Three's a crowd

David and Katherine have been best friends since they were in school together. Now they share an apartment in San Francisco as they each search for Mr. Right. But David's loyalty to Katherine is put to the test when Ross, her new boyfriend, makes a pass at him.

THE BEST MAN, by Paul Reidinger, $8.00

The first time he visited our apartment, a week or so after they'd met, I was struck at once by his looks and his absolutely predictable manner. He was polite, fairly quiet, charming without being witty; he was the quintessential Stanford lawyer. I remember having only one thought as we sat in the living room chitchatting: So what's the big deal? There is irony in that recollection.

I'd come back from work at about eleven thirty that night to find them positioned on the couch a discreet distance apart. I don't know if they'd maintained that separation all evening or if it was opened out of consideration for me. Knowing Ross, I would guess the former. When I stepped in — looking a bit disheveled and smelling of the bars I'd just darted in and out of on my way home — they both stood up.

"At ease, men," I said.

"David," said Katherine, "this is Ross. Ross, my roommate, David."

"Hello, David," said Ross with a neat, economical smile. He shook my hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you." "The famous Ross," I said. We sat down. "She talks about you all the time, you know."

"Untrue," said Katherine.

"At least in her sleep, then," I said.

He laughed nervously. It was unclear to me whether she had apprised him of our living arrangements, but I proposed to play no games. No more than were necessary, anyway.

"He's just babbling away," said Katherine to Ross. "Some genetic quirk. So, did you go out tonight?" she said to me.

"I stopped at a couple of places. *Beaucoup de* clone."

"David is searching for a man on a white steed," Katherine explained.

"And wearing a coat of shiny mail and carrying a lance," I added.

"Hmm," said Ross. He shook his head and gave us a quizzical smile.

"The white knight," I said. "Señor Perfecto. The man of my dreams."

"Oh," said Ross, and blushed slightly.

"It's pretty hard to get white horses into some of those bars," said Katherine.

"A major problem," I agreed. "But only one of many."

"David likes boys," Katherine said to Ross, as though anyone except an anencephalic could have failed to figure it out by that point. "That's why he's the perfect roommate."

"I don't really like them dressed up in steel, either," I said. "Although there are those who do."

"I was going to tell him sooner," she said to me, "but I thought it was really your decision."

"Thanks," I said. "You don't mind, do you, Ross?"

"Not at all," he said in the least convincing tone I'd ever heard.

There was a difficult pause.

"So, you're in law school," I said at last. "What's that like?"

"I sort of like it," he said, clearly liking it that he was back on the firm ground of career matters after having been led by surprise through the uninviting bogs of sexual perversion. "It's sort of a challenge, of course, and a lot of work, and the people are very competitive. But it's good. You learn intellectual discipline."

"*Really*," said Katherine, eyeing me speculatively.

"Isn't it terribly dull?" I asked.

"Not at all," he said. "Sure, you do have to read a lot. And the writing isn't always the best in some of those opinions. I'd say more professors than not give lectures that nobody can really follow. But it isn't dull."

"Thank God," I said under my breath.

The conversation went on and on, jumping cautiously from one safe, uninteresting topic to another. Where we were from. What we did in college. What restaurants we liked, what movies we'd seen, what books we'd read, what concerts we'd been to. Every word we spoke was forgettable; it was almost as though we were on some talk show. At some point after midnight I announced an exhaustion that had come upon me suddenly. I left them to the sofa and its demilitarized zone, sad that she'd dug up yet another bore; but content, too, in a way, that he couldn't possibly come between us.

Months later, at a beach on a warm afternoon, he rolled over to face me and said, "You didn't like me when we first met, did you?"

"Not much," I admitted.

"Why not?"

"I thought you were made by the Japanese," I said. "Perfectly crafted and exactly like a million others. Not an ounce of character in you."

"What changed your mind?"

I hesitated only an instant while I considered whether I had in fact changed my mind. I don't think he noticed. "I got to know you," I said. "I found out I was wrong."

"I'm glad," he said. "I liked you right away, you know. Could you tell?"

The answer was No, I couldn't. I was too tired and not sufficiently drawn by his physical appeal to overlook the low voltage of his charm. I went to bed and fell asleep without a single Valium.

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