

Mabel's Sixty-Nine in Three Acts

Act One

Penny carried the cake through from the kitchen to the living room, where Dee had decorated for Mabel's birthday party. "Good thing there are only two candles on this cake or I might set something on fire walking through the house like this," she joked as she set it on the low coffee table.

"It looks fantastic!" Mabel ran a finger through a blue ribbon of frosting and plopped it in her mouth. "Mm." She closed her eyes in appreciation.

"It's my first cake," Penny said with a grin. "I mean, I just did the decorating. Dee baked it."

Dee handed Mabel a knife. "Just a small slice for me and give Mom a corner slice so she's got lots of frosting."

"That's one thing Lydie and I always had fights over when we were kids. Whose piece of cake had the most frosting on it was a huge matter of concern." Mabel set a slice of cake on the tray in her sister's lap. She cut a bite with a fork and brought it close to Lydie's mouth. "Eat your cake, Lydie," she whispered. Lydie's head turned toward Mabel and her eyes widened at the sight of the cake. She took the fork from Mabel's hand and fed herself.

Mabel watched her sister eat birthday cake for a few moments, knowing that when the plate was empty the fork would fall from Lydia's hand and her gaze would return to the window to stare emptily at the world outside.

"Mabel, sit over there next to Phin and I'll bring your cake and tea." Penny carried a tray to Mabel, who balanced it on her lap and waited for the others to settle. She peered into her cup, at the tealeaves crowded together at the bottom, and wondered what they'd have to say once she'd drunk the brew.

"A toast to the birthday girl," Phin said, draining his tea in one long slurp. The others sipped theirs, knowing better than to follow Phin's example.

Penny tapped her fork against her the edge of her plate. "Speech! Come on, Mabel. The birthday girl should give a speech."

Mabel stood up and grinned at her friends. "I'd like to start this speech with a joke." She plucked the two numbered candles from the cake and held up the wax six and nine. "What's sixty-nine and sixty-nine?" She looked at each puzzled face in turn before grinning and yelling gleefully: "Dinner for four!"

"I don't get it," Penny said, giggling nervously and glancing at Dee, who was staring open-mouthed at her aunt.

"Dirty jokes? Really, Mabel," Dee finally managed to say. She turned to Phin, who sat with one hand covering his face, shoulders shaking with laughter. "Don't encourage her," she said, reaching over and slapping Phin's knee.

"Come on, Chickadee. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity to take advantage of my age. I'll never get to do it again."

"What? Tell a dirty joke at a birthday party?"

"Even better," Mabel said, rubbing her hands together. "I've been saving up for years waiting for this day."

"Saving up for what?" Phin asked, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"I've always had this goal of telling sixty-nine jokes about sixty-nine while I was sixty-nine."

"Why would you want to do that? It's ridiculous," Dee protested.

Phin snickered again and held up a finger for attention. "Sorry to point out the flaw in your plan, but you just turned sixty-nine. That means you're in your seventieth year. Shouldn't you have done this last year?"

Mabel gave him a withering look. "I come up with a fun plan and you're fixated on my age. Are you calling me old?"

"Just pointing out the obvious."

She ignored him. "How about another joke?" She smiled and continued despite several head shakes. "What's the square root of 69?" Mabel bounced on the balls of her feet as she paused long enough to give them time to answer. "Ate something!"

"That isn't even a real joke," Penny said. She picked up her plate and cup and gestured for Phin to pass his.

"No one appreciates sexy math humour."

Mabel looked at Phin. He rolled his eyes.

"It's funnier if you see it written down," she said glumly.

Act Two

Mabel tapped the tarot cards together and set the deck aside. She took the twenty dollar bill that the woman handed her across the small table with a smile of thanks.

"I hope the cards answered your question," she said to Charlotte, who nodded.

"What you said about patience and kindness is a good reminder, especially in this case. We're heading to my in-laws' cottage north of here first thing in the morning and I'll need to be patient with Joe's mother."

"Where are you staying tonight?"

"We've got a room at that place by the highway."

Mabel leaned forward conspiratorially. "There's not much to do after-hours around here so I've got a couple of jokes you can tell your husband later." She winked. "What do you call oral sex between yuppies? Sixty-something."

Before Charlotte could react, Mabel launched into another. "What is six point nine? Sixty-nine interrupted by a period! Love that one," she said, chuckling. She stood and Charlotte lurched to her feet a moment later.

"I don't know about you," Mabel said, as she grasped the edge of the curtain that shielded the alcove from Voodoo Café. "but it's been so long since I've had a period, you'd think I'd get laid more often."

She yanked the curtain aside and nearly bumped into Dee, whose face was flushed with stormy anger. Mabel peered over her niece's shoulder. A dozen faces stared at her, half of them children.

"Oh."

Act Three

Phin stared at Mabel, who sat across the table from him. She'd knocked on his door half an hour ago and demanded a reading. He was suspicious, as it was three days since her last one and several days until the new moon. She was shuffling her favourite deck of tarot cards but her small hands couldn't manage the oversized deck and several cards slipped to the table.

"Spit it out," he demanded, prying the deck from her fingers and scooping up the stray cards.

"You know my birthday is in two days," she began, and waited for Phin to nod before continuing. "I'm coming up a little short on joke-telling."

Phin closed his eyes and set the cards on the table. He'd hoped that Mabel would eventually get tired of the negative reaction she got from most of those jokes. Most of them had been pretty lame but had managed to sound either excruciatingly embarrassing or dirtier than usual only because of who was telling them.

"Fine, tell me a joke. One joke." He sat back and folded his arms, bracing himself for the inevitable uncomfortable pause at the end of the punch line.

"So, why can't Miss Piggy count to seventy?" She paused and raised her eyebrows, grinning.

Phin sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew she would wait him out. He'd tested her more than once and they'd had one standoff that lasted two hours, where Mabel simply repeated the question every ten minutes until Dee stepped in and insisted she tell the punch line. Dee had then set some ground

rules, one being that the joke had to be acknowledged so that Mabel could tell her punch line and let everyone get on with their day. "Gee, I don't know. Why can't Miss Piggy count to seventy?"

"Because every time she gets to sixty-nine she has a frog in her throat!"

Phin watched Mabel giggle with glee and tried to resist the tug at the corner of his mouth.

Mabel noticed. "How about another one?"

He held up a hand. "No. That's me done. I've done my duty. Find someone else to torture."

"What about the other day when you hung up on me? I didn't get to finish telling that one. I should get a do-over." She launched into the joke, talking rapidly.

"What's a seventy-one? A sixty-nine with two fingers up..."

"Stop right there!" Phin said, slapping a hand on the table and making her jump. "There's a limit, and that's so far over the top that I'm willing to throw you out if you finish that sentence. You've started that one twice now. I'm calling it done."

Mabel pouted and crossed her arms over her skinny chest. "No fair. I have to finish it or it doesn't count. I don't have a spare."

"I'm sure you've got a few left to tell."

"I've told sixty-two jokes, sixty-three if you count that last one. That makes six left to tell." She tilted her head and smiled. "Please?"

"Not a chance."

Mabel frowned. "I'm never going to make my deadline. Last week Dee said no more for her or Lydia – who doesn't count, by the way, because she's not really listening – and I've been banned from telling jokes in most of the stores in town."

"You should have thought of that when you came up with your scheme."

"Not fair," she complained again. "I've supported all your schemes."

"That's because you're the one who usually comes up with them. I'm always just dragged along for the ride."

"I could blackmail you."

"You've got nothing."

"Fine, you're forcing me to throw down my last card."

"What are you talking about?" Phin eyed her warily.

"Well, you know that Riva and I were once lovers," she began, and then nodded as Phin's expression belied his dismay at the unexpected topic. "That's right, dear, I'm throwing down the Step-Mom card."

"You can't be serious," Phin spluttered. "I wasn't even born yet when you...when she...er..."

"Oh you were around. Would you like to hear about how we met? Or about our first date?"

"No thanks." He glared at her through slitted eyes for a moment. "Here's the deal. I'll take a third of your jokes off your hands. That's two of the six."

"Not good enough, Son." Mabel grinned at his sour expression. "The less jokes you take, the more stories you get about me and your dear old Mom."

"This isn't a negotiation."

"I beg to differ." She regarded him blandly. "You get the three dirtiest jokes. I can probably fob off the milder ones somewhere."

Phin rolled his eyes to the ceiling, thinking furiously. This always happened with Mabel. If he let her set the terms, she'd escalate them the next time this happened. "All right. Here's my final offer: you tell me the three mildest jokes and mail me the other three."

"You have to promise to read them before my birthday or it won't count."

"You'll have to trust that I will."

"I'll need to hit the post office before it closes so they'll get to you in time."

She rubbed her hands together briskly. "Let's get started."

"You can wait another few minutes," Phin said as he got up from the table.

"I'm going to need a fresh pot of coffee."