



## The Short Story Writer Competition

**THIRD PRIZE**

**Fog Index: 5.6**

BEST SERVED COLD

By  
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“Helen, are you free this evening? I’m making your favourite pudding.”

“How can I resist? What time?” she laughed.

“Whenever suits you,” I said, trying to keep the relief out of my voice.

Best friends since our schooldays, she’s known Mark as long as I have. I needed her. Mark wasn’t pleased when he arrived home.

“Why is the table laid for three?”

“Hello, Mark. How nice of you to greet me so warmly after being away for three days. Have you had a good weekend? Yes, thank you, very interesting.”

“Maggie, cut the sarcasm, it doesn’t suit you. Who is coming?”

“Helen.” As I said her name, a spasm passed across his face.

“Helen! Again? Doesn’t she have a home of her own? She’s here virtually every night,” he exploded.

That wasn’t true, but Mark always believed his own exaggerations. “I’m sorry,” I said, trying to placate him, the evening was going to be fraught enough without a slanging match.

“I should have asked you first. Danny and Jay are at my mother’s and I thought it would be nice to have purely adult company for a change.”

I detested the way I was pandering to him, but it was the means to an end. For the last six months he’d lost all interest in the boys and me. I needed to do something about it.

I poured Mark a glass of wine and stayed in the kitchen until I heard the doorbell. I could barely make out the soft murmur of conversation as Mark greeted Helen in the hall.

Throughout the meal I watched, with fascination, the way she was able to keep Mark amused. I left them to make most of the conversation; I was waiting for my moment.

The pudding was a great success. Cooking is something that I can do really well, and I had made a special effort tonight. I never eat dessert, so it was very satisfying to watch Mark and Helen finish the dish between them, laughing over who should have the final spoonful.

As I was pouring the coffee I said: “I’ve been seeing a marriage guidance counsellor.”

Silence greeted my words and then embarrassment and anger vied for top slot.

“Maggie, I hardly think this is the time to discuss our marriage problems. You’ve embarrassed Helen.”

Helen had risen to leave, saying that it would be better if we were alone.

“Don’t go,” I reached over to touch her arm, “it would be worse for Mark and I if you left. You know us both so well.”

As Helen sat down, I continued. “I’ve been seeing a marriage guidance counsellor. I know you were opposed to the idea, Mark, but I didn’t want to let seven years of my life go down the drain without a fight.”

Mark’s expression showed that he would have preferred me not to bother.

I forced myself to go on. “Anyway, she suggested that I should try to put a bit of spontaneity back into our relationship. At first I couldn’t think how to set about it, and then I realised surprise was the answer.”

Helen was squirming. “Maggie, I don’t think I should be listening to this. I should leave.”

I ignored her. “Your business trip over the weekend provided the perfect opportunity. I asked Mum to have the boys so that I could travel to the hotel and surprise you Saturday evening.”

I had Mark’s undivided attention. “I drove down during the afternoon. I knew you’d still be in a meeting, because you’d told me how intense the seminar would be.”

Mark looked stunned; I don’t think he was capable of speech.

“Imagine my surprise on arriving at the hotel to find that the *International Wine Marketing Seminar* had taken place on Friday. There was nothing scheduled for Saturday or Sunday. How could that be, when you’d told me that you had to be there for the entire weekend?”

I’m sure Mark knew what was coming; he isn’t stupid. Helen looked as though she wanted to be anywhere other than sitting at our dining table.

“I told the receptionist that I felt sure a mistake had been made and asked her to call you. Her reply was a little confusing, she seemed to feel that you had gone into town with your wife.”

I waited, in case Mark wanted to say something, but the silence continued.

“I felt like a super sleuth, hiding behind a pillar in the reception area, waiting for you and Mrs Blake to return.”

“For goodness sake, sit down!” I snapped, as Helen tried once more to leave.

“I waited for nearly three hours before you came back. You looked so contented,” I paused to look at them, “with your arms round each other. *Mr and Mrs Blake!*”

As I got up to leave, I had only one thing left to say.

“I’m really glad you enjoyed the pudding so much. I’d have been very disappointed if you hadn’t finished it.” I could see the confusion on their faces at the change of subject.

“I wondered if you would be able to taste the extra ingredient, but obviously you couldn’t. I’m going to my mother’s house. Goodbye.”

Mark stood up so quickly that his chair fell backwards. “What do you mean, extra ingredient? What did you put in the dessert?”

I smiled, very satisfied with myself. “Just a little something to make you sleep for a long time, perhaps for ever. If you manage to stay awake for the next four or five hours, then you should be ok.”

Their look of horror will stay with me always. As I started my car, I couldn’t help laughing at the thought of them trying not to fall asleep. I hoped with all my heart that they were in for a long and miserable night. I hadn’t added anything to the pudding, but they didn’t know that.

Revenge is a dish best served cold. I think they received their just desserts.

End

