

RIPE FOR IMPROVEMENT

Anton, a prospective buyer, enters the sitting room, followed by Peter, who is showing him round

Anton Oh, wow!

Peter Yes.

Anton This is nice! (*Shouting*) Darling! We're in the front room. Hurry up -

Peter Thanks.

Anton She's come straight from the office. This all your own work?

Peter What?

Anton All this.

Peter Hardly. Haven't had to do a thing.

Anton You're kidding!

Peter No. Not a thing. Even the ... (*he gestures vaguely*)

Anton (*Taking a closer look at the ceiling*) God! That is amazing. How lucky were you?! (*Going over to the door*) What is she doing?

Peter Yep. It was just here. I mean, had been for years. Forever.

Anton And still ... amazing ...

Peter Yeah.

Anton Incredible. I mean, what would you pay, these days –

Peter I know.

Anton I mean you'd be lucky to get away with -

Peter Exactly.

Anton (*Calling*) Darling. In here. Come and ...

Peter Your wife, is it?

Jill (*Entering and looking round, waving a mobile*) Sorry, I was - Oh! My God!

Peter Hi.

Anton Oh, darling, this is ...

Jill (*Overwhelmed and barely registering Peter*) This is just incredible! Oh, darling ...

Anton I know.

Jill ... I can't believe it. It's perfect.

Anton This is –

Jill God, who'd have thought it? When you gave me the address, I thought no way. But you know, those houses further up, just by the corner, they've been done up –

Anton Darling -

Jill Oh, sorry. Sorry I'm late. (*To Peter*) Hi. You must think I'm so –

Peter Rude? No. Peter.

Jill I'm Jill. With a J. Wow – this is just – (*Grabbing Anton's hand*) Oh, darling ...

Anton That's what I said. That's exactly what I said, didn't I?

Peter He did.

Jill We could do what Sam and Mel did. With the hall.

Anton Steady on! You haven't seen upstairs yet –

Jill No, but we could. Minute I saw it –

Anton Yeah, I guess. If it's not load bearing.

Peter Sam and Mel? What did they do?

Jill Oh, you know – arch and that.

Anton Let more light in, you see.

Peter Right. Arch. Right.

Jill Gosh! Isn't it just too – it really is ...

Peter Gosh?

Jill What?

Peter (*Mockingly*) Gosh ...

Jill I'm sorry?

Peter Golly gosh.

Jill (*Laughing uncertainly*) What?

Peter Oh, don't mind me.

Jill Do you have a problem?

Peter Not me. I don't have a problem, Jill with a J. No.

Anton Darling, just wait 'til you see the –

Jill (Uncertainly) Oh. OK.

Peter (Ignoring her) So, Anton – is that right, Anton? - what do you think?

Anton Like I said – amazing. (To Jill) Isn't it amazing?

Jill Yes. (sotto voce) Listen, don't you think he's a bit –

Anton What?

Peter Yes, a bit what?

Jill Excuse me? I was talking to my husband –

Peter OK. OK. No need to get narky.

Jill Narky?

Anton He means upset.

Jill I know what he bloody well means!

Peter Temper, temper ...

Jill What?

Peter Nothing. (To Anton) Time of the month, is it?

Jill I beg your pardon?!

Peter (Ignoring her) So, interested?

Anton I should say! But Jill hasn't seen -

Jill Anton!

Anton - upstairs. The rooms are a really good size.

Jill The rooms!

Anton (Placatingly) Doubles, all of them. I mean, it's a great location –

Peter And the price?

Anton Very fair, I'd say. (Laughing) Oh dear, I'm not meant to be enthusiastic, am I? Supposed to have a poker face -

Jill Anton! Can I just have a –

Peter How about a drink? Then we can get down to the nitty-gritty.

Anton I wouldn't say no –

Jill Anton! (*To Peter*) Nothing for me. Anton -

Peter Thanks.

Anton Jill. Darling!

Jill What? (*To Peter*) What?

Peter Nothing for me, *thanks*. Manners maketh man. Or not. Although I don't remember asking you. But I will. Would you like a drink, Jill with a J? Sherry? Drop of Dubonnet?

Jill I beg your pardon!

Peter Sorry. Is it the accent?

Jill The – no! Anton, are you going to let him –

Peter Bud or Lowenbrau, Anton, me old mucker?

Anton Oh, er ... Bud. Thanks very much. Darling, don't be so –

Peter (*Shouting*) Oi! Two Buds in the sitting room. Right away.

Jill (*To Anton*) What?!

Peter (*To Anton*) Sure I can't get her ...?

Anton ... Darling?

Jill No! (*Beat*) Thank you.

Peter That's more like it. Not even a little sherry?

Jill I don't drink sherry!

Peter Oh God, not a tee-totaller, are you? (*To Anton*) She's not, is she?

Jill I'm sorry?!

Peter Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just having a laugh. No offence. Seriously.

Anton Well ...

Peter Come on, Anton, want to talk turkey? Numbers?

Jill Anton!

Anton Well ... yes. We do, don't we, darling? Darling?

Jill does not respond

Peter Moody.

Jill What?

Peter The lighting. You don't find it a bit moody?

Anton Oh, no, I like it. Atmospheric.

Peter Yeah. That's what I was aiming for.

A young woman comes in with two beers on a tray

Anton Oh, hi! Is this your –

Peter Careful! Give Anton his beer nicely.

Anton Oh, thanks! It's really very –

The woman goes to offer the other beer to Jill

Peter No! Over here. Dozy cow. She's not having one.

Anton laughs uneasily

Peter Women, eh? (To Agueda) Piss off, there's a good girl. (To Peter) Spanish. Agueda. Know what it means?

Anton No, I'm afraid I -

Jill It means good.

Peter Very clever. And she is – aren't you, babe? – she's very good. Very very very good. Know what I mean?

Jill Anton, I think it's time we went. (To Agueda) I'm sorry.

Peter What you apologising to her for?

Jill You.

Peter Oh dear oh dear. Don't be so touchy. She doesn't mind. Do you, Agueda my love.

Agueda says nothing but smiles weakly

Jill (Holding out her hand) Hi. I'm Jill.

Peter With a J.

Jill Pleased to meet you.

Agueda hesitantly takes Jill's hand

Jill Agueda. That's a nice name.

Peter Don't patronise her, there's a nice middle-class leftie.

Jill Anton, I've had enough.

Peter Only kidding.

Anton Jill ...

Peter See, Anton here, he knows I'm only kidding. Don't you, mate?

Jill Does Agueda?

Peter Why don't you ask her?

Jill turns to Agueda who looks away

Peter Only trouble is, she doesn't speaka da lingo. Do you, petal?

Anton *(trying to change the subject)* About the price –

Jill Are you married?

Peter That's a bit personal, love. You proposing?

Jill I'm not your love.

Anton Darling –

Jill Are you going to let him speak to me like that?

Anton I'm sure he doesn't mean anything by it.

Peter Hello? I'm still in the room. *(To Agueda)* Oi. You. Crisps.

Agueda hesitates

Peter Crisps, you muppet. Capisce?

Agueda leaves

Jill I'm not staying here a minute longer. *(To Anton)* Come on!

Anton *(Gesturing round the room)* But darling, it's just what we –

Jill Are you mad? I wouldn't buy this house if it were the last place on earth!

Peter Well! She certainly knows her own mind, doesn't she?

Jill Yes I do, you ignorant peasant!

Anton Hey, hey, darling ...

Peter Yes, hey, hey, darling –

Jill Don't you dare speak to me like that! Anton, do something!

Peter No need to get aerated. Finish your beer, mate.

Anton Look, Jill, we'll never find anywhere as nice as –

Jill I don't care!

Peter Don't care was made to care, as my old gran used to say. But maybe she has a point. You don't want to go rushing into these things, mate. Biggest decision of your life, buying a house –

Jill Exactly!

Peter See, even your lovely wife, the lovely Jill, agrees with me. So I must be right, mustn't I?

Agueda re-enters with crisps. Peter tries one

Peter Christ! These are cheese and onion. I hate cheese and onion! You know I hate them. Salt and vinegar, that's what I like. Forgotten what they look like, have you? (*He grabs her wrist*) Come on then, you silly cow, let's see if we can help you remember –

He pulls her out towards the kitchen

Jill Anton, do something!

The sound of a bowl dropped on the floor then the unmistakeable sound of a slap, a cry and someone crying

Jill Anton!

Anton What?

Jill Do something!

Anton Look, darling, we shouldn't interfere –

Jill Shouldn't interfere?

Anton It's nothing to do with us –

Jill We should call the police! The man's an animal –

Anton It's none of our business –

Jill You're going to stand there and let him –

Anton All I'm trying to do is buy a house!

Jill I don't believe you! You honestly think I'm going to live in a place that that creep owns? Do you? You must be out of your mind. Well, I'm going. You suit yourself.

Anton Don't be so hasty, darling! This place is perfect.

Jill He's a monster!

Anton Look, let's not get carried away. It's a great price! Just because we've got caught up in someone else's ... you know, life. I mean, we don't know the half of it, do we?

Jill You heard what happened. We ought to go to the police! You should have said something! Done something!

Anton Darling, he's bigger than me. Frankly, I wouldn't fancy my chances.

Jill Anton! Don't be such a wimp!

Anton Oh, now that's out of order. That's not fair – I'm not a coward. Kiddie in a burning building, I'd be in there, no question. But, look, relationships ... you don't know where you are with them. Like they say, who knows what goes on behind closed doors, eh? I'm not condoning his behaviour, but I mean, we've only just met the bloke. And all I want is to buy a frigging house! But have it your own way! As usual. Let's get out of here.

He storms off. Jill takes one last regretful look around the room, then swiftly follows him

Agueda puts her face round the door

Agueda (in an English accent) Idiot! (Calling) They've gone.

Peter appears, rubbing his cheek

Peter Good. Pillock. Christ, that was some slap.

Agueda Got a bit carried away. I thought it was her you didn't like.

Peter Didn't like either of them. You were good.

Agueda So were you. Convinced me. I was struggling not to laugh.

Peter (Imitating Jill) 'Don't you dare speak to me like that'.

Agueda Agueda! Where did that come from?

Peter I don't know. Genius. But you were quick, I give you that. I thought, oh God, she's going to do Russian or something.

Agueda I nearly did. That's why I kept schtum. But I thought you wanted to sell this place.

Peter I did. I do. Just not to them.

Agueda Pete! For Chrissake! What does it matter what they're like – you're never going to see them or the house again once it's sold.

Peter I know but ... can you imagine? It'd be all Heals and Habitat. Potpourri in the bog and drink mats. They'll start knocking through and having dinner parties with hummus and Cloudy Bay. In my house!

Agueda It wouldn't be your house, you dipstick. It's just a house. You sell it, you buy another one.

Peter It's not just a house – it's my history, my life. I've invested so much emotion –

Agueda Oh, don't talk bollocks. It's a box with some rooms, nice bit of cornicing and some original features. Way you're talking, you'd never move; you'd get a place and be stuck there for life.

Peter You know your trouble, you are so unromantic.

Agueda And you're a fuckwit. I tell you, either seriously try and sell the bloody place or stop expecting me to join in with your little charades.

Peter I thought you enjoyed them.

Agueda I do. But you're beginning to enjoy them too much. I wonder about you sometimes.

Peter No, don't start getting all judgemental. You saw them. Anton and Jill. With a 'J'. Right couple of posers. Her especially.

Agueda You just get off on all this, don't you? Having the upper hand. Turning the tables.

Peter What if I do? Give them a taste of their ownmedicine. Thwarting their little schemes. I like working these prospective vendors over. The power! The games they play.

Agueda It's you that plays games.

Peter Whose side are you on? They come in here with their noses in the air, like the place is a shit-hole and they'd be doing me a favour to take it off my hands.

Agueda You're just jealous.

Peter And why not? They go round dissing everything like I can't see what they're up to. 'Ooh, look, there's a crack there?' 'Is that a spot of damp?' They think they're so clever, know all the wrinkles, they're going to get a bargain. Everything handed to them on a plate and suddenly – Oh no, some prole is holding out, won't give them their heart's desire. Diddums. Then there's the time wasters – just want a good old poke about other folks' houses. Sunday afternoons, nothing on the telly –

Agueda They're not all like that. Some of them are serious –

Peter Oh, they're the worst – the desperate. Eyes out on stalks, devouring everything they see like it's the first time they've ever been in a house. My God, a bath! With taps! They've been round the block so many times, and you know the minute you see them they can't afford it. And still they ask, can we just go round again? Have another look at the bathroom? What you gonna say – no, you should have looked more closely the first time? So up they troop, flush the loo, turn on the shower, anything to look serious. Like real buyers. They're telling you their hard luck stories, the kids crammed into too few bedrooms, how they've been gazumped a gazillion times and you think: what, so I'm going to drop the price for some total strangers? I don't think so.

Jill (O/S) Hello?

Peter Well, well, well. What have we here? Scram, will you?

Agueda Peter ...

Peter Go on!

Jill (O/S) Hello?

Agueda You won't ...

Peter What?

Agueda You know.

Jill (O/S) Peter?

Peter No idea what you're on about. 'Bye.

Reluctantly, Agueda slips away. He opens the door, ushers Jill in

Peter Jill with a J! This is a surprise.

Jill I thought I might have dropped something. (*She is nervous*) Earlier. My purse.

Peter Your purse.

Jill Yes, I opened my handbag when I ... Have you seen it?

Peter No.

Jill Oh. Well, could I ... sorry if I'm (*interrupting*) ... is Agueda ...?

Peter (*sitting on the sofa*) Out.

Jill puts her bag on the sofa and makes a half-hearted attempt to look under and behind things

Jill About earlier ...

Peter When you lost your purse.

Jill Look, I was probably a bit hasty. Been overdoing things, you know, at work. I think I may have -

Peter You were. But no worries.

Jill No? Thanks. No, no sign of it. Where on earth did I ...

Peter reaches out and pulls a purse from Jill's bag

Peter Not this, then?

Jill Oh, yes! Where did you -

Peter In your bag?

Jill Oh. (*Beat*) Look –

Peter Agueda or the house?

Jill What?

Peter Which one are you here for?

Jill Look. Peter. Can I call you Peter?

Peter Why not? It's my name.

Jill I was out of order. Anton was right.

Peter The house then. OK. So old Anton was right, was he?

Jill He was. It's not for me to make judgements about the state of your marriage.

Peter No.

Jill I mean, people get into relationships that suit them and it's not for me –

Peter Indeed they do. Like you and Anton.

Jill Well, yes. Like any couple.

Peter Because we all know who cracks the whip in your marriage, don't we?

Jill I don't know what you mean.

Peter Oh don't start all that again.

Jill What?

Peter Bridling. God, you must be one of the most thin-skinned women I've ever met.

Jill (*with difficulty*) I'm sorry.

Peter Christ, you really do want this place, don't you?

Jill is struggling

Peter Tell you what, Jill with a J. Let's stop pussyfooting around, eh, and just say it. Say what you mean. Just for once. Go on, try it.

Jill Well, I –

Peter No, no, no, don't doctor everything before you open your mouth. Take a flyer, why don't you, just open your mouth and let it out –

Jill (*Losing it*) My God, you are one of the most obnoxious, insufferable people I have ever had the misfortune to meet -

Peter Not bad –

Jill The way you treat people, the way you treat that poor girl –

Peter Yeah? Back on her, are we?

Jill – Like a Neanderthal. She was terrified of you, anyone could see that –

Peter I thought you were here about the house.

Jill I am! I am. I thought it over and I decided that, so what if you are a pig-ignorant bullying bastard, who beats up his girlfriend, if we bought this place we could cleanse it, make it our –

Peter Cleanse it?

Jill Yes!

Peter Cleanse it? You think it's dirty?

Jill No! Yes. Well, not physically –

Peter Metaphorically?

Jill – eradicate every trace of your evil, sick persona –

Peter Ooh er –

Jill – and make it into a family home. We could transform it and it would be as if you had never been.

Peter That's not very nice, is it –

Jill Anton was right, we're buying the house, it's got nothing to do with the vendor.

Peter Well!

Jill Satisfied?

Peter Why didn't you say all that when you arrived?

Jill For God's sake! Can we just get down to business?

Peter You seriously think I'll sell you this place?

Jill You won't?

Peter I dunno. I might. But then again –

Jill Oh, I get it. You want more money? Is that it?

Peter Not necessarily.

Jill What then? *(Beat)* What?

Peter looks up

Jill ... you mean ...? What are you suggesting?

Peter I'm not suggesting anything. What are you suggesting?

Jill I ... I...

Peter Have you seen the bedrooms? Only I don't think you ever made it up the stairs.

Jill Oh ... the bedrooms ... no.

Peter Help yourself.

Jill hesitates

Peter Go on. Have a good look round. A snoop. Try out the beds if you like.

Jill Look ... I don't know what you –

Peter What? Lovely cornicing. Even nicer than this. Anton was knocked out. You should always check the ceilings before you buy a house. Just think how much of your life is spent staring at ceilings.

Jill Ceilings ... oh ... right ... upstairs, is it?

Peter That's generally where the bedrooms are.

Beat

Jill Would you ...?

Peter What?

Jill Show me. The bedrooms.

Peter If that's what you want.

Jill Yes. Yes, it is.

Peter smiles. Jill smiles

Slow fade