

**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.

RIPE FOR IMPROVEMENT

**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 speak 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 unmistakable 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 own medicine. 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** Ageda 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*