

Dinner with the Gods

Era: November 1994

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"Is your son going to be around for Thanksgiving?" Leil asked. She was heading out of the washroom after a strenuous Friday in front of her computer screen. Her eyes were bordered with dark circles but she'd brightened the contours of her face with a touch of red lipstick and a hint of rouge. Her silky black hair hung loose in a page boy cut.

"No. He's in Australia this year. It was Japan last year. I'm not sure where he picked up the travel bug. It sure wasn't from me."

I was washing out my lunch dishes in the sink by the coffee machine. Killing bugs was against my ecological principles but the janitor had complained about my dirty dishes sitting around on the floor so I was washing them grudgingly - in the interest of good human relations.

"Well, I'm cooking dinner," Leil confided. "How would you like to come over and have some with us? Robin is coming and one of his friends, Hank Flipper. He's a law professor at the University. Oh and Mary Magda Cat. She's from my transcendental meditation group. Actually she's quite an interesting person. She's the Maven for the Assembly of the Purple Cauldron."

"You're not trying to match me up with somebody are you?"

"With Magda? She's a woman! ...Oh with Hank? No - no way, Lois. I don't know anybody that's suitable for you."

"Okay. Sorry. It's just ... I had a feeling ... with Robin around. I mean..."

"Knock it off Lois."

"I'd love to come. What night?"

"Sunday. How about six?"

"See you then," I nodded.

She smiled, almost exuberantly, and headed out of the building. The smile was what did it. Leil didn't smile like that unless she was up to something.

I was surprised when I realized that Leil's condo was within a couple of blocks of my own.

I rang the door bell on the second floor of the condo building about five after six. Even after forty-five years, I never knew what time a person should arrive if they were invited for dinner. I was hoping I was late enough to be polite.

I had put on a dress in flowing chiffon, a powder blue that proved I had a waist and showed some cleavage. It seemed a sacrilege to be totally sexless if you were going to have dinner in the same room as a sex therapist. But I was wondering if I'd gone overboard. I hadn't worn this particular dress since my husband had died.

The door swung open with a rush of air. "Lois, you're right on-time."

Leil was dressed in a long black skirt and a see-through red blouse. The skirt had a slit that came up to the top of her left thigh and I realized that the lace on her panties matched the lace on her black brassiere. I wasn't sure if her outfit made me more comfortable with what I was wearing - or less.

"Good. I was hoping I wasn't too early."

"Come in, come in. You look stunning." She kissed me with full red lips, painting me in a glow of lipstick. "You're the first one here. I really am glad. I hate waiting around for people to show up." She led me to a plump green couch and we were about to sit down when the doorbell rang again.

"Excuse me. I'll be right back."

I sat down on the couch, pulled a Kleenex from my purse and wiped the lipstick from my face. A lumbering dog with short bristly hair padded out from a nearby room and moseyed over to the

coffee table in front of me. I listened as Leil laughed in the entranceway. I heard the guest make some remark about putting on the slippers that he had brought with him. The dog moved over to my legs and began sniffing at me, pressing his nose into alluring locations on my body.

A man that I assumed was Robin appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Hello," he remarked jovially as I tried to preserve my dignity.

He grabbed the dog's collar and hauled him back toward the bedroom. The dog whined. "That's enough, Leo. Behave yourself. You must be Lois. I'm Robin." The dog rose onto his hind legs as Robin dragged him across the floor. "Can I get you a drink?"

"... when you're finished with Leo - sure."

I wouldn't have said Robin's shoulders were like an Oreo cookie but he did look a little like a string bean. Eventually, he maneuvered the dog off the carpet and onto the hardwood floor of the bedroom. He shut the door behind the dog, and the quiet left time for me to wipe the spittle off my skirt, an act that I completed just as Leil flowed around the corner with her second guest.

Robin arrived back at the coffee table at the same time as Leil and the newcomer. Robin was carrying two glasses of wine and offered one to me, and one to the newcomer.

"Hank Flipper, Lois," Leil offered. "Hank this is my very good friend Lois. Hank is a Law Professor at the University of Calgary. When I told him that Mary Magda Cat was going to be here, he jumped at the chance to meet her." I breathed a sigh of relief – apparently, if there was match making going on, it wasn't going to involve me.

The door bell chimed once more.

"Is that because Mary Magda Cat is associated with the Assembly of the Purple Cauldron?" I asked Hank.

He smiled, looking a little embarrassed. "You called that one. I'm quite interested in off-beat groups, so yes, that's part of the reason. On the other hand how can a single man turn down a good home-cooked meal?" He was tall and smoothly muscled, sort of rakish with a jaunty chin and a warm smile. I could see him turning the heads of all the eighteen year olds on the Calgary campus. If he really wanted home cooked food, I figured he could satisfy his desires easily enough.

Leil had disappeared down the hall once more to answer the door.

Robin joined the discussion, directing his comments toward Hank. "Some of these groups have an interesting perspective on things. I've considered attending one of Mary Magda's Yogic Flying Events on a couple of occasions. I've been wondering if her group figures that sexual innuendo contributes to Transcendental Consciousness." He slumped onto the sofa and Hank took the chair on the other side of the coffee table, at the opposite end of the couch from me.

"Interesting perspective...? Yes," he responded to Robin, "whatever transcendental consciousness is...? I find alternate ideas tell us a lot about our North American culture."

I could hear melodic voices from the doorway at the end of the hall, and realized that Leil was talking about Mooch. I understood why, when Leil, Mooch and a gorgeous brunette in a flowing cape melted into the room. I was wondering if Leil took fashion advice from this woman – what with the flowing cape and all.

"This is Mary Magda." Leil gestured from the newcomer toward me and Hank. "And look who followed her over here!" She pointed to Mooch who was strutting his stuff across the living room carpet.

"Mooch - he lives in my complex," I commented. "I guess it isn't all that uncommon for a cat to travel a couple of blocks but I'm still surprised to see him here."

Mary Magda laughed. "It's been a thing all my life. Cats seem to really like me. They like my whole family actually."

"What a surprise!" Leil offered. "Maybe that's why your surname is 'Cat'."

"Mooch likes everybody," I responded. "He visits with anyone who will let him in the door."

Robin left his seat and opened the door to the bedroom. "So he's called Mooch. Good name for him. He mooches off us all the time. Guess I can leave the bedroom door open now. Usually Leo and Mooch entertain one another."

"So how is the entrepreneurial search going Robin?" Hank asked.

"Well, the sexual consent forms are doing quite well this month. And I've got a few ideas boiling in my cauldron." Robin looked at Mary Magda and winked. "Say... let me run a few ideas by you guys and see what you think."

I heard the low rumbling of a television set from the adjacent bedroom and knew that Mooch was making himself at home. I have concluded that he is adept at turning on TVs. Maybe he's been attending classes at the Assembly of the Purple Cauldron, I thought.

"You guys go ahead. I'm going to slip into the kitchen," Leil intervened. "I have a few things to do so we can eat this fabulous meal I've conjured up."

Robin nodded then continued. "So... what do you think about a business that manufactures levitating beds?"

Hank smiled. "Well – beds...sounds like a good manufacturing business. How would the levitation bit work?"

"I was thinking about thin steel cables to keep the bed in place – could build magnets into the floor and into the bottom of the bed. The magnets would repel one another and the mattress would float."

"Hmmm... could be expensive ... electric magnets, I suppose. You might need an engineer for that one." Hank looked thoughtful. I concluded he wasn't enthusiastic about the idea. "What else do you have in mind?"

"Well, I've also considered applying to NASA to do a scientifically-controlled study on "The Benefits of Sex in Space". I think I couldn't find a better place to brand my ideas than working for NASA?"

"Excellent idea!" Mary Magda exclaimed. "I've taken on a very similar challenge. You could call it "The Benefits of Meditation in Prison". I'm now working for Corrections Canada as a Prison Chaplain. You and I... We're taking on the power structure because we are LEADERS. Taking on the power structure is the only way to bring about tolerance, peace and lasting justice – that's what I call working for true Transcendental Consciousness. It's especially important when you're dealing with the underprivileged, like the prison population I'm working with."

Leil reappeared carrying a huge glass bowl. It was half a meter in diameter and obviously heavy. "I think we should have a *Reckoning of the Crystal Bowl* while we're waiting for dinner," she explained. Nobody seemed to hear her. She sat the bowl strategically in the center of the coffee table then wandered around the room, setting out red, yellow and purple candles.

"I suppose the Federal Government does hire religious leaders to counsel the prisoners," Hank responded to Mary Magda's comment. "Why not use a meditative spiritual leader, like you? Good going."

Leil turned off the brighter of the two lamps in the room. After she lit the candles, she sat between Hank and me on the couch, before dropping a puff of cinnamon and a fresh rose into the water in the bowl. I watched as she ran her index finger around the lip, and the crystal bowl began to sing. Seconds later I noticed Mooch and Leo, materializing from the bedroom, heading for the respective edges of the couch – Leo next to Hank and Mooch by my side. The two animals seemed to be mesmerized by the sound.

"Another idea that is bound to be a huge success," Robin continued, "is to set up a business as a wedding band detective. You know - when people lose their wedding rings - I could go out with my metal detector and find the lost rings."

"Hmmm... a wedding band detective... that has a nice ring to it." Hank was definitely a polite kind of guy.

Leil had broken into a soft whimsical hum. The sound pervaded the room. I was beginning to feel a little like Leo and Mooch, as the hum turned to a melody. It harmonized with the trill of the bowl and Leil's delicate words curled through my senses.

"I cast a circle of love," she caroled in a low voice. There was an immediate silence in the room and everyone's attention was directed toward her. "And I invoke the God and Goddess." She continued to hum and the crystal bowl continued to sing as she ran her finger around the lip. It seemed Hank had decided to help her out because now a higher pitched eerie tone emanated from the crystal wine glass that he was holding. He was helping her by rubbing his finger around its edge. The overtones from their combined rubbing started the glass in my fingers vibrating. It chanted a third note. I set the glass down quickly on the coffee table, in close proximity to the crystal bowl and it rang even louder – so I scooped it up again. The three tones filled the room like the haunting swish of melodic bird wings.

"True love has come. True love has blanketed this room," Leil continued. "God and Goddess, let love entwine us. I feel your presence. Flow over us. Be with us here. Anoint us with your beauty." She sprinkled the cinnamon water from the bowl onto every one along the couch - Mooch, Hank, Leo, and me, then threw a flick across at Robin and Mary Magda. It didn't quite reach them. Somehow, she avoided sprinkling herself. Finally, with her right hand, she slipped a dagger from her waistband, all the while continuing to rub the lip of the bowl with her left. Holding the dagger delicately, she stabbed it into the contents of the crystal bowl, then into Hank's chalice of wine. With a deft twist of her body, she aimed the dagger toward the bubbles of my glass as well. Anticipating her move, I lowered the glass quickly to the coffee table, and she missed – missed both the glass and my arm.

I was becoming super-paranoiac about this ceremony.

A second stab of the dagger toward the chalice on the table rewarded her with success. "A symbol for the greatest in love and life - the chalice and the dagger," she continued. "Gracious God and Goddess, hear my plea. Anoint with love. Please make it be."

Leo immediately commenced to bay wildly as if the moon was standing right in the room. Mooch caterwauled in accompaniment. Now everyone was paying rapt attention to Leil – including Mary Magda, who looked at the younger woman with a faint air of skepticism and worry. Mooch and Leo moved together in front of Leil. They rubbed their noses against the crystal bowl. Visible signs of anxiety were causing them to step on my feet and knock against Hank's knees.

Everyone sat perfectly still – mesmerized by the eerie quality of the sound and the light in the room. After several minutes, Leil's hands folded onto her lap, while the bowl and chalice tones dropped away. The harmonies faded quietly behind the low mewling sounds of Mooch and Leo.

"Hey, hey!" Robin pounced suddenly as if Leil's spell had just broken. "You guys be quiet. What's got into you?" He grabbed Leo's collar and once more pulled him toward the bedroom. "Usually Leil's ceremonies don't have this kind of affect on them." Mooch followed, sniffing Leo's haunches. Soon Robin had maneuvered the distracted dog and cat, back into the bedroom. He shut the door once more.

Mary Magda stood and reignited the lamp that Leil had turned off – but she left the candles sputtering about the room. "Have you ever tried the *Reckoning of the Crystal Bowl* before, Leil?" she asked. I detected a worried sound in her voice.

Leil didn't answer. She stood quickly. "Do I smell something from the kitchen?" She hurried from the room – probably a good thing because I could now smell something too. It reminded me of the day that I boiled a pan of eggs dry. I decided that Leil might want some help, so I followed her into the kitchen – just in time to see her grab a pan off the stove and slop it into the adjacent sink. "It's burned to a crisp," she wailed.

I walked over to the stove, lifted the lid of a second pan and witnessed an eruption of brown ooze that flowed onto the burner. Two other pans were jostling up and down over the stove, bubbling and gurgling in a friendly fashion. I switched all the burners into the off position, and turned to look at Leil as tear drops rolled down her stoic cheeks. No sobs...

"They should have warned me," she commented very quietly.

"Pardon?"

"They should have warned me – Party Bites should have. I got them to cook the food and bring it here, because I'm not much of a cook. I wanted to impress Robin with my culinary skill. Now, look how it's worked out. It seems I'm not up to keeping the food warm without burning it – never mind cooking it myself!"

"Oh dear!" I gave her a big hug, and she collapsed against my shoulder in tears mixed with laughter. A couple of minutes later, she drew back and chuckled as she wiped her cheeks. "Oh well, at least I don't have to pretend to wash the dishes in order to keep it a secret from you guys. I can just send the whole works of it back and let the caterers deal with it."

"I don't think Robin particularly wants you to be domestic anyway." I smiled at her. "Heck you can eat a diet of raw vegetables and be really healthy. You never have to cook if you don't want to! He fell in love with a woman who's good at designing gas plants, not cooking food."

She smiled again. "Come on." She walked over to the stove and flipped the oven temperature dial to zero. "The meat's burned, too. The stove's off. Let's go back to the other room."

As we crossed the threshold, Robin was continuing with his description of possible entrepreneurial endeavours. "That one should definitely work out and I have this other idea for marriage insurance. I sell you some insurance that compensates you if you end up in a divorce court, but if you stay married for 35 years you get an even bigger payout – maybe \$100,000. I'm all for encouraging people to stay married."

"Maybe you should consider a related profession," Hank suggested. "We're looking for someone to teach creative entrepreneurship in the Business Department at the university." He spoke over the sounds of jostling, jumping, running, and mucking that were coming from Mooch and Leo behind the closed bedroom door.

"Here's another possibility for you," Mary Magda interrupted, "Have you heard of the Old Bags Club? I was told about this just the other day. It's been started by a group of women who say they're tired of being discarded by their cheating husbands for younger women. One of them has written a book called *101 Ways to Get Even*."

"The food is ruined." Leil threw this comment as an aside into the conversation.

I could hear a heavy thump and squeaking springs from the bedroom. Leil put her hand over her eyes. Mary Magda looked over at me and I could tell that something was on her mind.

"You're right. I should approach them," Robin replied. "The Old Bag's Club... maybe their marriages failed because they needed therapy. I could really help out with a group like that. They need me big time."

Leil rose from her seat. She picked up the Crystal bowl and headed for the bedroom, eventually closing the door behind her and locking herself in the room with Mooch and Leo. Mary Magda looked at me again.

"There's another possibility I've been considering as well. I've been doing some research on a pheromone that's commonly found in human sweat. The stuff is brilliant at stimulating a sexual response from the opposite sex. It's called androstenone. I could manufacture an after shave or a perfume that contains it and sell it as a love potion. Sort of like Love Potion #9." He snapped his fingers and gyrated rhythmically on the couch, reminding us of that old piece of music from the late 1950s. "That should appeal to you, Mary Magda – Love Potion #9!"

"Okay, okay..." Mary Magda didn't seem to appreciate the implication of magical values.

"I had some phenomenal experimental results when I used the stuff in a double blind experiment."

Leil poked her head out of the bedroom. "Mary Magda, could you come in here for a minute? I might need your help." Mary Magda rose for her seat and headed towards Leil. I decided that it might be a good idea if I went with her. These entrepreneurial endeavours were getting to be a bit too risqué for me.

"Results like...?" Hank enquired.

"In general, something like a 35 to 40% increase in the incidence of sexual encounters with the opposite sex if you compared the pheromone group to the control. I could probably get something like a hundred bucks a shot for a lotion like that."

Their voices faded into the distance as Mary Magda and I walked into the bedroom and Mary Magda shut the door behind me.

Leil and the crystal bowl were sitting on the centre of the bed, and Leil was continuing to make it ring by rubbing her index finger along the lip. Mooch and Leo were cavorting wildly in circles that pushed them up onto the walls and over the furniture.

"Leil," Mary Magda said, "I don't know where you got into this Reckoning of the Crystal Bowl, but this isn't something I would endorse under the auspices of transcendental meditation. In addition to that, you didn't do it right or you wouldn't have Mooch and Leo so upset."

"Maybe you should just stop rubbing the bowl," I suggested to Leil. "You know, stop with the tones. That's probably what has Mooch and Leo so anxiety ridden."

"I don't think that's the problem. They didn't stop this wild merry-go-round while I was in the kitchen."

"Yes, but it's going to take awhile for them to settle down..."

Leil turned to Mary Magda. "I have to figure out how to undo the spell – reverse it. You're right, Mary Magma, of course you are. I shouldn't have done it. Can you help me out here? How do I get things back to normal?"

"How badly do you want them back to normal?" asked Mary Magma.

"Really, really badly..."

"Okay." Mary Magma walked over to the window, slid the drapes aside, and opened one of the panels in the window. I could see a rock garden two stories below. Mary Magda picked the crystal bowl from the bed, took two heavily laden steps as she turned, then heaved the bowl through the open window. I could hear the crash and tinkle of broken glass and the beautiful object shattered on the rocks below. "There. That should fix things." She wiped her hands together as if she was glad to be rid of the offending object.

Mooch and Leo immediately stopped running and chasing. They both sat bolt upright looking toward the window, then toward Mary Magda, then toward Leil.

"Oh dear," Leil sighed. "Not only do I have to clean up the mess in the kitchen, now I have to get the glass out of the rock garden. It's a good thing that I have an understanding landlord."

"Good thing," Mary Magda muttered, then strode resolutely toward the bedroom door, opened it noiselessly, and returned to the living room. I looked at Leil, who seemed mesmerized by Mooch and Leo. The two animals were staring back at her, puzzled but no longer wild with anxiety. I decided that my best bet was to follow Mary Magda.

"Everything okay in there?" Robin asked as I arrived in the living room. "... sounded like you guys blew something up... then nothing..."

Leil returned from the bedroom.

"Everything's okay," Mary Magda responded, "but I have a story to tell you. This one is for Hank. It has to do with one of my experiences at the prison." She stretched placidly in the chair she had chosen, and portrayed that totally relaxed posture that you could always attribute to someone who was skilled in commanding psychological control of a room. "One of my prisoner clients is telling me that he has brought in his lawyer because he is suing God - suing him because God didn't save him from the devil. Which God I'm not sure. He claims that all the bad things he's done are God's fault. He would never have gone to prison he claims, if God had done his job and saved him. How would you assess the legal ramifications of a move like this?"

Given the bent of the conversation, I realized that Magda didn't think it was advisable to fill the group in on the details of our bedroom encounter nor of the broken crystal bowl.

Hank laughed. "Well, in my legal career, I've never run across one like that before. Your prisoner might have a problem, due to the difficulty of subpoenaing God to appear as a witness."

Leil interrupted enthusiastically. "Maybe when they get to court, I could channel for God," she suggested. "I know it wouldn't be a good idea for you to do it, Mary Magda, because of your job and everything, but what about me?"

Mary Magda directed a totally withering look toward Leil. It seemed to be saying... "No way Leil! Not five minutes ago, I had to remove the spell you put on Leo and Mooch. I'm not sure a court room is a good place for you to practice channeling skills."

Out loud she muttered under her breath, "The client is mine Leil. I will deal with him. No channeling. And I sure as the devil hope that the spell on Mooch and Leo is the end of this thing...!"

Hank responded to Mary Magda's comment with a startled look. I could see his mental wheels were turning.

"Okay, guys!" Leil changed the topic. "The food is wrecked. I think we have to go out and get something to eat. This is my dinner party, so the bill is on me. How about we go to that Pizza Spot down the street?"

"That's a strange type of Thanksgiving meal," Robin objected.

"Sounds good to me," Hank disagreed, then added, as he put his arm around my waist, "... just so long as I get to sit beside Lois!" I looked at him quickly, hoping to see him wink. No such luck – I didn't see a wink at all ...

Before we left, I rescued Mooch from the bedroom. And I could have sworn that the cat winked at me as he headed down the street...



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