

Setting the Stage

“Yes, Becky,” I said, “I’ll see you later then, thanks for letting me know.”

I put the phone down and stood there for a moment quite bemused, then I headed for the kitchen to check my calendar.

Oh dear, if ever I need evidence that I was cracking up there it was, I wasn’t even on the right month. I flipped over the picture with the tulips and saw my entry for the 2nd of May, coffee morning at my house. I could forget the peaceful day I’d planned for myself after having my two boisterous grandchildren over for the week-end. I glanced at the clock, half past eight, that meant I only had two hours to clean the house and make my special preparations, it would be a rush, but it had to be done, my reputation was at stake.

Thank heavens Becky had phoned to let me know that she’d bumped into one of our old friends, Sarah, and she’d taken the liberty of inviting her along. I dread to think of the consequences if they’d just arrived, I would’ve felt like a fool totally unprepared and no doubt I would have been the butt of everybody’s remarks and innuendos for months to come.

I mentally ran through the tasks that needed doing. Vacuuming, dusting, cleaning the bathroom and lastly the most important bit, the stage

dressing, I always saved that till last.

I like to think of our coffee mornings as a perfect opportunity to get together with friends. We take it in turns to provide tea and cakes and make sure we catch up with any juicy gossip. Our meetings are also perfect for giving birthday presents and exchanging gifts especially Christmas when we might even have a drop of something in our tea. Yes, it's all very civilised. The only downside from my point of view is the gifts, those that I receive are always, well to put it bluntly, are a bit grim.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not ungrateful, it's just that our tastes are terribly mismatched. They seem to think that they are giving me something wonderful when the truth of the matter is that I find them so tacky that I couldn't possibly leave them on display a minute longer than I have to. So after their visit I pack them all into a box and shove it into the cupboard under the stairs. They only come out again when it is my turn to play the hostess .

I fought my way around the house with the vacuum, dusted where it showed and sprayed the air liberally with polish to generate the right atmosphere. By now I was breathing heavily but in ten minutes they'd start to arrive so I staggered over to the cupboard and dragged out the box of horrors.

First out of hiding were the awful china dogs that were given to me over the years by Anne. They were made from that cheap pottery, the stuff that you get from tacky gift shops. There were seven in total, all Yorkshire terriers and although they were all different shapes and sizes they were all extremely ugly. Every year she'd say the same thing.

“Here's another one for your little collection Pauline.”

What collection? I never had a collection, not until she started buying

them for me. She thought I had an affection for them because I once spoke warmly to her about a Yorky that I'd once owned. If I'd know what it would lead to I wouldn't have said a word. Still I shouldn't moan, I lined them up on the mantle piece like the magnificent seven.

The framed cross-stitches from Chris was next, she'd decided we should all share the rewards of her new hobby. Three of them I'd had so far, a little robin with a Christmas message picked out in red cotton to match the bird's chest. A butterfly stitched in colours that no self-respecting butterfly would be seen dead in and a fat kingfisher that was so out of shape that I think it must have swallowed a pike.

"You'll never believe how long it took me to do it, Pauline, I was up till midnight for three nights on the trot, I thought my eyes would pop clean out of my head." She'd said when she gave me the last one.

I can appreciate that she'd laboured over these items and I don't wish to seem ungrateful but they're not to my liking. I stuck them on the sideboard like the three stooges

Then it was the odd couple, two little ducks given to me by Becky. I call them the odd couple because one is small, fragile and made from glass. It's roughly the shape of a duck but with an overlong neck it could be mistaken for a swan. The other is made from nuts and bolts that have been welded together to resemble a duck, but one could hardly imagine it being very graceful in flight. I still can't believe what she said as I unwrapped it.

"When I saw it in the shop, I thought it was a must for you sweetie. It looks like a duck but at the same time it's a bit of a jumble, a bit like your house I thought it would fit in so well." Then she laughed like a donkey.

What a cheek, obviously Becky believes I collect all things ducky

and would be pleased to receive anything fowl as a gift. I put the glass one on the telly and the other on the bookshelf.

I had just enough time left to put the kettle on and cut the cake. In fact I was just getting the gateau out of the fridge when I remembered Sarah was coming. Oh no, the painting! Sarah had given me a framed print of some poppies, it was too big for the cupboard so after their last visit I stuck it up the loft. I ran to the shed for the step ladders then charged back with them under my arm looking as if I was about to storm a castle. I bolted up the stairs, shot up the steps and slid my head up through the hatch, thankfully it was within easy reach. I took it down wiped it clean then exchanged it for one of my paintings over the fireplace.

Just in time, I heard a car pull up outside and had a quick peek through the curtains. It was them walking up the path clucking like a flock of hens. I just managed to take off my apron and throw the steps into the back garden before greeting them all with a smile.

They all took seats in the lounge where they waited for refreshments while I went to the kitchen smiling. I'd done it, I was shattered everything was in its place, now I could play the proud hostess.

I'd just finished serving the tea and cake when Sarah pointed at the painting.

"I see you've still got the poppy painting I gave you Pauline, in pride of place too." they all nodded their heads in unison each scanning the room looking for their own gifts. Then Sarah looked at me and added. "It's a lovely painting, I bet it makes you feel very relaxed and peaceful."

The rest of the flock chirped their approval, while I just smiled, if only they knew.

The End