



The Dinner Party

by Chris Robinson

I am a camera, with its shutter open. I notice things other people don't. A furtive glance, a private joke, a sneaky pinch under the table from one sibling to another and I take a snapshot; a captured moment to be stored in my memory forever.

Until recently I was happy and content with my life. Married to Ben with two healthy children and a comfortable lifestyle. We don't have lots of friends preferring the company of Henry and Milly, a couple we have known since our twenties. We've laughed together and cried together. It worked well until new parents Pippa and Frank arrived on the scene. Everyone instantly loved them but I found their gushing friendliness and enthusiasm overbearing and false.

The first time I saw Pippa she was unloading several beautiful, well groomed, smiling children out of her silver 4x4. They looked like something from a toothpaste ad. She was tall, slim and blonde, wearing pale blue cropped jeans, an oversized pale blue shirt, tied at the waist and pumps. I noticed several gold bangles on one wrist, catching the light, making them sparkle and shine. She was effortlessly stylish and before long Pippa was involved in everything. Every coffee morning, luncheon or dinner party I went to she was there. I wouldn't say she blanked me but she was definitely more interested in a friendship with Milly. My lovely, sweet, best friend Milly.

Ben said I was jealous and it was not a nice trait. His comment annoyed me. I was not jealous, I just notice things that others don't and I felt it was my duty to share some of these observations with Milly. I tried bringing Pippa up on several occasions but she was having none of it. She thought it was great how Pippa had integrated so quickly and couldn't recognise the fake, social climbing, interfering person I was describing. Her attitude irritated me just as Bens had done. Even more reason to keep my camera shutter open and at the ready. I would prove them wrong.

Over time I became aware of Milly and Pippa doing things without me. They joined the tennis club, inviting me too whilst knowing full well that I don't like sport. Through tennis the husbands became friends with Ben daring to join them on occasions. Stories began circling of parties they had gone to as well as the odd weekend away with other couples. We were always included but I would decline preferring not to spend precious family time with Pippa. That didn't stop them posting photos on facebook showing the world what fun they were having. Group photos of the four of them pulling funny faces and messing around. Pippa had perfected a posing pout but Milly just looked happy, her dimples larger than I remembered probably due to the size of the smile that went with them. I pretended not to care but it hurt. I blamed Pippa but took it out on Milly instead by being surly and sulky whenever we met.

One night Ben and I were invited to dinner at Pippa and Franks. We pulled into the driveway of the beautiful double fronted Georgian House. The lawn was immaculate and the pillared porch had little bay trees in pots either side of the large red front door. I made a nasty jibe saying it must be hard to be perfect all the time. Ben glared at me, a look that told me to behave.

Dinner was dinner. It was as I expected. Beautiful food, expensive wine and pleasant enough conversation but then the suggestion of a skiing holiday came up. It was blatantly obvious the other two couples had already discussed it and I felt like we were included as an afterthought. Milly talked about the resort as if she had been going there since childhood. She was a bit giggly and flushed from the wine and suddenly I just saw red. I opened my mouth and asked loudly "Why do you want to go to that particular resort then Milly", the irritation and sarcasm in my voice not going unnoticed. I had deliberately turned my back on Pippa indicating this was a private conversation between me and Milly so when she tried to interject I put a hand up to shush her, never once moving my eyes from Milly's face. Milly started to stammer "Well it's just that, er, its because Pippa has, er, Pippa and Frank have...."

"Pippa and Frank have what exactly?" I snapped rudely causing everyone to shut up and stare. Pippa fiddled nervously with her bangles whilst Frank, sensing the tension,

jumped in. "I think what Milly was trying to say is that Pippa and I have a chalet there and we thought it would be fun if we all went together".

There was silence but I could tell by the pulsing in Ben's temple that he was angry with me. He carefully folded his napkin and made some excuse about an early start in the morning and that it was time to go. I stood up slowly avoiding eye contact at all costs. Henry, our friend of twenty years came and kissed me on the cheek. Dear Henry, I thought, ever the gentleman. Being a man of few words I was shaken when he whispered in my ear "Poor show tonight dear girl. Poor show indeed".

As I made my way to the door I took in the scene for the last time. The desserts were still untouched on the sideboard next to a cheeseboard saying what about me? The men were topping up their glasses and murmuring quietly together and Milly was sitting on the sofa being cuddled and soothed by Pippa whilst sobbing her little heart out.

I snapped my shutter shut not wanting to capture that particular picture. It had been well and truly overexposed.