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by Ian Cowell

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Dramatis Personae

Grace, 60s

Peter, 60s

Lodger, 30/40s

ACT1

SCENE 1

LIGHTS UP.

TWO ARMCHAIRS ARE POSITIONED UPSTAGE CENTRE.

A DRINKS CABINET SITS UPSTAGE LEFT HOLDING VARIOUS BOTTLES / GLASSES AND A LARGE POTTED PLANT.

PETER SITS ON THE STAGE LEFT ARMCHAIR READING THE DAILY MAIL. AN EMPTY WHISKY GLASS SITS ON THE ARM.

GRACE ENTERS STAGE RIGHT. SHE SETTLES INTO HER ARMCHAIR AND PICKS UP HER KNITTING.

AS SHE STARTS TO KNIT PETER TAPS HIS EMPTY GLASS.

GRACE PUTS DOWN HER KNITTING AND TAKES PETER'S GLASS TO THE DRINKS CABINET. SHE FILLS IT FROM A BOTTLE OF MALT WHISKY AND RETURNS IT TO HIM.

SHE SITS AGAIN AND TAKES UP HER KNITTING.

PETER: That took a long time.

GRACE IS CONFUSED.

Out there. You were gone a long time.

GRACE: I'm not as young as I once was, dear.

(PAUSE)

PETER: That was very hurtful, Grace.

GRACE: What was, dear?

PETER: What you implied. It was very hurtful.

GRACE: I don't follow, Peter.

PETER: I think you do.

GRACE: I truly don't.

PETER: It was in your tone.

GRACE: It was? Oh. I am sorry, dear. Perhaps I am a little out of sorts; you know how I can get a little tetchy when I'm tired.

PETER: I have a condition.

GRACE: I know dear.

PETER: It's not easy living with this... disorder.

SHE REACHES OUT AND COMFORTS HIM BEFORE RETURNING TO HER KNITTING.

GRACE: How is the crossword coming along?

PETER: Tough one today.

GRACE: Give me a clue.

PETER: You can't do cryptic.

GRACE: You never know; I may surprise you.

PETER: I very much doubt it. Fifty first member is flaccid.

GRACE: Penis.

PETER: Penis? How in hell's name did you get penis?

GRACE: Member. Does it fit?

PETER: No, Grace. Penis doesn't fit. It will mean member as in someone who belongs to something, like a bowling club or organisation of some sort.

GRACE: How many letters?

PETER: Four.

(PAUSE)

GRACE: What was the clue again?

PETER: Fifty first member is flaccid.

GRACE: Member... member... membership... Member of Parliament... member of--

PETER: Limp. It's limp. Fifty-one is L I in Roman numerals and Member of Parliament is MP. Limp. So obvious now I see it.

GRACE: Well done, dear. I truly can't imagine how you unravel these things.

PETER: The male brain is configured differently, Grace. Men have the ability to reason these things out, to think laterally.

GRACE: You're probably right, dear.

PETER: It's a proven fact, Grace. The male brain is larger and more able to cope with complex tasks.

GRACE: Well, size doesn't really matter, does it, dear?

(PAUSE)

PETER: What did you mean by that? Size doesn't matter.

GRACE: I read the other day that size has no real bearing as women's brains are more efficient because their neural pathways are--

PETER: Neural pathways?

GRACE: Yes, their neural pathways are configured--

PETER: Where did you read this nonsense?

GRACE: In the newspaper, dear.

PETER: Don't believe everything you read, Grace.

GRACE: But it's The Mail, dear. The Mail always tells it like it is, you say: the last vestige of truth in a world gone mad.

(PAUSE)

PETER: Was it in the magazine section?

GRACE: Yes, I think it was.

PETER: Well, there you have it (HE RETURNS TO HIS CROSSWORD).

GRACE: But, still--

PETER: I'm trying to concentrate, Grace.

GRACE RETURNS TO HER KNITTING.

GRACE: Did you ask around?

PETER: Ask around?

GRACE: At work. Those messages you keep finding on the windscreen. You said you would ask around.

PETER: No-one knows anything about them. Or at least they say they don't.

GRACE: Do you not recognise the handwriting?

PETER: No, Grace. I do not recognise the handwriting.

GRACE: Probably disguised.

PETER: Do you think? (PAUSE) There was another one today.

GRACE: What did it say?

PETER: Soon.

GRACE: Soon? Just soon?

PETER: Just soon.

GRACE: How odd. You do have your birthday coming up. Perhaps your friends are planning a surprise?

PETER: A surprise?

GRACE: Yes. Maybe these are clues. They're leaving clues to lead you to your birthday surprise because they know you love solving crossword puzzles.

PETER: That's undoubtedly it, Grace. My 'friends', as you call them, having been remiss these past thirty-five years, have suddenly become aware of their oversight and have taken it upon themselves to throw me a surprise party, a party to end all parties, a party that will only ever be realised if I solve the lexical equivalent of Fermat's last theorem. I'll be sure to wear my favourite tie that day.

(PAUSE)

GRACE: I'm sure it's just someone's idea of a joke.

PETER: Hilarious.

(PAUSE)

GRACE: I have some good news.

(PAUSE)

PETER: Well?

GRACE: I had a response today. From the ad.

PETER: You did?

GRACE: I did.

PETER: Now that is extremely fortuitous. Did she sound nice?

GRACE: He. Yes, he sounded very pleasant.

PETER: He?

GRACE: A young man.

PETER: A young man? Do you think that wise?

GRACE: We've had young men before, Peter.

PETER: Not since the Italian.

GRACE: (DISCONCERTED) No. Not since then. But this one isn't Italian.

PETER: I don't imagine behaviour of that sort is the sole preserve of the Italians, do you?

GRACE: Well, no, probably not, but I have a very good feeling about this one, dear.

PETER: I seem to remember you had a good feeling about the Italian too.

GRACE: It's a shame this one didn't work out. I was so hoping she'd be with us for a while longer. I had such high hopes.

PETER: You can't blame yourself, Grace.



GRACE: I wasn't.

PETER: I'm sure you did everything you could.

GRACE: I did.

PETER: The young have no bloody respect.

GRACE: It seems to be the way of things now. Good manners don't seem to be considered important these days.

PETER: Bloody essential in our day if you wanted to avoid a clip around the ear. I remember one time--

GRACE SHUSHES HIM.

OFFSTAGE A FEMALE VOICE CRIES OUT PITEOUSLY.

GRACE PUTS DOWN HER KNITTING AND EXITS. PETER RETURNS TO HIS NEWSPAPER.

OFFSTAGE THERE ARE A SERIES OF SICKENING BLOWS AND YELPS FOLLOWED BY SILENCE.

GRACE (OFF): Peter.

PETER: What?

GRACE (OFF): Would you like a cup of tea? I may as well make a pot now that I'm up.

PETER: No, not for me. (PAUSE) Do we have any fig rolls? Grace!

GRACE (OFF): Yes?

PETER: Do we have any fig rolls?

GRACE (OFF): I'll check. (PAUSE) Yes, we do. Would you like some?

PETER: Why do you think I asked?

GRACE (OFF): Peter. We have fig rolls. Shall I bring some through?

PETER: Yes!