but tell me: why is there a blackboard and chalk hanging by the shower? What's it for?

ELLA

What's that? The little blackboard and chalk in the en-suite? Oh, that's simply there for guests to write on. It's somewhere they can hopefully vent their anger by writing rude words without actually destroying the bathroom suite as they try to desecrate all the new Health & Safety notices the silly-arses at the council force us to put up.

Only last week some guy took offence at the sign telling him the shower floor might be slippery when wet. I found the one telling him to take care because the shower might have hot water, stuck on the loo seat, right next to where he'd scratched: 'Caution: Shit may happen here!'

(an aside glance)

So I really do apologise for all those stupid notices, poppets. Unfortunately you'll find them everywhere these days; we all have to obey the law. That's why when I put peanuts on the bar over there they have a notice in front of them saying: 'Salted Peanuts. Warning: This product may contain nuts'. Like the notice in the hallway with the arrow, the one that says: 'Caution: Stairs', it is now the law in these parts, and so I've heard: there are a whole load of new ones coming out soon, these concerning the dangers of breakfast cutlery, teapots, and the hot water we provide for topping up.

You might already have noticed I've started to fight back. I've put one of my own signs up next to each one of theirs, a much bigger one that says: 'Warning: Nearby Health & Safety Notice!' I've found it does help to dampen the anger of some people, so that's good.

GRAHAM

You really don't like the Health & Safety people, do you?

ELLA

No, I hate them, darlings! Can't stand them!

Poor old Vera with the verrucas, her next door but one, she's had a hell of a lot of trouble with them of late. She reckons they're a bit like having head lice: once you've got them it's a hell of a job to get rid of them. Worse than a bad dose of the clap they are, so she says — and she should know all about that! The tart is up the clinic every second week!

(an aside glance)

Still, I shouldn't go speaking ill of her, she does keep us well-informed of who else she sees up there — and that can be a blessing!

(an aside glance)

Of course they never go next door, these Health & Safety idiots. Not anymore! They tried to once and that was funny, but I think they've learned their lesson. Old Sam stands no nonsense from anyone. Years back he was a copper, one of the old brigade: a clip round the ear and that's the job sorted.

Well, these two officious-looking tarts turned up on his doorstep one morning at nine o'clock: arses out, thunder thighs and walking like a couple of ducks, they had metal-rimmed glasses, tweed skirts, and pointed noses, with each of them carrying a huge clipboard — you know the type?

It was just as he was serving his breakfasts, so they couldn't have picked a worse time. Sam is not good with breakfasts. There's many a morning I can hear him through the wall, cussing away. I know then he's burnt the toast. If it's any worse than that, say he's frazzled the eggs, he throws the whole lot across the kitchen at the wall: eggs, beans, tomatoes, everything, and then he starts all over again, after breaking into a whistle.

Well, old Sam let rip into these women so fiercely that morning, the whole street must have heard him. Many of us abandoned cooking our breakfasts to stand out there and watch. Our guests were out there with us too, curling up in hysterics.

Oh, he really made those stupid tarts feel small. Being an ex-copper, you see, he could keep firing questions at them, not allowing them to get a word in edgeways. How dare they turn up without an appointment? Could he do the same at their office and expect to see them? Didn't they know anything at all about the hotel trade? What were they doing in their jobs as they obviously didn't? Did they expect to come before his hungry clientele?

The questions came so quick and fast, the poor women didn't know what to do. In the end they fled, bawling their eyes out to a round of applause from the rest of us. They've never been back, which is just as well. After the amount of times he has thrown everything up that wall, Sam's kitchen is like an oil slick. Still, I suppose it does mean he changes his cooking fat far more frequently than many I could mention around here!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

Do you frequently change your cooking fat, then?

ELLA

Me? Oh, yes my dears! You'll find mine is fresh vegetable oil out of a bottle every morning. We pride ourselves in cleanliness here. It was the first thing we changed when we bought the place. The tub of general purpose Crisco on the kitchen side was out the door quicker than that, I can tell you! I mean: you could see the frantic fingermarks clawed into it where someone had grabbed a handful,

(an aside glance)

and I know no one ever gets that frantic over their cooking! No, it's all okay here my luvvies, I promise you. Even our eggs are free range so the chickens have had a chance to wipe their bottoms first!

Young Tommy does the breakfasts for me these days. He's a lovely lad, hunky with blonde hair and gorgeous equipment. I only carry the plated food to the tables, and take all the credit. I have to do that because he likes to do his cooking naked, you see? He treats it like an art, and that way he says he can get more of a feel for it — besides it gives him somewhere to keep the tea towel so he always knows where it is.

(an aside glance)

Many an excellent meal has come to grief while searching for the tea towel, I can tell you!

You did read the notice on the back of your door regarding room service, didn't you? The one telling you to hang the sign outside on the doorknob if you are in and don't want a service?

GRAHAM

We did, yes.

ELLA

Oh, that's good! Apart from Tuesdays, Todd does your floor, you see, and he hates to come across people unexpectedly.

(an aside glance)

He's another one who doesn't wear a lot, not when he's servicing. Says he gets hot. But he's a beautiful young guy, and so obliging too, however being blacker than coal, he does sometimes frighten people if they've forgotten that sign and he bursts in on them with his equipment. He's very good at his job though, is our Todd. So thorough. You'll always know when he's serviced you, there's not a bit he will have missed!

(an aside glance)

DENNIS

What happens on Tuesdays, then?

ELLA

What happens Tuesdays, did you say? Oh well, Tuesdays are normally quiet days in this trade and there's very little to do, so that's the day when he services me!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

Really? That must be nice for you! Tell me: do you provide an evening meal?

DENNIS

We haven't seen a menu anywhere.

ELLA

No. No we don't do an evening meal anymore. We used to, but I found it didn't pay. Being so cheap and plentiful it was normally chicken, but they can go off so quickly, can't they? Guests would order a meal and then forget to come back for it, meaning Tommy would have stripped off and prepared his meat and two veg all for nothing.

(an aside glance)

He's a lovely lad, as I said before, but when it comes to the punters, he doesn't like doing anything pointlessly. I mean, what can he do with a chicken once he's stuffed it?

(an aside glance)

I know the waste was upsetting him, because he can produce some really marvellous meals. His sundries are to die for too, especially his ring doughnuts. I can remember once somebody ordered a dozen of them, wanting them piping hot for dead on five o'clock. Of course they didn't turn up, and by six o'clock we were playing hoopla with them.

Poor Tommy, he got into a hell of a state over those doughnuts! They were chocolate coated, you see, and as I'd managed to hoop nine on him,

(an aside glance)

after we'd had our fill he had to take a shower!

So as we don't do an evening meal, if you are looking for somewhere to eat later, Spring Shoots is a reasonable restaurant. You can't miss it; it's on the front by Bottom Row. They have their stuff delivered daily. Everything is fresh there, including the waiters. You might need to watch out for them though if it's a quiet night, they can get frustrated very easily. Personally, I think it's down to the two-way mirror they've installed in the little boys' room. They say it's only there as a security measure, but I have other ideas. I mean: if anybody pays it a visit, you won't find a waiter for love nor money until they've come back out!

(an aside glance)

A tip though, and it goes for all the restaurants in town: it is always best to order what you can see someone else just starting to eat; that way you're a lot less likely to get anything the second time out. The food places here are very conscientious, and you'll find for many of them recycling goes a whole lot further than simply saving plastic and cardboard, sweethearts.

Of course, if it's only something simple like fish and chips you're after, then you could do a lot worse than: 'The Fishy Plaice'. You'll find that's just around the corner, down Bottom Row.

(an aside glance)

Two dykes run it, Fran and Jessica, lovely girls, been there for years, big though, and they stand no nonsense from anyone. Complain about something and you'll find yourself outside looking up at the stars!

Old Sid who's got the Unicorn pub next to their chippie had a bit of trouble one night last year, and when the police didn't turn up he phoned the girls. They went round and cleared the pub for him within minutes, but it took nearly an hour for the ambulances running a shuttle to remove all the bodies lying outside in the road afterwards.

Sid's no fool though: he took photographs of the street-full of injured. Since having one framed and put on the wall behind the bar, he's never had the slightest bit more trouble.

GRAHAM

Really? That's good. We shall have to check out Spring Shoots later on, when we're ready for something to eat. But is there a lot of trouble in town of a night, then?

ELLA

Quite a bit. You'll find most of it is outside 'Balloons' though. That's the new straight nightclub on the promenade. At weekends, sometimes it's like a battlefield there in the

early hours. With bodies lying all around, there's blood and gore everywhere — and quite often that just used to be the police.

Nowadays they are a little bit more sensible and rarely rush over there to answer a call. Sometimes you can even catch them hiding round the corner in their meat wagons, watching all the aggro on CCTV. There's a camera high up, right opposite the club, you see, and as often as not now they wait until the fighting has died down a bit before intervening.

I suppose you can't really blame them, can you? I mean: it's tough out there on the streets these days, so would you want to wade in? I know I wouldn't! I always say: there's no joy to be had riding into the sunset on a limp hero, is there?

(an aside glance)

Personally, if I were a copper I'd only protect the peaceful, law-abiding general public and its property. I mean: who really cares if the toerags frequenting these places of a night and causing trouble kill each other? I certainly don't! After all, it might mean a few less of them being around to do it tomorrow!

GRAHAM

Yes, I think most people would sympathise with you on that score! We certainly can.

ELLA

Good! I'm so glad we're in agreement! But you needn't worry: thankfully our types of pubs and clubs are all at this end of town, and they hardly ever see any trouble. On the odd occasion they do it is usually only because some silly arse has been a bit careless, or when times are hard: become money-grabbing, by allowing a load of Stags & Hens in. They can be really bad news, Stags & Hens, you know? There's many a pub and club, both gay and straight, gone to wall because of them. Sometimes whole towns have suffered terribly.

Of course I'm not anti-straight, or anything like that, darlings. Don't get me wrong: I wouldn't want to see straight youngsters banned from gay places. Oh, no! I have a great deal of respect for our chicken producers. I mean: where would any gay bloke be without them?

(an aside glance)

It's just unfortunate so many of the straight ones they make turn into thugs these days! We get them here, sometimes. The odd one or two straight lads will try to book in when they think everywhere else is likely to be full. If I've got room I might take them in, but I don't encourage it. Unless they're extremely good looking, and appear to be suitably packed,

(an aside glance)

I usually try to put them off.

DENNIS

You do? But how on earth do you spot them? How do you actually know if they're straight or gay?

ELLA

Darlings, if you can't smell a cheesy cock when it walks through the door, you shouldn't be in this game!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

(looking horrified)

You mean you can actually smell them?

ELLA

A lot of the younger ones, you can. You see: they don't have the same ideas about personal hygiene, sweethearts, and the splashing it all over they do first thing in the morning soon fades away to reveal a horrible truth: they haven't washed well in all those important little places where every gay guy would be meticulous. There are other give-aways too, of course.

GRAHAM

Like what?

ELLA

Like their eyes. A straight guy may inadvertently catch sight of a crotch and buns as he sums someone up, but he'll never look back there again, where a gay guy's eyes will keep on returning. Todd books most of our guests in, and any guy who doesn't have a fascination with his packet is definitely going to be straight, isn't he? Especially as Todd never buttons up and there's many a glimpse to be savoured!

(an aside glance)

DENNIS

I always thought having a straight man was every gay guy's dream. Er . . . Not that either of us have ever fancied one!

ELLA

Was that when you thought the Earth was flat too, sweetheart?

Think more of a fascinating challenge, a want of the difficult to attain, along with an inquisitiveness and the forlorn desire to not be disappointed. Yes, there are times when a straight bloke can be a gay guy's saviour, like any port can be in a storm, but only rarely is he really going to be his dream lover — and in the case of a size queen, probably never!

(an aside glance)

DENNIS

(puzzled)

Eh? Really?

ELLA

‘Fraid so, honeybun. It’s an established fact: far fewer straights are well endowed in that department, and as for knowing what to do with it, well! A banana is likely to have more sense of what to do than most straight guys!

(an aside glance)

Saying that though, some of our regulars do appreciate the odd straights staying here at times. They regard them as a sort of sport.

We had a couple last year, Robert and Steve they were called, and they were only pretending to be gay because everywhere else was full due to some famous plonker appearing at one of the straight clubs. Hammered by the time they got back that night, a group of our lads coerced them into holding a bedroom party, where after a few more drinks they were totally out of it. Blotto!

As a joke, the unfortunate pair were stripped naked and squeezed into the same single bed in the most compromising of positions, but not before several condoms had been inserted deep up each of their jacksies with the help of a lavatory brush — since discarded,

(an aside glance)

and a few used ones strewn around their floor!

I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall and heard the conversation in their room the next morning! Skipping breakfast, the poor guys sneaked out unseen, and I had to feel sorry for them.

You know, I often wonder what the world would be like if the gay-straight ratio of the planet were to be the other way round. It would be absolutely wonderful, I reckon. Nothing but fun, fun, fun! Probably one long disco dance party, colourful, happy, full of love, with copious amounts of sex for everyone, and yet no overpopulation and no wars.

Perhaps best of all, were it to be like that then perhaps I might stand a chance of scoring with that John Tyler up the road!

(an aside glance)

Ultra-straight, and ultra-beautiful, he is an absolutely mind-blowing fascination, darlings! The exception to the rule, he just screams out to be sampled, but there’s no hope of it happening. Life can be so cruel at times, can’t it? Never mind, I suppose I really shouldn’t complain — after all, I do frequently have his equally as delicious brother.

GRAHAM

You do?

ELLA

Eh? Oh, of course, you wouldn’t know, would you? His brother is Tommy, my lovely cook I told you about. He fell out with his homophobic stepfather, so he lives here with me now, and that’s turned out to be a bit of double-edged sword really. I now know just how good his brother could be!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

You’re a bit of a tart on the sly, aren’t you?

ELLA

Of course I am, sweetheart! Of course I'm a tart! At my age what else could I be? I'm far too old to do most things I'd like to do. I can't even manage my stage act anymore; the voice has gone, and the speed of wit, not to mention the looks! I am a tart, there's no denying it, and all I have left to look forward to is someone smothering me in cream.

(an aside glance)

Fortunately I've found a way to make that happen. There is a never-ending supply of cream here for me, and while there is, I am determined to thoroughly enjoy every last mouthful of it!

I'm not stupid; I know these lads don't really love me. But as I said earlier, life is all about giving and taking, and while I am still able to, I intend to take everything I can get. I'm going for every last drop. After all, it may not be for much longer. Who is there to know when that final curtain call will come? But you mustn't think badly of me. I also told you earlier I knew how to do grateful, and I do.

You see I really am not here running this place because I'm down on my luck. I have been very lucky in my lifetime — lucky to have had my Danny for all those years, for a start. Without him, and all the common sense he acquired — and he found that without having to go to a posh school like me who has none, I would probably have blown every last penny I earned. But I didn't because Danny always managed the money. When we were no longer a double act, it became his job to manage me and our money— and that he did to the point of excellence!

We sold that four bedroom house, the one I told you we bought in the first year at the Exclusive, and we did it just before the property market crash. Made us more than a million that one did, and ten others that we bought over the years made similar huge profits. Today, sweethearts, as well as a bulging bank account I have a property portfolio that, amongst others, encompasses a third of the hotels in this street, including the one Tommy's stepfather rents. Failing some of them may be, and I know a couple of them are having difficulty paying the rent on their leases, but I don't mind, and I don't push it, because just the land that they stand on is worth an absolute fortune.

I can't take it with me when I go, so with it I shall look after all my lads, past and present. There's not one that I haven't kept in touch with, and one day they will all benefit in some way or another. I shan't forget them. They will all do well. You see, all those years ago, Gerry was a professional gangster. He knew the ropes, and he taught us how to play the game.

GRAHAM

(sitting forward attentively)

What do you mean: 'play the game'?

ELLA

Because he set us up with so many different bank accounts and companies, with companies owning companies that owned companies and so on until lost in confusion, and under so many different names, we have hardly paid any taxes for decades. Still playing the game today, even here in this double building, all those rooms on the two floors above my flat aren't on the books, you know? They are a part of my private house next door, and neither the council idiots nor the stupid taxman have a clue they are there!

The interconnecting doors on the landings are fire doors, only for escape through to next door in an emergency. They don't realise there are another seven rooms on that side. It's all bonus, darlings! It's all for the lads, one day!

Todd has been very kind to me. He comes back here every year for the season, and a good looking bloke like him, especially one hung like a donkey,

(an aside glance)

could get in a place anywhere. And as for Tommy, he's such a lovely lad. I think the world of him. He's stays with me all the year round, and I know he has no plans to move on.

They both have their own lives, of course. They go out on the town, having a good time and pulling occasionally, bringing their shag back here, especially Todd, but they seem to do it less and less as time passes. Working here, with all the drunken idiots in the tumultuous relationships that we see so much of in this game, I think they both know they won't find the guy of their dreams in any tacky nightclub up town.

Anyway, after Todd and all the other lads have been seen okay, everything else, including the properties and my wardrobe, will go to Tommy. My only regret is that I won't be around to see him throw his evil, homophobic stepfather out on the street, for I know he will, and he'll take great delight in doing it! I'd do it myself, but I wouldn't want to rob him of the pleasure one day. His stepfather is a wicked, wicked man.

DENNIS

Why are you leaving Tommy your wardrobe? Isn't it worth a lot of money? Why don't you sell it now?

ELLA

Well yes, it is worth a fortune. There's one dress alone with over a grand's worth of gold thread sewn into it, but even if one day I get to perform at some great matinee in the sky, I shall never be able to wear it again, will I? Actually, when it comes to that dress: thank chuck for that, I say! It was as heavy as hell! But I didn't tell you how I first came to meet Tommy, did I? It will explain the wardrobe.

Living only a few doors away from his stepfather's straight hotel, one of the few in this street, I was always bumping into the lad. We would just exchange a neighbourly 'Hello' with each other and go on our way, but he must have known I fancied him. You can't hide things like that, can you? The eyes give you away. Then one afternoon, when I was out the front polishing my knocker,

(an aside glance)

this awful row broke out at their place. I could hear his old man effing and blinding like there was no tomorrow.

Well you know me, darlings. I wandered up there anxious not to miss a word. All of a sudden the front door opened and Tommy flew out, hurled down the path, with his stepfather coming out onto the top step, shouting after him and telling him never to return.

Poor Tommy looked up at me, he was barely seventeen at the time, and the tears were flooding out as he picked himself up and apologised for the disturbance. I could see the panic written in his eyes. He didn't know what to do, or where to go. His secret was out, you see. He was wearing it: a bright blue dress, and with that on he couldn't go to any of

his mates for help. So without saying a word I led him back here. Todd was at home, and he lent him some of his clothes, but Tommy was still in a hell of a state, not knowing what to do.

Todd even offered to share his room with him, and his work, just so the youngster had a home, but I said no. Luckily, Mario, an Italian lad who had a kiss like a sink plunger

(an aside glance)

and cooked the breakfasts, was leaving in two weeks time, so I said Tommy could have his own room, learn how to cook the breakfasts, and take over the cooking, but only if he really wanted to.

Well of course he wanted to. He took the job, and stayed. Here he could be himself, frock and all if he wanted. He works hard, and he's become the best cook I've ever had, but no one ever sees him dragging up. He still keeps that side of his life very secret, only doing it in the privacy of his own room, but I know one day he'll really treasure that wardrobe.

DENNIS

The lad was very lucky you were around, wasn't he? Though I guess, by giving him a home, it immediately enabled you to seduce him? Or sample him, as you like to call it? So perhaps really you were the lucky one?

ELLA

Eh? Are you trying to get off on this, or something? No, I didn't seduce him! He was far too young and immature, still little more than a boy at that time. Darling, nappies I don't do! Chickens have to be able to get served in a pub for me to want them, even if they are so young-looking they need to produce ID each time — I don't do milk bars either!

(an aside glance)

It was much later, about a month after his eighteenth birthday, that one night he just asked if we could fool around a bit. I guessed he was feeling extra horny, needing to get his rocks off, so we did it. Now it's pretty regular, and sometimes it's in a threesome with Todd, or somebody else, but I have no illusions he's in love with me, well not in that way. I know he's not. He's just a wonderful, young, caring, fun guy, one happy to share a part of his life with me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Here, let me get us some more drinks again. It's the gin. I think we've arrived at the depressing stage; we've become far too serious! Gin does that sometimes, doesn't it? But I'm sure we can drink ourselves through it!

(an aside glance, then collects the empty glasses and minces towards the bar)

(Blackout. Curtain.)

END OF ACT I

ACT II**SCENE ONE**

(The lounge. Graham and Dennis are sitting quite still on the sofa. Ella is at the bar.)

ELLA

(walks from the bar with three drinks, placing two of them on the coffee table by Graham and Dennis before sitting in the armchair)

Well, here I am again, honey-buns! Sorry I had to pop off for a moment there while I was seeing to the drinks. You did notice, didn't you?

GRAHAM

Yes, of course we did.

ELLA

Oh, good, only you had me worried there for second. I feared the worst. Sometimes it's quite difficult to tell whether someone's wearing that comatose gin-drinker's expression, or they've suffered a sudden death, isn't it?

No, it was only because it's coming up to one-thirty, you see, and I had to pop off to make sure Todd realised what time it was — he'd be annoyed if he missed the train.

DENNIS

He's off somewhere then, is he?

ELLA

Oh, no, no, no, he's not going anywhere. Well, that is: apart from into his shower.

You see: there are usually a good number of knockers arriving on the one-thirty train, and as they trip down the slope from the station, with us being on the end of the row the window in Todd's shower is at eye-level to them.

DENNIS

Can people see through it, then? Isn't it frosted glass?

ELLA

Well, yes, it is frosted, and it nearly goes from floor to ceiling, but he opens it up wide so everyone can see in. You'd be surprised how much business he can drum up on a Friday and Saturday afternoon simply by soaping himself up in there.

(an aside glance)

Mind you, I think the sign outside helps a lot too. You missed that, did you?

DENNIS

I think we must have.

ELLA

Ah, well, he wasn't showering at the time, was he? Right next to that window it is, and it used to say: 'The Queen's Hotel', but as we don't own a ladder, when we changed the name the best I could do was to hang out of the window and daub paint on it. Todd and Tommy held a leg each as I swung back and forth splashing a bit more on each time. I couldn't reach very far, but now it says: 'The Queen's Hot', it does seem to work much better!

(an aside glance)

Of course, with Todd being blacker than black, I had to replace all his shower tiles, didn't I? They can see him much better now against the white ones, especially after all the extra floodlighting I had installed. That did give us some problems though, I can tell you! Apparently it showed up as a hotspot on the thermal imaging camera in the police helicopter, and the daft buggers raided us thinking we had a cannabis factory in there! Anyway, now they've checked us out and marked 'ignore' on their map, I do feel a whole lot better about the basement!

(an aside glance)

GRAHAM

You've got a cannabis factory in the basement?

ELLA

Oh, no. No, I didn't mean we've one hidden down there, sweetheart. Not at all. There wouldn't be room anyway, not with the sauna, the wet room, the porn cinema, and all those slings and harnesses.

(an aside glance)

No my dears, we don't need to grow our own. Ninety percent of our punters arrive absolutely loaded down with the stuff. Everything you could ever want is under this roof most nights, and enough of the young lads come back so wasted of a night that they crash out as soon as their heads hit the pillow, or the floor — *(aside) whichever comes first!* Not even able to remember what they did the previous evening, when they find it gone the next morning they simply think they've used it themselves. Tommy and Todd sometimes sell the unwitting punters their own stuff back to them when they wake up desperate. It's quite a good perk for them.

DENNIS

Hasn't anybody ever tumbled the scam? Or woken up and caught them taking their stuff?

ELLA

No, nobody has ever caught them. Only once has a guy ever woken up. It was on Todd, and it didn't matter. The punter merely thought he had crept into the room because he fancied him, so with a grin from ear to ear he immediately threw his legs up behind his ears.

(an aside glance)

No, no don't laugh, darlings! You shouldn't! He was only a slip of a lad, and after Todd had dealt with him the poor guy couldn't make it down to breakfast the next morning.

He's been a regular for two years since then though, comes back for a night every month throughout the season. I give him a bit of a discount now because the poor guy can still never make it down to breakfast.

DENNIS

You mean . . . ?

ELLA

Well, yes, sweethearts. I thought I'd mentioned it earlier: like an anvil tosser's forearm!
(an aside glance)

(Off: Doorbell rings.)

ELLA (CONTINUES)

There! That's the doorbell now! What did I tell you? I must just take a quick look out of the window.

(shielding eyes, minces Down Stage onto the Apron and stares left, just into the House)

Oh, yes! How fabulous! I can see the chicken express has done us proud again; there are at least a dozen gorgeous guys queuing up at our door already. But don't worry, I won't have to go, Todd will see to them. He'll rush down and book them in.

GRAHAM

Wasn't he in the shower? He'll never get himself dried and dressed in time, will he?

ELLA

Well of course he couldn't get dressed that quickly, so he'll run down with just a wet handtowel draped around his middle. But opening the door in that state, he's sure to attract a couple more punters, isn't he? Sweethearts, I have a feeling it's going to be a very good night tonight — on the whole!

(an aside glance, then looking right of House)

Oh look, there's Steve and Steven standing outside their front door. The jealous buggers are staring daggers across here, I'll give them wave. Hello, dearies!

(overly-smiling, gives a queenly wave before returning to the armchair)

You know, I'd feel sorry for them if they weren't such compulsive liars? They've got the New Plumpton a few doors down on the other side. Lovely website, if only the pictures on it were of their own hotel. It looks so nice on there, nothing like the truth of their pokey rooms with sagging ceilings, old-fashioned wallpaper and bare floorboards. They call it 'character' and charge extra for it, but there can't be as many fools around as they were hoping for, I've never seen it so much as half full. I think they'll probably go under this year. I hope so, anyway.

GRAHAM

I guess by saying that you don't like them, then?

ELLA

Oh, no! No, I wasn't being wicked, sweethearts. I don't wish them ill. It's just that the property is one of mine, and I know the council are after renting a place around here. They are good people to rent to, the council. They do the places up themselves to their own high specs, are usually in for the long-term, and they always pay top dollar.

DENNIS

What do the council want a place for, do you know?

ELLA

What do they want it for? Well, I shouldn't be telling you this really, not as we've all signed the petition against it, but they want it for a chicken farm.
(an aside glance)

GRAHAM AND DENNIS

(incredulous)

A chicken farm?

ELLA

No, no, no, don't be silly puddings, darlings! Not the clucking hen variety — homeless youths! You know, young men? Potential trade?

DENNIS

But you said you signed a petition against it!

ELLA

Oh, don't worry about the petition; the council never take any notice of them. Petitions only make the council more determined to do what they want to do. I mean, people only sign them because it is the expected thing to do, don't they?
I happen to know, almost to a man, everyone along here would really love to see some talent move into the area. After all, we have the quiet winter months to think about. Lads in council programmes like that don't receive a lot of financial benefit off the state, do they? Chances are: they'll be forever popping out to borrow a drop of milk — *(aside) or bum a fag!*

GRAHAM

Won't most of them be straight? It's the normal way of things, isn't it?

ELLA

Straight? Well, yes I suppose most of them will be straight, but that only counts in front of their mates, doesn't it?

(an aside glance)

How many have you known who wouldn't, or you couldn't, given the right circumstances? The only one I've ever come across is Tommy's brother, and that's probably only because he's so shit scared of his old man!

Believe me: one hundred percent straight is about as rare as rocking horse do-do! There have been loads of surveys done over the years, the last two quite recently, and they all agree: eighty percent of guys experience same-sex at least once in their lifetime, and most of them more than once. That's four out of every five, darlings, and I wouldn't mind betting in nearly every case the other one is a chuffing liar!

(an aside glance)

DENNIS

But won't the council make these lads seek employment? Surely, they'll all be out working, won't they? With money in their pockets, they won't be a pushover!

ELLA

No, don't be silly! They won't be going out to work and earning money. I mean: just where could they get a job? Apart from one or two venues kept open for the locals, this resort dies every year at the end of September. This is Blackport, sweethearts — not Blackpool! You'll find more life on a chicken's skiddies than you will down the front here in winter!

(an aside glance)

(The Stage Left door opens. Ella looks directly across at it.)

ELLA (CONTINUES)

Oh hello, Todd! No, don't come all the way in, you're still dripping water everywhere!

(pause and questioning look through doorway)

Who? Jeff and Jon? And they want the vicar and choirboys film put on for tonight? No problem, sweetheart, I think I know where it is. By the way, these are old friends of mine from way back: they're two of Dildo Doris' lads.

(extends an arm to signify Graham and Dennis)

She had ten, all boys, but these were the only gay ones — that we know of, anyway! Like me, they once graced the boards. Hoofers they were, not drag artistes, and to die for in their day. I used to tweak their nipples regularly, in the wings before we went on, just to make sure they were erect. Unfortunately it sometimes affected more than their nipples,

(an aside glance)

and then the dancing went all to pot, but never mind! I've told them all about you, and I wouldn't want them to think I was fibbing, so be an angel and drop the towel, luvvy.

(pause - and then looks around at Graham and Dennis)

There you go! What did I tell you, sweethearts? Have you ever seen anything like that before?

GRAHAM

(shocked)

My God!

DENNIS*(shocked)*

Jees! That's gruesome!

ELLA

What's that? Gruesome? Oh no, dear, I can assure you: that hasn't started to grow yet!

(an aside glance)

Personally, I reckon that's the kind of black rod they ought to use each year to open the Houses of Parliament. It would be much more fun — though I rather suspect it would leave the Queen quite speechless!

(looks back at doorway)

Thank you, darling. You are a pet. You can put it away now. Tell our friends I'll sort that video out for them for tonight. It'll be in the cinema, and on channel nought in their room. See you later, my precious.

(The door Stage Left closes.)

ELLA (CONTINUES)*(turns to face Graham and Dennis)*

You'll like Jeff and Jon; I expect you'll meet them later on. It's Jeffery and Jonathan really, but they reckon the shortened version adds a certain air of butchness. Of course, cut or uncut, it doesn't really matter to me.

(an aside glance)

I've never minded a bit extra to get my tongue around!

They're a lovely couple who met in church, a vicar and a choirboy, and they found it holy impossible to altar their communion! Oh whoosh, dears! Sorry! You'll have to forgive me — I love that joke so much, and I do it every time they come!

They've been together for yonks now. Jeff must be fifty if he's a day, so that puts Jon about thirty-five, I guess, meaning it's twenty-odd years they've been partners. They're both still with the church though — a bishop and a vicar these days, but you mitre already guessed that! Oh, there I go again! That was inspired, but a tad surplus to requirements, wasn't it? Anyway they'll be downstairs later, in the basement, jiggling around to the music in full regalia. Such a happy sight!

GRAHAM

I hope they don't go around try to convert people; their room is not near ours, is it?

ELLA

No, you're quite safe, they're on the middle floor, darlings. They don't receive callers in the night. It's only on the top floor, where you are, that the doors have two locks — one for locking it, and one where it flies open should anybody push or fall against it.

(an aside glance)

It'll be full of chicken up there tonight, sweeties. Just take the lightbulbs out and you should be okay.

Most of the lads come back so wrecked they haven't got a clue where their own room is, and quite honestly they don't care so long as there's more drink available! Any door that opens for them can be home for the night! You could land up with a whole roomful, sweethearts; it's all a matter of luck. A swig of vodka and a sniff of the poppers and they'll be anything you want them to be, I promise you!

But just a little word of warning here, darlings:

(an aside glance)

do make sure you hide the glass with your teeth in. As far as you can push it under the bed is always a good place.

Someone lost a small denture up there only the other week, the glass was empty by morning, drunk dry, and though we searched everywhere we never found it. I expect some young lad has had the shock of his life by now! That's if, *(aside)* **heaven forbid**, it hasn't bitten his boyfriend in a love-locked moment of passion!

DENNIS

You certainly see life in the hospitality trade, don't you?

ELLA

Oh, yes, sweethearts. It's a laugh a minute in this game; we see it all! Anything can go astray in the nightly scrummage here, not just watches and jewellery it can be teeth, glasses, and even contact lenses.

We had to stop one lad blindly staggering around outside only last week. He was trying to find the station for his train home, believing whatever he took in the night was still affecting him and the reason why he couldn't see properly. Upstairs we had another lad screaming his head off because he thought he'd shrunk in the night; everything was so huge and looming up on him. Daft buggers had each other's contact lenses in!

I've lost count of the number of times we've had to put people in touch with each other simply to return items. Watches are a favourite. We only do it because, rather than trust the post, quite a few of them return the following weekend, paying again just to do the exchange.

Chuck out is at eleven o'clock you see, and with the late openings at the clubs these days, by the time they've got back here and had a good session, they don't have enough time to recover. Whole flocks of them fly out the front door some mornings by the skin of their teeth, still sky high, tripping on the night before, and racing like lunatics for the Hogwarts Express. It's what we locals have come to call the eleven-ten out of here, because it can only be by magic that some of the guys ever find their way home!

(an aside glance)

Mind you I pity the ones who book in at the other end of the road, either because they know no better, or because we're all full this end. They really need to be out a good bit earlier to catch that train.

DENNIS

But this road isn't that long, surely?

ELLA

No of course the road isn't that long; it's just that they've got the run of faith to do. They have to make it past St Mildred's.

It's a big double building, a little further down on the other side. You can't see much of it from here as the tall lleylandii foliage hides it from view, but it's owned by the church and used as a rest home for old and knackered priests. Thing is though, few of them are so knackered they can't be out the front in time to catch lads running to the station.

You'll usually see them out there in force, holding hands trying to prevent anyone from passing as they straddle themselves across the road. They want to save the youngsters' souls for God, leaving their bodies for themselves, and it's a hell of a temptation for some of these guys returning home skint. They're not short of a bob or two, these priests, and sometimes a lad or two will succumb, but they only do it the once!

Though to look at them you'd think they were mostly far too old for it, of course I'm not begrudging any of these old fogeys a bit of chicken in the sack. I mean: why should I?

No, it's not that at all, it's just what some of them get up to in there of a night that worries me — half of them need locking up in a funny farm; they're completely doolally! It's not unusual for one of them to conduct a full exorcism before morning, simply on the strength that a demon must have accounted for the disaster in his bed. Any other night he'd have kept his incontinence pants on! I pity any poor chicken who has to wake up to face that, I can tell you! Weed will take on a whole new meaning for him!

(an aside glance)

I've only looked inside the place once, and then very briefly. It's a bit like something out of a Dickens' novel in there, and it positively reeks of urine! Apparently they have a severe shortage of bathrooms, just the one of Victorian age for about eighteen inmates, I believe — and that's before you consider any overnight guests they take in! I've heard at times they have to resort to using china jugs, which are then forgotten about and left around everywhere!

They put on a garden fete last summer, hoping to raise some money. Not many people went to it, and I promise you: nobody but nobody would risk buying a jug of their refreshingly-iced apple juice!

(an aside glance)

Well, I mean: would you?

Every Easter they come round with hot cross buns, and that is a delight, I can tell you! Honestly, they are heavy enough to be cannonballs! But nobody dare throw them out because the priests frequently rummage through everyone's rubbish looking for stuff for the needy.

We all have to put them straight out our back doors, and then draw lots. Whoever loses is the one who has to be over the garden fences next day at first light, collecting them up and sneaking down the front to feed the gulls.

I do feel sorry for them; the gulls, I mean!

No, don't laugh, it's pitiful! I've seen what those buns can do! It was my turn to dispose of them last year, and one unsuspecting bird catching a piece in mid-air came down like a missile. Impaled deep in the wet sand by its beak, its covered eyes sending it into a shutdown mode, it was left there prone and helpless, upside down with its arse in the air, and I had to climb down and rescue the poor little bugger!

I have to tell you, darlings: there can be fewer things worse to be caught doing than sneaking up on a seagull's arse on a deserted beach in the early hours of the morning!

(an aside glance)

I mean: just who would believe the truth?

More gin, sweethearts?

(collects empty glasses and minces to the bar to refill them)

GRAHAM

We seem to be drinking an awful lot of your gin. Can you really afford to give it away like that?

ELLA

Don't be silly, of course I can afford it, cherubs. I told you before: we make money hand over fist here, and nobody knows about it! Besides, I'm a shareholder in the company. The more gin I drink, the better I do. I've found that works well for a lot of other things, too!

(an aside glance)

Especially in the end!

Now what were we talking about? Oh, yes, I remember! Arses in the air, wasn't it? Like that poor seagull. Every neighbourhood seems to have an arse in the air character, doesn't it? We soon found out our hotel community is no exception. Ours here is known as: 'Arse in the Air Andy'.

Andy is the toff who's got the Regal Hotel on the corner with the promenade. Suit and tie place, it is. You know the sort I mean? It is the kind of place where instead of saying: 'Fancy a shag, mate?', one needs to ask over prearranged drinks: 'Would one be attracted to the offer of participating in some mutually gratifying exchange?'

Well, no need to tell you, darlings: just having to work that mouthful out would see me losing interest!

(returns, to hand out the refreshed glasses before again sitting in the armchair)

Our Andy doesn't like to participate in anything, you see, or sometimes even to contribute; he much prefers to pontificate, believing he is far superior to everyone else. I used to joke once, betting he even dressed up to go to bed, until my Danny had him one night and I found out it was true.

The man wears pyjamas to bed, expensive ones that he has neatly pressed with razor-sharp creases. Can you believe that? He has his bed sheets heavily starched too. Danny told me it was most off-putting, like making love in a bowl of breakfast cereal!

(an aside glance)

Anyway, this Andy guy believes his gay hotel is so much better than anybody else's, but it's not, I promise you. Yes, he has more rooms, and he starches the bed linen for those who like that kind of thing, but that's about all. Having gone for the maximum amount of bedrooms with the minimum space he can get away with, all his rooms are much smaller than mine. You wouldn't even want to share with a fart in some of his double rooms, I can tell you! They really are that cramped, and as for his en-suites — well!

All my en-suites are proper wet rooms, sweethearts, and as standard the showers come with a secondary douche attachment already fitted, one which Todd carefully cleans out

with a pin and sterilises between occupants. *(beat) (aside) What? He doesn't mind — he says it's therapeutic!* But Andy only has bog-standard en-suites, pokily small with no douches provided, and in some cases there's not so even so much as a foot-washer, darlings! And by the state of the showerheads that Danny saw on his look around, the staff cannot be cleaning them very often. I won't elaborate on some of what he saw that day, sweethearts, but I can tell you: it would make the gin jump right out of your glass!

GRAHAM

We were only saying earlier: we'd never seen such good en-suites as you provide. They are quite exceptional, and you must be really proud of them.

ELLA

Well, yes, thank you for saying that about my en-suites. A lot of other people have told me they are the best they've come across too. I am proud of them, along with the clean and sizeable rooms I supply. We don't have beds pushed up against walls in this establishment, darlings. I mean: such a thing can be so off-putting at times, can't it? When your neighbour's bed is frantically banging away against your wall, you can easily find yourself changing rhythm to match, and that doesn't always work, does it? Especially if you've got further to go!

(an aside glance)

No, when you're having a ride, I say it's definitely a case of: horses for courses. It's like someone with short legs, dearies; they always go faster, but if you have long ones and try to match their pace, you could land up doing yourself a serious mischief, couldn't you?

DENNIS

That's so true. It's not a race, is it?

ELLA

Exactly, sweethearts! It isn't a race. It's not all about getting there. Only the inexperienced who haven't found all the enjoyment there is for them on the journey, think so much! Mind you, having said that, I do find the inexperienced can be a lot of fun at times! I mean, some of them go at it like a jackhammer on speed, don't they?

(an aside glance)

It's as if they think they're in a 'beat the clock' competition, and the little sweeties are so surprised afterwards when you put on your disappointed face and ask them to do it all again.

I like to tell them the story of the two bulls, where the one who takes his time, and leisurely services all the heifers in the field, pleases the farmer and goes on to live a long and happy life with endless conquests, whereas the bull who rushes at it, wearing himself out so he can't manage to get through them all, soon finds himself turned into an Oxo cube. It's a good analogy, I think, because I can almost guarantee it'll give me a long and pleasurable night with the lad!

DENNIS

I've heard one like that about fireworks. Have you heard it?

ELLA

What's that? Oh, the one about the box of fireworks? Yes, that's a good one too. Your box can give you one big bang, all over in a second or two, where so much is going on that you miss most of it, or a whole evening of enjoyable entertainment.

I know which one I prefer! I mean: if making it last wasn't better, then why do we hope for heaven and eternity? Why don't we just look forward to one almighty big bang at the end? No one's box appreciates a big bang more than mine does, darlings, but no matter how big it is, I've never found one that on its own was ever enough!

My God, I think I'm becoming far too serious again! Down the hatch!

(drinks)

I know, I'll tell you a story about Old Mother Higgins. Four years ago she took over what we now call the zoo at number one, right behind Arse in the Air Andy's hotel! That'll cheer me up; she's always good for a laugh!

Like this one, Nora Higgins' hotel, Nora's Ark, is a double-fronted building consisting of what once were two residences. It's basically a straight hotel that takes in guests with their pets, and she runs it with another old girl, one who goes by the strange name of Tessa Pumpkin.

GRAHAM

(laughing)

Tessa Pumpkin? I don't believe it!

ELLA

Yes, really! That is her name, and her unfortunate shape too! There is no disguising it: they are both enormous women, and both spinsters well into their sixties; dykes some believed for a while, though it was not something they ever admitted to and may only have come about because of their daily buying of a very large cucumber from the greengrocer in Market Square,

(an aside glance)

with the hand-picked sizeable carrots they also purchased from time to time doing absolutely nothing to dispel the theory. That is, until we found out about the zoo in their backyard!

Darlings, if it's got four legs and it isn't furniture, you could very probably find it in their backyard! And inside the place itself is little better, stacked full with everything from fish tanks to caged birds. There's even a foul-mouthed parrot called: 'Captain', and as that's allowed to fly free anywhere it pleases, I imagine their bowls of mayonnaise must last them quite a long time!

(an aside glance)

Anyway, last summer, following a heated row between adjacent guests at the Regal Hotel where one complained about the other one's squeaking bed waking him up every morning, Andy traced the source of the actual annoyance to the rabbits in the garden behind — in fact, right down to the two offending beasts.

Now Andy being Andy, a man who knows everything, he just knew it would do no good talking to the women, so he hopped over the wall in the middle of the night and had the rabbits away, leaving the cage doors open so it would appear the animals had escaped. Taking them home, he had his cook skin and gut them, but with rabbit stew not

something he would ever have on his posh hotel menu, he then took them over to St Mildred's for the priests to enjoy.

That was that, Andy thought, problem solved. With the pelts already burned, the priests would devour the last of the evidence. But they didn't. What he hadn't counted on was them taking the carcasses straight back over to Old Mother Higgins so she could give her guests' dogs a little treat! Well, the row that followed was really something, even for this street!

Now Andy doesn't normally move very fast, he does everything in a gentleman-like fashion. Even when on the disco dance floor he'll still wear his full suit, occasionally moving an arm or leg with dignity while continuously contorting his face, which does most of the work for him. So when Todd bellowed out that morning for Tommy and I to quickly join him out the front, I couldn't believe it.

There was Andy, as always dressed in his smart suit, trying to leg it up the road past us, with his gangly arms and legs going like drunken pistons. Behind him, shaking his fist was a puffing fat guy with a handlebar moustache, and Nora carrying a kitchen knife was close on his heels. Tessa, wobbling along dramatically, brought up the rear, and she was threateningly waving around a horrendous-looking thing that we later learned was a tool for performing animal castrations.

(an aside glance)

All of them were screaming out at the top of their voices, mostly profanities, and that brought the rest of the street out to watch.

Like something out of the Keystone Cops, they chased Andy into the station, over the ticket barrier, across the pedestrian bridge, down the platform and along the railway line. By this time the police were turning up, and they too joined in the chase. Then the police helicopter arrived, hovering overhead with somebody shouting out a load of totally incomprehensible garbage through its speaker system. Annoyingly, all too soon the chase went out of sight to the crowds of us by now watching from the bridge, but apparently the police stopped the running scrimmage when a couple of their cars cut it off at the level crossing, more than a mile up the track.

It turned out the two rabbits belonged to the fat guy, who for the animals' security had brought them with him on holiday. Of show class, the product of many years of speciality breeding, they were worth a small fortune. I know Andy paid him thousands in an out of court settlement, but there are still some court cases dragging on. He was not licensed to kill animals, you see, so there is that and the possible matter of cruelty, then there's disturbing the peace, not buying a railway ticket and correctly observing the barrier, and trespassing on railway property, with an additional charge for the train company having to stop the trains.

Quite surprisingly, Nora and Tessa got away with just a warning after claiming the knife and clipping tool were only in their hands unwittingly because they had been using them immediately prior to taking up the chase. Anyway, Andy has since solved the problem of any noisy animals they have from time to time waking his guests — at more expense, he's had double-glazing put in all his back windows. I tell you, darlings: living here is a laugh a minute! I wouldn't leave this place for the world!

GRAHAM

But you have a holiday, don't you? You do get away?

ELLA

Oh, well yes, darlings, I do go away on holiday for a month every winter, but that's not really leaving, is it? Danny and I bought a villa in Playa del Ingles, yonks ago. It sleeps eight and has its own reasonable-sized pool, but it's nothing pretentious by the standards over there, I can assure you.

DENNIS

I bet it's not down some side street way up in the hills! I've got one of them, sleeps four, and despite sharing the pool it still cost an arm and a leg!

ELLA

No, it is a little better than that, I must admit. It's on the front overlooking the sea, with the notorious sand dunes starting just to right of our view. I take Tommy there with me every year now, usually in February when it's not too hot.

Todd came with us last year for the first time, and he loved it! He made a hell of a lot of friends, especially after volunteering to be a contestant in a saucy game at one of the popular bars in the Yumbo Centre. He didn't win, but everyone got more than what they bargained for when it became his turn to strip down to his underpants. Wearing loose boxer shorts to keep cool, they didn't entirely cover everything and he was dangling out down one leg.

(an aside glance)

Well, the scream that went up! People were leaving adjacent bars just to come and see! By the time we made it back to the villa that night, Todd had a pocketful of names and phone numbers, and two guys with him that he brought along to entertain! Of course, I didn't mind, it turned into quite an orgy, but one of them squealed like a banshee for half the night, and I was quite expecting complaints from the neighbours!

I know Todd enjoyed himself a lot with those guys. In the dunes the next day, what could have been mistaken for the lighthouse the day before had taken on a definite look of the tower of Pisa! Still, it was perfectly okay again by that night, judging by the amount of screaming that went on in the disco darkroom!

DENNIS

You actually go in those places? Aren't they just a little 'iffy'?

ELLA

What? You've never been in one? Darling, you haven't lived! They are so exciting! You feel like a kid let loose in a sweetshop! There's so much to rummage through and taste! But you do need to be careful — you know: if you fancy sampling more than just a lick: be sure to pick a newly wrapped one? I've always found it best to avoid the fruity wrappers too; especially the nutty ones!

(an aside glance)

Once in there, everybody blindly gropes about in the dark, trying to avoid the walls because that's usually where you'll find all the old fogeys like me, and then when two people are happy with what they've found it's whoopee! Anything goes!

I always follow Tommy around; he's so good to me. When he thinks he's found me something worth having, he sidesteps at the very last instant and I get the thrill of it. He's got impeccable timing, that lad!

Sweethearts, your imagination can absolutely run riot thinking of the gorgeous hunk you are snogging, and wondering just what he might do to you next. Everything happens, I promise you, and you can have an absolute whale of a time — that is, until someone tries to leave, letting in too much light, and you finally get to catch a glimpse of the neandertal troll you've picked!

(an aside glance)

(Off: Doorbell rings.)

ELLA (CONTINUES)

When you come to think about it, I suppose it's all a bit like enjoying a horror film in the dark — it can be really frightening, but you love it! Todd loves it, and he wants to come with us every year now, and so he will. I never refuse my lads anything, sweethearts, that way they never refuse me anything!

(Door Stage Left opens.)

ELLA (CONTINUES)

(looks across inquiringly at door Stage Left)

Eh? What do you want?

(screws up face, puzzled)

You want me?

(turns to Graham and Dennis)

You'll have to excuse me for a moment, lovies. It seems Todd has a slight problem.

(gets up and exits: door Stage Left)

(pause – then off: screams)

What!

(pause then enter: door Stage Left, and looking shocked walks over to just in front of armchair to confront Graham and Dennis)

You're not Graham and Dennis then — it seems they've just arrived! So who the hell are you two, sitting there drinking my gin and taking a free room?

GRAHAM AND DENNIS

(stand up, gulp down the last of their drinks, and place glasses on the coffee table)

GRAHAM

We never said we were — you just assumed we were the Graham and Dennis you were expecting. We would have told you that we didn't need the room for tonight, but we

weren't going to miss the opportunity of looking it over — especially as it doesn't appear to be on your books.

You see, I'm the new local Hotel Inspector, one of those council silly-arses you seem to dislike so much, and my colleague here is from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the stupid taxman as you prefer to call him. We shall be off now, but you will be hearing from us shortly. I must say: you have been most helpful.

DENNIS

Oh, and thank you for all the gin. That was most welcome too. I did happen to notice the Export labels, though. You have paid the correct duty on it, I presume?

ELLA

(swooning, to fall back into the armchair)

Oh my God!

(Blackout. Curtain.)

THE END