

MARITAL MANEUVERS

“I’ll tell you one thing, Mabel – I sure don’t feel like someone who’s turning 85 this year.” Dorothy Stone punctuated her declaration with a sip of zesty Sancerre.

“I’ll tell you something else,” said Mabel, lifting her wine glass in tribute – “you don’t *look* anything like 85, Dottie – in fact, not a day over 70.” Mabel wasn’t just flattering her friend – Dorothy’s face had few wrinkles, she remained well-proportioned, and the woman moved with the fluid gait of a younger person.

“I’m full of life,” said Dorothy exultantly, “rarin’ to go, into all the new things. . . .”

The two long-time friends were having lunch at their favorite Manhattan restaurant, Scotties – an outing they renewed every month or so. It was now 2:45 in the afternoon. The other tables had already emptied, and the last waitress impatiently awaited their departure.

“I’ll vouch for that,” said Mabel, a few years Dorothy’s junior and herself running on all cylinders. “I feed off your energy every time we’re together.”

But Dorothy’s face now took on a more somber expression. Based on long experience, Mabel knew what was coming.

“My problem,” said Dorothy in a wistful tone, “is Harold.”

Mabel had guessed right. Dorothy’s husband, Harold, was her recurring topic of conversation toward the end of many a lunch.

“What now?” asked Mabel.

“Don’t get me wrong, Mabel – Harold is a good man, or I wouldn’t have been married to him for over 50 years. But with the passage of time, certain things about him – things I could tolerate in

the past – have become serious concerns that are really getting me down nowadays.”

“Why don’t we talk it out,” said Mabel warmly. “You know, whatever you say in Scotties, stays in Scotties.”

“Yes, I know I can talk to you in confidence – I’ve always felt that way. . . . Well, to put it in a nutshell, Harold has three characteristics that I have a hard time putting up with.”

“Only three?” asked Mabel with a smile.

“There are more, sure – but these three will do for the moment.” Dorothy took a sip of wine to help her navigate the testy waters. “The first is that he’s gotten cheaper than a miser. It’s true he was always tight-fisted, having grown up during the Depression, but now – even though he has plenty of money and securities – he’s carrying it to an extreme. ‘No cabs, Dottie – take the bus.’ ‘Don’t order the oysters, Dottie – too expensive.’ ‘You don’t need new shoes, Dottie – look at all the pairs you have in your closet.’ And so on.”

Mabel gave an empathetic nod. “I can see how bothersome that must be. Look, if he wants to deprive himself of things, that’s his business – but when it affects you, that’s not good.”

“It’s terrible. And, as a result, I often have to dip into my own limited funds to cover expenses that he’d normally be expected to pay.

“That makes me appreciate my own husband more – he’s no paragon, but he lets me control the purse strings.”

“The next thing isn’t as bad, but it really gets on my nerves. Harold absolutely scorns every new electronic device there is. Not only doesn’t he have a cell phone – would you believe that one of our land line phones still has a rotary dial? The TV in the den operates through a rabbit ears antenna. He refuses to own a computer or copier – still types on a Smith Corona, making carbon copies. And on and on.” She paused to emphasize the husband-wife disparity. “And you know me, Mabel – I eat the new stuff up.”

“Might his problem be,” Mabel asked cautiously, “that mentally he’s not up to handling the new stuff?”

“No, it’s not that he’s doddering – his brain is fine, and I know he has the mind to handle it – but he just refuses to get involved. I’m trying to bring us into the 21st century – he’s mired back in the 1950’s.”

Mabel shook her head ruefully. “I can see how that might prove irritating to you.”

Dorothy took another sip of wine before continuing. Mabel had a hunch that what was coming next bothered Dorothy most of all, and she proved to be right.

“But it’s the third thing that really gets to me. Most of the time, Harold just refuses to go out. He sits on the sofa in the living room, or in his favorite chair in the den, watching TV or reading a magazine and listening to music – on vinyl records, mind you, playing on an old victrola.”

“No CD’s or stereos, no streaming for Harold. . . .”

“And meanwhile, all summer now, I’ve been wanting to get out. I’d like to eat in good restaurants, I want to see movies and go to the theatre, I’m keen on museums. . . . It’s crazy, because on the rare occasions that I get him to one of these places, he enjoys himself – but then he just sinks back into this. . . uh, what’s that word? . . . oh, torpor.”

They were silent for a few moments as Mabel pondered the problem. Then she asked, “Does he have any physical problems that keep him from moving around?”

“Not a bit – he’s healthy as a horse. And you know what’s the worst thing – we never take a trip. I love to travel, but I haven’t been anywhere in years. And when I raise the subject, he’s non-responsive – or if he does comment, it’s just to say that it will cost us too much money.”

“Did the two of you ever travel?”

“When we got married back in 1962, my parents treated us to a honeymoon in Venice. It was great. And I know that Harold enjoyed himself, too – especially since he didn’t have to pay for it. But as much as we both adored Venice, we’ve never gone back – and it’s been all downhill from there in terms of travel.”

Dorothy leaned across the table to sum up her litany of complaints. “In short, Mabel, my life is boring – b-o-r-i-n-g. And it doesn’t have to be – I’m so full of life.”

Mabel sipped her drink, pondered saying what she’d been thinking, and decided to go with it. “It sounds, Dottie, like you’re ready for an affair.”

Dorothy laughed. “No, no, I couldn’t handle that at my age – all the deviousness and other stuff. And besides, I love Harold, I really do – but he’s driving me crazy.”

Mabel put down her glass, and her voice took on a decisive tone. “Okay, forget that idea. But I don’t think you should take the situation lying down. Pardon me for being so blunt, Dottie, but you’ve been going at it wrong. You can’t make a man change his ways by telling him he’s mistaken – that kind of direct approach just raises his hackles. Instead, *he* has to discover it on his own.”

“I think I know what you mean. . . .”

“And for that to happen, we’ve got to work out some strategies, so Harold won’t even know what hit him. I’m good at this kind of stuff, Dottie. I’ll give it some thought, and then let’s meet for lunch in a week. We’ll tackle the easiest of the three problems first – his scorn for modern devices. I’ve already got the germ of an idea. . . .”

* * *

A little after noon that same day, the doorbell rang at Dorothy and Harold’s West Side apartment. Harold, a well-preserved

man in his mid-80's, rose from his armchair and moved with ease across the carpeted floor.

“Hi, Mike,” he said as he opened the door. “Come right in.”

Mike entered the foyer and gave Harold a warm greeting. He had been Harold's college roommate 65 years ago, and they remained close friends. Mike looked younger than his years – an impression he promoted by his youthful wardrobe.

“Mike, I really appreciate you coming over here for lunch. Dorothy is downtown with one of her friends, so I got to thinking – hey, why go out to some expensive restaurant with my old buddy Mike, where we'd have to shout at each other to be heard over the din – we'll just eat at home. I bought some nice tuna salad sandwiches at the local coffee shop, and there are soft drinks in the refrigerator. . . .”

During lunch at the dinette table in the kitchen, Harold did most of the talking. “I really like being in my home. Dorothy is always bitching about me not leaving the house enough – and it's true, I seldom go out, but I really don't want to.”

“I understand,” said Mike, “but Dorothy is such a vibrant woman – I can see why she wants to be out and about –”

“That's fine for her, but every time we go out together, it's so goddamn expensive – dinners, shows, the parking or cabs, all those tips. She must think I'm made of money.”

“Well,” said Mike with a knowing half-smile, “I did always consider you well-heeled.”

Harold's expression didn't change. “I am, I guess, at least reasonably so – but that's because I know how to save a buck. If it were up to Dorothy, we'd be spending a fortune on vacation trips. All that airfare and hotels and fancy restaurants – who needs it?”

Mike took a bite of his tuna sandwich, washing it down with a sip of ginger ale. “So, since your retirement, how do you pass your time at home? I bet you spend a lot of hours surfing the internet.”

Harold's features formed into a mock scowl. "Bah, humbug! as Scrooge would say. The truth is I don't even have a computer – or an I-Pad or I-Pod, whatever they call those things, or a cell phone – the hell with all of them. . . ."

* * *

"Dottie," said Harold a week later, "where's my tie clip?"

"I might have known it," replied Dorothy. "You haven't been out for such a long time, so you haven't needed to wear a tie, so there's been no hunt for a tie clip."

Harold ignored her sarcasm. "Do we really have to do this tonight?"

"Yes, dear. Mabel's my good friend, we've never been to their new home, she's been cooking dinner all day – we have to go."

"But they live all the way out in some God-forsaken neighborhood of Brooklyn."

"It's not that easy to get to, I'll admit, but I've ordered ABC Car Service to take us out there."

Harold frowned. "My God, that will cost us our life's savings."

"It's all right, dear, I'm treating on this one – it won't cost you a dime."

They finished dressing – Dorothy having quickly located Harold's missing tie clip – and exited their apartment house. The ABC Car was waiting at the front entrance. It was a long ride to Mabel's house, with Harold making a fuss about various matters a good part of the trip.

Midway down a dark, ominous-looking Brooklyn street, the driver pulled over to the curb, stopped the car, and announced that

they had arrived. “This doesn’t look like what I’d imagined,” said Harold, but the driver insisted he was right. So the couple got out of the car, which then sped off into the night.

Dorothy and Harold walked up the path to the front door of the house the driver identified. They rang the bell, but no one answered. There were no lights on.

“This couldn’t be Mabel’s place,” said Harold.

“I’m afraid you’re right,” replied Dorothy.

They walked back to the curb, intending to try the doorbells of some other nearby houses on the street. Looking down the block, they became aware of two tall muscular men coming their way, fierce-looking in their tank tops. No one else was out on the darkened street; no other cars or taxis were passing by. A frightening predicament indeed – and Harold became panic-stricken as the two scowling hulks drew nearer.

At this point, Dorothy coolly opened her purse, took out her cell phone, hit a few buttons, and said, “ABC– the driver of your car 122 dropped us off at the wrong address in Brooklyn. We’re on a dark street that looks dangerous. Please send him back for us immediately.”

Harold stopped shaking long enough to gaze at Dorothy with new-found respect; and when, thirty seconds later, the ABC Car sped down the street to pick them up – just as the two menacing brutes drew near – well, he was full of awe.

“Sorry for that,” said the driver. “I think I know what I did wrong. Now I’ll take you to the right address.” And so he did, without further incident.

* * *

Later that evening, when Dorothy and Mabel were alone in Mabel’s kitchen, Dorothy was ecstatic.



“Mabel, it worked perfectly! Harold has no idea that we cooked up the whole thing.”

“Hey, Dottie, did you like the touch with the two goons coming down the dark street – they’re friends of my daughter from her fitness center, who agreed to play the heavies.”

“They had Harold shaking in his boots. And the ABC driver did exactly what I’d told him to do – wait just around the corner after he dropped us, so he could shoot right down the street when I called his direct cell number.”

Mabel smiled in appreciation of their expert planning.
“What did Harold say?”

“Well, he finally admitted that having a cell phone was a godsend – ‘I’ve been underestimating their usefulness’ were his exact words. So I’m going to buy him one tomorrow – the cheapest model, of course, since he’ll ask what it cost, and anyway he’s not ready for all the bells and whistles. But it may get him started on the road to the 21st century.”

“Absolutely. But we can’t rest on our laurels. Now it’s time to figure out a way to get him out of the house more often. I’ve been playing with something. . . Tell me, Dottie, do you like the movies. . . . ?

* * *

When Mike’s phone rang two days later, he picked it up and heard Harold’s voice. “Mike, you’re not going to believe where this phone call is coming from.”

“Of course I know where,” said Mike. “It’s coming from the old rotary telephone in the den of your apartment – from whence most of your calls emanate.”

“A good guess, but wrong – I’m calling you on my new cell phone.”

Mike was startled by the news. “I don’t believe it – you, Harold, with a cell phone! How did that come about?”

“Well, if you have a few minutes, let me tell you the story. . . .” And, he proceeded to relate the events of the alarming trip to Mabel’s house several days ago.

When Harold finished, Ed said, “So, Dottie was able to show you how useful it can be to have a cell phone – something you’ve always resisted – and then she followed it up by buying you one. . . .”

“An inexpensive one,” said Harold quickly, “mainly to use for emergency situations. . . . Wait a minute, Mike, are you implying that this. . . uh. . . might not be. . . uh. . . just circumstantial?”

“Well,” said Mike, “it does sound a little too neat – with the ABC cab whisking right back to your side within seconds after Dottie’s call to the dispatcher. . . .”

“So, do you mean that Dottie may have set up the whole thing, as a trick, to get me to graciously accept the gift of a cell phone. . .?”

“I’d never accuse her of that. . . . But just suppose that she did plan this, in order to bring you into the 21st century gadget-wise – a worthwhile motive, I must say – how would that make you feel?”

Harold, pondering his feelings on the subject, didn’t reply right away. “That’s a tough question. . . . I have to give that a little thought. . . .”

* * *

“Welcome home, Dottie,” said Harold, rising off the couch to give her a kiss. “How was the movie?”

“It was terrific – you would have loved it. By the way, I ran into Don Burns on my way out of the theatre.”

“Don Burns? . . . Oh, Don, the handsome widower as of six months ago. Do I dare to ask – did he have a date?”

“No, he didn’t. . . . And now that you mention it, neither did I. . . .”

* * *

A week later, when Dorothy returned home from another solo cinema evening, Harold remarked, “You’re a little later than I expected. It must have been a long movie.”

“No” said Dorothy, “it was about the usual length. The reason I’m home later than usual is that I ran into Don Burns again at the theatre, and we went for coffee afterwards at that little café right down the street.”

Harold perked up at the news. “Was he alone again?”

“Yes, he was. We had a very lively conversation. You know, Don is really quite intelligent, with many different interests. For instance, he enjoys Broadway shows, and we talked about possibly going to the new musical that opened last week to such good reviews. . . .”

* * *

One evening the next week, Harold was sitting in his favorite armchair near the television as Dorothy headed toward the front door. “Okay, honey,” she said, “I’m on my way to the movies. See you in a few hours.”

Harold looked up. “What movie are you seeing?”

“That great new one by Scorsese.”

“You know what,” he said, rising slowly from his chair, “I think I’ll tag along with you tonight. . . .”

* * *

“Mabel, you’re a genius,” exulted Dorothy over the phone to her friend the next morning. “Harold came with me to the Scorsese movie last night and actually enjoyed it. Your scheme worked like a charm.” Her voice then took on an incredulous tone. “Just imagine, the man is going to be 85 in a month, and we have to play tricks to get him out of the house to a movie.”

Mabel laughed. “Well, now that you’ve hooked him on film, you don’t need Don Burns any more.”

“But Mabel, I’m beginning to think I *do* need Don Burns – not so much to lure Harold out of the house, but because Don is my type of guy – active, involved, interesting. . . .”

“Uh! oh – this sounds like we’re adding a new dimension. . . .”

“Well, I couldn’t help comparing the two of them last night. Don wasn’t there at the movie, but Harold and I went out for a snack after – and the conversation wasn’t nearly as stimulating as when I had coffee that night with Don. . . .”

Mabel interrupted her. “Sorry, but I have to run now, so let’s discuss this further at lunch on Thursday – and remember, we still have to come up with something to loosen up Harold’s tight fist. . . .”

* * *

“Well,” said Mike on a call to Harold’s new cell phone, “I’m delighted to hear that you actually got out of your favorite chair and accompanied Dotty to a movie.”

“And you know what – I enjoyed it. I think if I pick the right films, like this Scorsese one, I might make this into something of a habit.”

“And then, after movies, you might even try a museum or a basketball game.”

“Maybe. . . . But here’s the thing, Mike – I’m pretty sure now that Dottie is manipulating me. First it was that cell phone episode, and then it was what led up to the movie.”

“What led up to it?”

“Well, two weeks ago. . . .” And Harold proceeded to fill Mike in on Dottie’s several references to Don Burns.

When Harold finished, Mike asked, “Who is this Don Burns? Is he for real, or just someone Dottie made up?”

“He exists, and his name keeps cropping up in our conversations. I’m beginning to think she may, uh – excuse me for using teenage slang – have a crush on him.”

“Oh, come on, Harold –“

“And I don’t like the thought of that. And I dislike being manipulated. My hunch is that Dottie’s friend Mabel is involved in this – that evening cab ride to her house, their frequent lunches, and they’re always gabbing on the phone.”

They were silent for a moment before Mike said, “Do you want to confront Dottie with your suspicions?”

“No, not at this point. But I’ll tell you what I want to do, and that’s get back at her with some deviousness of my own.”

Mike chuckled. “I’ve never thought of you as devious.”

“I’m not – and that’s why I need your help. . . . Wait a minute, Mike, that didn’t come out right. I don’t mean to imply that *you’re* devious – just that you’re much more imaginative than I am.”

“That’s all right – I won’t sulk.”

“What I’d like to do is for us to come up with some stuff going the *other* way – to try to influence Dottie. The woman is still

too much of a spendthrift, she goes out way too often, and she's so into her gadgets that we don't converse as much as we used to."

"I get it – and you want me to help you cook up some strategies to counter all that."

"Right – sort of like what I'm presuming Mabel has done with my wife. I want to show Dottie, with vivid examples, the virtues of thrift, the joys of staying at home, and why in many instances it's important to be able to make do with tried-and-true non-electronic methods of communication."

"Well, that's a tall order, but I get your drift, and I'll get right to work on it. . . ."

* * *

"I realize this is somewhat unusual for me, " said Harold, as he helped Dorothy into the passenger seat of their car – "going out driving at night. But at your suggestion, I went downtown today and bought one of those GPS devices you're always talking about – the kind that tells you where you are and how to get to your destination – and I'm anxious to test it out."

"No problem," said Dorothy, doubly pleased at both Harold's interest in up-to-date electronics and his volunteering to leave the house. "I'll just sit back and enjoy the ride."

Harold pattered busily with his new gadget as they drove over the 59th Street Bridge and into Queens. He tinkered some more as they went down several unfamiliar streets. And then – on a block that was just as dark and threatening as the one they'd encountered on their trip to Mabel's house – he pulled the car over to the curb and turned to face his wife.

"The damn thing isn't working, Dottie. We've been going around in circles for the last five minutes. I have no idea where we are or how to get back to the bridge. And I don't even have a map, because I've been relying on the GPS."

Dorothy said nothing but looked concerned. Harold mumbled, “I’ll try to call for some assistance on my new cell phone.” He took it out of his pocket, tapped the face a few times, and then gave up. “Damn, I forgot to charge the battery. I can’t get a signal.”

Now it was Dorothy’s turn to become worried. But Harold remained calm, saying, “Never fear, dear – our new gadgets may have failed us, but there’s still an old-fashioned solution to this and every problem.”

At that point, he exited the car and stepped into the street. Out of nowhere, a taxi approached. In addition to waving his arm to get the driver’s attention, Harold also held out an upraised thumb – the classic hitchhiker gesture, simulating Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*. The cab driver braked to an abrupt stop and, in short order, gave Harold good directions back to the bridge.

As he resumed driving, Harold couldn’t resist chortling to his wife: “See, Dottie, you can’t always rely on this new stuff – but the old thumb still does the trick.”

* * *

“Bravo, Mike,” said Harold over his cell phone the next day, “it worked perfectly. I had the taxi follow us all the way through Queens and then come by two minutes after I stopped the car – just as we had planned. I think I really made an important point with Dottie.”

“That’s great. Harold – good job. By the way, how much did you pay the cab driver?”

“I gave him what was on his meter plus ten bucks to get back to Manhattan.”

“No success fee?”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind. . . . Now listen to this idea I have to emphasize the virtues of staying home. . . .”

* * *

“Mabel,” said Dorothy on the phone, “you won’t believe what happened last night. If I didn’t know Harold better, I’d think it was one of *your* strategems. . . .”

When Dorothy finished relating her lost-in-Queens tale, Mabel said, “Hmm. . . that does sound like one of mine. . . .”

“I thought so – and now that I’ve confirmed it with you, I’m about to get mad as hell at Harold. I don’t like being taken advantage of like that. . . .”

“Calm down, Dottie. It looks like Harold has figured out what we’ve been pulling on him and has decided to get in a few digs of retribution. Can’t say I blame him – after all, we started it. And if we’re right about the Queens caper, at least it proves there’s some life left in the old boy. . . .”

“I hear you, but all I can say is that Don Burns would never have pulled a stunt like that – he’s too much of a gentleman. . . . By the way, Don and I have a lunch date tomorrow at the restaurant in MOMA – I really like that man. . . .”

Mabel murmured something ambiguous in response, but she found this last disclosure alarming. It was one matter to be playing around with some little gambits, she thought, but things may now be getting out of hand – the curse of unintended consequences. . . .

* * *

A few nights later, as they were finishing dinner in the apartment, Harold said to Dorothy, “I know you want to go out to the movies tonight, but I’d like you to stay home with me to watch this excellent new show that’s on TV.”

Dorothy frowned slightly. She much preferred to go to the movies – but Don had told her he wouldn’t be there, and the film had

gotten mixed reviews. So she replied, “All right, if you insist – but I’m not happy about it.”

They watched Harold’s show, which Dorothy found passable, if not stimulating. A half hour later, the phone rang. As was her custom, Dorothy answered the call. A voice she didn’t recognize said, in old fashioned radio-announcer tones, “Mrs. Dorothy Stone, is that you?”

“Yes it is,” she replied warily.

“Well, Mrs. Stone, I’ve got some exciting news for you. You’ve been selected as the potential recipient of a \$500 cash award, provided you can answer just one question correctly.”

Dorothy’s ears picked up. “Well, I’ll try.”

“By the way, I’m so glad you were home tonight, Mrs. Stone. You’re the fourth person we’ve called and all three of the others had gone out. If you weren’t home, we would have had to pass the opportunity to win the \$500 award on to several other potential recipients. . . . All right, here’s your question: what is the name of the new Martin Scorsese film that’s been playing in theatres around the city. . . .?”

* * *

“Well,” asked Mike by phone, “how did it go?”

“Bingo!” said Harold. “Your friend sounded exactly like a radio pitchman. She bought into it completely – and now, for perhaps the first time, she sees some virtue in staying home.”

“That’s good – although I must say it surprised me when you so readily agreed to personally fund the \$500 prize she’ll be receiving. . . .”

“You know, Mike, I even surprised myself on that one. . . .”

* * *

“Come on, Dottie,” said Mabel on the phone, “You say you won \$500 just by staying home and responding to one question – a question that Harold must have realized you knew the answer to? It sounds a lot like a hoax.”

“Well, that’s probably so, but the bank check arrived today by mail. If Harold is up to one of your old tricks, I’m not unhappy to pocket the funds. . . .”

“Hey, you sound a lot more mellow toward Harold today than you did last time we spoke.”

Dorothy thought for a moment before responding. “I have mellowed.”

“What do you attribute that to?”

“I guess it’s a combination of two things. Do you really want to know?”

“I do, for sure. What’s the first thing?”

“Well, the night after this happened, I managed to get out of the house on a pretext. If you must know, I told Harold that you’d called me, and finding yourself in Manhattan that evening, had invited me to dinner –“

“You can use me that way any time you want –“

“And what did I do on my night out? Well, I met Don at his apartment. He said he wanted to show me his cooking skills – a new lasagna recipe he’d discovered. But the evening progressed beyond lasagna. . . .”

“Uh-oh – here it comes.”

“I’m not going to bore you with all the sordid details, but Don turned out to be a beast. I had to literally fight my way out of there. . . .”

“So much for the charming and cultured intellectual! I apologize for ever suggesting that you use him as leverage. Okay, I get the first reason – arrivederci, Burnsie. What’s the second?”

“Well – and I really owe this to you – I’m seeing a new Harold these past few weeks. He’s playing with electronics, he’s devising his own clever rebuttal tricks – and he must have had to cough up the \$500 prize out of his own pocket! You know what, Mabel – I think I’ve got a real diamond in the rough here.”

“Hooray! But we still have to test whether that \$500 symbolizes a new generosity on his part, or was just a necessary evil to make the prize gambit work – in which case, Harold may still be the same old tightwad. And it just so happens that, in order to determine which it is, I’ve got a good idea. . . .”

* * *

A few nights later at the dinner table, Dorothy broached a touchy subject. “You know, Harold, your 85th birthday is coming up next month. How do you feel about it?”

“Well, I’m in pretty good health and don’t look so bad. And unlike some of my peers, I’m not afraid of letting people know my age.”

“So, why don’t we have a party for your family and friends?”

“No, no – no party.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, it would cost a fortune. . . .”

* * *

“SURPRISE!!!”

It was a month later. As Harold and Dorothy entered their favorite trattoria for a quiet birthday dinner, a large group of Harold’s family and friends greeted them noisily, crowding around to wish him well on this auspicious occasion. Harold gave Dorothy a stern look that implied, ‘How could you go against my wishes?’ But a moment later, his friend Mike wrapped him in a big bear hug, and a smile came over Harold’s face that rarely deserted him the entire evening. He was having a ball.

The highlight occurred after dessert, based on another of Mabel’s ideas. The invitation to the surprise party had said, in place of the usual “no gifts” admonition, “Please *bring* a gift, which should consist either of two tickets to some cultural or entertainment or sports event in town, or of some inexpensive new-fangled electronic device.” Mabel took on the role of mistress of ceremonies, opening each envelope or package and announcing the results to the assemblage.

“And here, courtesy of Bill and Sue Weaver, are two tickets to a night at the Philharmonic.”

“Look here, courtesy of Sam and Linda Carter, one of those little gizmos you can talk into and record all the things that would otherwise be lost to memory.”

Each gift was punctuated by a roar of approval from the crowd. Abandoning his usual reserve, Harold joined in the fun and appeared delighted.

On their way home that night, side by side in the back seat of a cab – a cab that, believe it or not, Harold hailed – he turned to Dorothy and said, “I loved the party. I can’t tell you how happy I am that you ignored my resistance to having one. But I do have to ask one thing – how did you pay for it? This must have been very expensive.”

“Don’t worry about that, dear” she replied, nuzzling his neck – “my credit is still good enough for a \$2,500 loan from the bank.”

* * *

It was the night after Harold's big party. They had finished dinner at home and were relaxing on the couch. Dorothy turned to face Harold and said, "Can we finally talk about *my* 85th birthday, which is coming up next month?"

"Of course, dear," replied Harold.

"Were you contemplating a party for family and friends?"

"No, we just had one for *my* 85th."

"Well, how about a family dinner at a fine restaurant?"

"No, that would be too expensive."

Same old thing, thought Dorothy – I'm not sure he's changed a bit. "So what did you have in mind?"

"I thought we ought to celebrate it together, just the two of us, by ourselves."

Dorothy grimaced. "Oh, well, if you insist, but that's certainly disappointing."

"Don't you think that would be romantic, Dottie – a seafood dinner by candlelight with soft music playing. . . ?"

"Maybe so, but I doubt they have any candles at the Red Lobster. . . ."

At this point, unable to sustain his cheapskate pose any longer, Harold handed Dorothy an envelope. "Please open this." She looked puzzled but complied.

The first item she removed was a note from Harold, thanking her profusely for his party, with his check for \$2,500 attached. "Oh, Harold," she said, "you don't have to do that – the party was my birthday gift to you."

“And my check is one part of my gift to you for *your* birthday. But there’s also something else in the envelope. . . .”

Dorothy reached inside and pulled out a packet which she unfolded. It contained two first class round trip airline tickets for next month to Venice.

For a long moment, the aging couple beheld each other without speaking. Both were aware of their mate’s recent ruses. But each now realized that the marital maneuvering, having done the trick, had run its course, and no further words or deeds were needed on the subject. Instead, they fell into a deep and loving octogenarian embrace.