

Dicky Delgado's eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped as he opened the door of Apartment 3D and stepped inside. After a long day of rehearsal at the Trocadero nightclub in lower Manhattan, he was looking forward to a few quiet hours at home. But instead of walking into his living room, he entered...

Where the hell was he?

Papier-mâché palm trees sat in the four corners of the room and coconuts were scattered around the floor. A fake sun, made from a painted paper plate, hung from one wall. In a daze, Dicky wandered over to the couch and sat down.

"Aiye!"

He jumped up again, spinning around. Why the hell was there a canoe on his couch?

He heard the bedroom door open. A scratchy calypso record began to play. Footsteps sashayed down the hall. And then Lilly appeared, wearing a sarong and a fruit hat and holding two flaming batons she was trying to twirl. Dicky clapped a hand to the side of his face and sank onto the arm rest of the couch, gaping at the spectacle as Lilly wriggled around the room, dancing out-of-step with the beat of the music, her batons making wobbly rings of orange light that dazzled his eyes.

When Lilly tried a pirouette she stumbled over a coconut and fell down, the batons flying from her hands as the bananas, grapes and mangos tumbled off her head. Dicky dashed to her side and yanked her to her feet.

"Lilly! What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm auditioning for your new show. What do you think of my authentic Polynesian fire dance?"

"Well I must admit, it made me wish I was in Polynesia."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Because if I was there I wouldn't be here, watching the worst dancing I've ever seen in my life."

"Oh hardy har har. You're a regular Jackie Gleason, you are. But all kidding aside..."

"Who said I was kidding?"

"All kidding aside, that dance is just the spark you need to liven up your act. You said you were looking for some new material and this is it."

"Lilly, we've been over this again and again. You are not getting into show business."

She put her hands on her hips. "Give me one good reason why not!"

"I'll give you five. First of all, as I've told you a thousand times, one person in show business is enough for this family. It's a tough, crazy way to make a living and when I come home from work I wanna get away from it for awhile."

"But..."

"Second of all, you have no talent."

"You're just envious, that's all. If I got a chance to prove myself I'd be a big star in no time and you're scared to death I'd outshine you. Your fragile male ego can't handle it."

"Lilly, I dunt wanna argue any more."

"Oh you dunt, huh?"

"No I dunt. I mean, I don't. And quit making fun of my accent."

"I'll quit making fun of your accent when you quit making fun of my talent."

"If you want me to quit making fun of your talent, try doing something you're actually good at."

"Like what, singing?"

“No.”

“Acting?”

“No, cooking. Speaking of which, when will dinner be ready? I’m starving.”

She gave him a dirty look. “In a little bit,” she muttered.

“Good.”

He started to walk away.

“Hold on a minute,” Lilly said.

“What is it now?”

“You said there were five reasons why I can’t be in show business. What are the other three?”

“You have no talent, you have no talent, and last but not least, you have no talent.”

She stomped her foot. “Oh, you make me so mad! I’ve got this fire inside me, this burning desire to share my talent with the world, and you’re nothing but a wet blanket, always trying to put me out!”

“Never mind your inner fire, better tend to dinner. That’s the only thing that’s burning around here at the moment.”

“I haven’t started dinner yet. I was too busy working on the props for my audition.”

“Then what’s that smell?”

The Delgados’ nostrils flared as they sniffed the air, then Lilly gasped and thrust out an arm, pointing at the twenty-inch Sylvania Berkeley television set. One of the batons had landed in the built-in bookcase underneath, setting fire to the stack of TV Guides, and now flames were licking up the front of the set.

“Caramba!” Dicky cried. “Get some water! Get some water!”

“You get the water, I’ll grab the baby!” she said.

He started toward the kitchen. She made a beeline for the bedroom. They collided and fell down, then scrambled to their feet. Dicky dashed into the kitchen, filled a bucket with water and returned to the living room just as Lilly scurried out the front door, cradling Little Dicky to her bosom.

Dicky tossed the water onto the flames, ran back to the kitchen for a refill, lugged the sloshing bucket into the living room and flung its contents at the set, but the bucket slipped from his hands and smashed into the Movie-Clear TV screen, cracking the glass. For a few seconds the set did nothing but smolder and hiss, and then...

KABOOM!

A few minutes later, after dropping off Little Dicky at Mrs. Frumble’s apartment, Lilly returned and found Dicky sitting on the floor in front of the ruptured TV set, muttering in Spanish as he plucked glass shards out of his bloodied trousers.

“Oh my God!” she said, rushing toward him. “Dicky, what happened?”

Scowling, he gestured at the scorched shell of their brand new Sylvania.

“Mira que tiene cosa...”

“Dicky, this is no time to be Cuban. Tell me what happened, in English.”

He stood up. “I’ll tell you what happened. The picture tube exploded. So now we got no television set. A hundred fifty bucks down the drain because of your stupid dance.”

“You’re blaming me?”

“You’re darn right I’m blaming you. And that hundred fifty bucks is coming out of your allowance. Every single penny.” He thrust his arm at the charred patch of carpeting beneath the set. “And you’ll pay for that too!”

"Oh, Dicky..."

"Of all the lamebrained, harebrained, scatterbrained stunts you've ever pulled, this has to be..."

"Alright, Dicky. That's enough. You can go back to Spanish now."

Bethyl Kertz smiled sweetly at her husband as he came in the door.

"Hello, snookums," she said, putting an arm around his shoulder. "Gee, I sure missed you."

"Why? I was only gone an hour."

"I know. But every hour we're apart feels like a year. I'm always so happy to see you walk through that door."

"You are? Since when?"

She giggled. "Oh Ned, you're such a kidder. That's one of the things I love most about you. Your sense of humor." She pecked him on the cheek.

He turned around and walked out into the hall, looked at the door and came back in.

"What were you looking at?" she said.

"I just wanted to make sure I was in the right apartment."

"Of course you're in the right apartment. Why would you doubt it?"

"Whenever I come home late you're madder than a wet hen. You always accuse me of stopping off at the corner bar for a little snort with the boys. So if this is the right apartment, you must be the wrong wife."

"Oh come on. I'm not as bad as all that. And I really don't mind you unwinding with your friends. It's a good way to get your mind off your troubles."

"What troubles are you talking about?"

She turned away from him and sauntered toward the center of the living room, clasping her hands. "Oh ... nothing in particular."

"Come on, Bethyl. Out with it. Something's wrong. I can tell."

"Well..." She turned around. "You know that new carpeting you laid in the Delgados' apartment a few months ago?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Lilly got a little careless and burned a hole in it."

"Oh. Well anyone can have a smoking accident. Nobody's gonna notice one little cigarette burn."

"Uh, it's not exactly a cigarette burn. It's a little bit bigger than that."

"How big is it?"

"About ... five or six feet."

"Five or six feet! What the hell did she do, make a campfire in the living room?"

"No, she was auditioning her authentic Polynesian flaming-baton dance for Dicky and..."

"A flaming what?"

"A flaming-baton dance. And one of the batons went flying and landed underneath their brand-new twenty-inch Sylvania television and set it on fire along with the carpet and they didn't notice it at first because they were too busy arguing."

Ned shook his head. "Of all the lamebrained..."

"Never mind the name-calling. What's done is done. You'll have to put in a new carpet right away."

"Do you have any idea how much that carpet cost?"

"Yes, Ned. I know."

"Well the Delgados are going to pay for it. Every square inch of it!"

"Dicky said they'll be glad to pay for it – when they have the money."

"Fine. When he comes up with the dough I'll put in the new carpet."

"Oh no, you've got to do it right away."

"Why the rush?"

"Lilly is hosting our club meeting tomorrow evening and she can't entertain guests with a great big hole in her carpet, now can she?"

"So the club can meet somewhere else – and I don't mean here! I already put up with those cackling hens when it was your turn to host."

"Lilly can't ask them to move the meeting. It's got to be at her place."

"Why?"

"It's her turn."

"So what? I'm sure the ladies will understand if she explains the situation."

"But she had to beg off the last time it was her turn. Remember?"

"Oh brother, do I! It took forever to scrape that bread dough off the ceiling after the explosion. But everybody knows Lilly's a walking disaster area. When she tells the ladies what happened they won't be a bit surprised. Heck, they'll probably get a good chuckle out of it."

"But Lilly is running against Carolyn Maplebee for club vice president and Carolyn's never missed a turn. Ever. If Lilly can't host tomorrow she'll look bad and it'll practically hand the election to Carolyn."

"So what? We ain't talking about vice president of the United States or General Motors, just some silly ladies' club."

"It is not silly."

"Well I've got other stuff to do tomorrow so the carpet will just have to wait."

He headed toward the kitchen. Bethyl followed.

"What other stuff are you referring to?" she said.

"Joe Norton's gonna pick up a few loads of scrap metal and haul 'em to the junkyard in his truck. I promised I'd help him and it'll take most of the day."

He opened the fridge and took out a Miller High Life.

"He can get someone else to help him," she said.

"Yeah, and then they'll get the five bucks he promised me."

He reached into a drawer beneath the counter and took out a can opener.

Scrunch. Hiss.

Gulp.

"OK," Bethyl said, "you can lay the carpet after you get back from the junkyard."

"No I can't. I'll going to the ballgame."

"Oh for heaven's sake. There will be plenty of other ballgames. You can stand to miss one."

"Not this one. It's Whitey Ford versus Mudcat Grant in a duel of titans."

Bethyl put her hands on her hips. "Ned Kertz, if you leave Lilly in the lurch I won't make pot roast for a month of Sundays. Or blueberry pie."

"You don't mean that."

"Oh don't I?"

"That's hitting below the belt."

"No, it's hitting *above* the belt. Right in the old stomach."

Ned rolled his eyes. "Alright, Bethyl, you win. I'll do it."

She patted his cheek. "Thataboy. I knew I could count on you."

Ned raised his head and glowered at the ceiling. "That damn Lilly! I could wring her neck!"

"Don't be so hard on her. Everybody makes mistakes."

"Yeah, but not like Lilly. Who else would set fire to her carpet with a flaming baton? Who else would get a trophy stuck on her head, or get locked in a freezer, or trapped in a steamer trunk, or stranded on the roof wearing a Martian costume? Who but Lilly? And now she nearly burns down the whole dang building. I swear, Bethyl, if she pulls one more crazy stunt like this I'll bash her brains out!"

"Oh now Ned, you don't really mean that."

He took a long gulp of his beer, then slammed the can down on the counter. "You're right, Bethyl. I'd never bash Lilly's brains out. She doesn't have any brains to begin with!"

The tall, dark and handsome attorney with the burly build held out his hand and smiled. "Good morning, Mrs. Delgado. Have a seat."

They sat. Barry Bason folded his hands on his desk. "What can I do for you?"

Lilly Delgado glanced at the young brunette sitting in a chair off to the side holding a stenographer's notebook and a sharpened pencil. "I prefer to speak to you privately, Mr. Bason."

"Ella Rhodes is my confidential secretary," he said. "You can trust her completely."

Ella smiled reassuringly.

"Oh, alright," Lilly said, and turned back to Barry. "Mr. Bason, I'll come right to the point. I need you to defend my husband, Dicky."

"Dicky Delgado ... That name sounds familiar. He's a bandleader, isn't he?"

"Yes. And a darn good one too!"

"What's he been charged with?"

"Nothing. But he will be. And he didn't do it. I'm positive of that."

"Didn't do what?"

"Murder me."

Barry and Ella exchanged a puzzled glance. "I don't understand," he said. "You fear you're about to be murdered?"

"Yes. And Dicky will be arrested. He's a wonderful man and he wouldn't hurt a fly, but he's Cuban and you know how hotheaded those Latin types are. The police are bound to make him their prime suspect and it's not fair!"

"You've received death threats, I take it?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Has someone made an attempt on her life?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then what makes you think someone wants to kill you?"

"Just a hunch. Woman's intuition. A dark and foreboding feeling has settled over my soul like a rain cloud. Have you ever had one of those feelings?"

"I'm getting one now. Have you gone to the police?"

"How can I? The crime hasn't been committed yet. And I certainly don't want to go off half-cocked like I did before."

"Before?"

"Yes. About a year ago I thought Dicky was plotting to kill me, but it was all a big misunderstanding. You see, I'd been reading a mystery novel and Dicky made a joke about husbands murdering their wives and then I overheard him on the phone telling Jerry Mauser – he was Dicky's press agent at the time – that he was going to get rid of someone and I thought I was

the someone he wanted to get rid of, but it was actually Marilyn, the girl singer in his band, and he wasn't going to murder her, just fire her. And then I found a gun in the desk drawer and I let my imagination get the better of me. But it turned out it was just a prop for a Western number he was writing into the show. And after I learned the truth I realized how foolish I'd been, because underneath that angry Latin exterior my husband is the most gentle, loving, considerate man alive and he'd never, ever harm me – although he did yell and cuss a lot after I accidentally destroyed our brand-new television set and nearly burned down the apartment building."

"Uh ... how did you manage to do that?"

"I was performing an authentic Polynesian flaming-baton dance in the living room and tripped over a coconut."

"Oh ... I see." He glanced at Ella, who was trying valiantly to suppress a smirk. His eyes returned to Lilly. "You certainly lead an interesting life, Mrs. Delgado."

"At times."

"So tell me, if you're convinced your husband doesn't want to kill you, who *do* you suspect?"

"Nobody. I don't have an enemy in the world."

"But you have this dark and foreboding feeling that someone wants to kill you?"

"Yes. And it was confirmed by the cards."

"The cards?"

She fished around in her purse and took out a dog-eared paperback book. She stood up, placed the book on the desk and resumed her seat. Barry leaned forward and picked it up.

"How to Tell Fortunes With Ordinary Playing Cards," he read aloud.

"I found it at a rummage sale and tried it out right away," she said. "The queen of clubs was my card, and when I dealt out the others you'll never guess which card landed right next to mine."

"The ace of spades."

Lilly blinked. "How did you know?"

"I'm psychic."

"You are? Then maybe you can ..."

"It was just a joke, Mrs. Delgado."

"Well I don't think this is anything to joke about!"

"You're right. It's not. I apologize. But I don't think you should put your faith in fortune telling."

"That's what a lot of people say before they meet Raya the Medium. She's the one who wrote the book and in Chapter Thirteen she lists at least a dozen examples of skeptics who..."

"If I might make a suggestion, I think you should switch genres."

Lilly raised an eyebrow. "Why on earth would I want to do that? I'm perfectly happy as a woman. And besides, those operations are very expensive. And what would Dicky say?"

Barry chuckled. "I said you should switch *genres*, not genders. In other words, instead of reading mysteries and fantasies you might try romances or sci-fi or perhaps some non-fiction."

"But Madame Raya's book *is* non-fiction. It really opened my eyes."

"I see. Have you talked to your husband about all this?"

"Oh heavens no! After what happened a year ago he'd just laugh at me and say I was loco."

"I can't imagine why," he said, darting another glance at Ella.

"So will you represent my husband when he's arrested?" she said.

"No, I think I'd rather take a proactive approach."

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning we should ascertain if someone really is trying to kill you, and prevent it from happening in the first place. I can put you in touch with...”

“I’m afraid you can’t prevent it, Mr. Bason.”

“And why’s that?”

“The cards. The dark forces on the Other Side have already dealt the hand and they play for keeps. My fate is already sealed. It’s inexcusable.”

“The word is inexorable, and I believe we control our own destinies. Nothing is preordained.”

“You’ll see. After I’m dead you’ll change your tune.” She stood up, reached into her purse and took out a checkbook. “So how much will it cost to exonerate my husband? Or should I just pay you a retainer now and he can pay you the balance once he’s acquitted?”

Barry rose. “Let’s discuss my fee later, after I’ve looked into the matter.”

“Alright, if that’s the way you want it.” She put away her checkbook and extended her hand. “Adios, Mr. Bason.”

“Au revoir, Mrs. Delgado.” He picked up the paperback book and tried to hand it to her. She shook her head. “Thanks, but I won’t be needing it any more.”

As she walked out the door, Ella approached Barry. “She certainly was an oddball. Do you really think her life’s in danger?”

“I don’t know,” Barry said, his brow furrowing as he gazed at the bust of Voltaire next to the door. “Get ahold of Saul.”