

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Mom sat us down a few hours before the family arrived and told us that a schizophrenic was coming for Thanksgiving dinner. My older brother's friend, Clarence, and his family had nowhere to go during the holiday, and his younger sister, Penny, the schizo, was guaranteed to make the night complete.

This was excellent news. I had been riding on last year's success for way too long. Our cat, Tread Head, who was named accordingly because he was all white with a gray tire track running down his forehead to the nape of his neck had lifted one leg like a dog and pissed in a flowerpot within line of vision of everyone and surround sound the year before while we were eating turkey, including the relatives. All guests had frozen, forkful of something on its way to their lips, and stared in horror as this cat let it rip, oblivious to his captive, nauseated audience. That highlight had lasted through at least Easter. I figured a schizophrenic would fuel me through a full year of uneventful holidays.

“Oh, Larry, I'm so excited to meet some of your friends from school. How lovely their family is in town, as well. I'm so looking forward to meeting them,” mom said to older brother. I'd never heard mom say, 'lovely,' and none of us really cared for company, but mom seemed genuinely excited this time. She had become a bit more lively after dad had exited the scene, divorced her, sold the house we'd once lived in and was already on to wife number two.

My younger brother, Peter, and I exchanged glances, lifted our eyebrows and poured more wine into our glasses.

Larry told us more about Clarence. He was an accomplished linguist and had just completed his dissertation on "Medea's Family Reunion: An Awkward Occasion".

"Wasn't she the one that killed all her children and ate them?" I asked. Mom looked at me and laughed. Younger brother, Peter, and I raised glasses, nodded our heads and shot back the red wine while mom chattered on with Larry about how great it would be to have different guests every year. Now I knew mom had been tossing back a few glasses of her pink Chablis early on. She hated guests and especially strangers. Peter grabbed the bottle and poured, furrowed his eyebrows intently at mom and older brother as though he was listening. He refilled our glasses. We enjoyed the holidays because all rules were on sabbatical and Peter and I, thirteen and sixteen respectively, were on our way to getting completely trashed.

Mom kept leaping up to check something in the kitchen. The timer had been going off since before nine in the morning every hour or so and the smells that radiated from the kitchen had raised all siblings from the dead early and every one of us had been in and out snaking off skin from the turkey and warping the hors d'oeuvres into lobotomies that mom had to keep revamping into full mounds again as she slapped our hands lightly and giggled.

I asked Larry about the schizophrenic, Penny. “Well,” he said, as he tapped his fingers together, an indicator that he was excited about the topic, “When she was eighteen she had to have some serious dental surgery. I think the dentist pulled six or seven teeth that were crowding her mouth in one sitting, so he could put braces on later to correct the cramped quarters. Penny came home filled with bloody cotton in her mouth and painkillers and locked herself in her room for over 24 hours. When her parents and brother couldn’t coax her out, they finally had to get a locksmith to unleash her from her lair. Clarence said she was an entirely different person. She looked right through them, never answered when spoken to. She had more interest in the voices in her head than any of the ones around her. The psychiatrist called it, ‘the first break’. They put her on anti-psychotics after that.”

I hadn’t met Penny yet, but felt an intense kinship with her. I’d done a lot of acid and the voices in my head had always over-baked anything going on outside of it.

The doorbell rang. Everyone looked startled. Mom pushed her hair back and straightened her dress as she got up to answer the door. Peter and I downed another glass of red wine as I pushed him to open another bottle, grabbed the empty one incriminating us in front of our plates. I followed him into the kitchen, dumped the bottle in the trash, plunked my index finger in one of the pumpkin pies. The air was fragrant with that billowing decadence of dead roasted, basted turkey, stuffing, casseroles, potatoes, pecan and pumpkin pies wafting into the atmosphere. I took a spoon from the drawer and scooped

up some green beans and yams with cornflakes on top and then worked at fluffing them back up to their original coif before I'd desecrated them.

Peter took a swig from the newly opened wine bottle and handed it to me to slug back before we came out to meet the guests. Mom walked in with four people trailing behind her. She wore that startled smile of panic that we'd seen so many times before. She tried her best to look excited. She lifted her right arm up and clutched her neck with her other hand. "Everyone, this is the Hinrich family. Mr and Mrs. Hinrich, Clarence and his darling sister, Penny."

There were mumblings of 'hellos,' and 'what would you like to drink,' and 'let me take your coat,' but Penny was given my full attention. She was quite short for a girl in her twenties. Her hair was thinning, the color of gravy, and had patches missing. She was dressed in a matching polka-dot pants and shirt outfit that I would have maybe worn when I was nine and everything compressed toward her rotund middle that settled on her like a young child who was either pregnant or had a beer gut. Her vision ping-ponged around the table until her eyes latched on mine. Her round face reddened and she lifted her index finger and beckoned me to come to her. I was ecstatic.

I rose from my chair and sidled up next to her. "My friends are very hungry and they're waiting downstairs,' she whispered. "Can you let them in?" No question. I walked with her to the door and pushed the buzzer to let them in. We opened the door and waited. We were on the second floor so we stood there in silence.

“Here they come,” she said and smiled. I stared at empty space and flourished my arm out to welcome them. I waited a second. “Are they all in?” I asked. She looked at me as though I was crazy. “Come on,” she said and led us back to the dining room.

Mrs. Hinrich immediately clawed at Penny and sat her down between her two parents. The mother mouthed a ‘thank you,’ to me, grabbed one of the linen napkins and stuck it in Penny’s shirt. “She can make such a mess,” the woman said to mom. Penny looked across the table at me and winked.

I loved her. Maybe she was messing with her deadbeat family. Her dad was strange as the moon, with a rheumy look to his eyes, as though no compass could ever locate where they focused. He had a bushy head of brittle hair that was parted on one side like a child’s. His face was a frantic red that would have seemed more at home on an Orangutan’s ass, his nose, a map of purple capillary rivers and canyons that spoke of borders created long before anyone took a pen to papyrus.

Mr. Hinrich was seated directly across from older sister, Abby, which was quite unfortunate for him, but extremely entertaining for Peter and myself. Abby was a radical feminist, who loved nothing better than to provoke any imbecile who dared to question her treatise.

Abby slammed her fist on the table. “Unbelievable there were ten more rapes reported on campus just last week and did anyone do anything about it? NO. It wasn’t even recorded in the school newsletter so Tiger and I went around and threw up flyers everywhere and handed them out to all the girls coming out of classes. Goddamn fascists who run the school couldn’t give a shit.”

“Please, Abby, honey. It’s Thanksgiving,” mom mumbled knowing it would get her nowhere.

Mr. Hinrich cleared his throat and everyone dropped their forks again, riveted. He had one of those perverted half-smiles on his colorless lips that did not match his overzealous face. “Well, you know how these girls dress these days, everything hanging out all over the place like some kind of peep show.” He shook his head and grunted. “It’s a wonder more of them don’t get what they’re asking for.”

Abby’s face would have been an explosion if it could have been. I could see the steam blasting out of her ears like one of those cartoons and her face got all puffy and strange with reds and purples close to the colors of Mr. Hinrich’s natural hues. Peter kicked me under the table and I don’t think anyone was breathing at this point except Mr. Hinrich, who had gone back to eating, oblivious to the violence erupting across the table from him. We knew Abby was capable of anything. She’d smacked some guy in the face sitting in his car in the parking lot of 7-11 one day for whistling at her as she walked by.

Abby was visibly shaking when she picked up her knife.

“No, Abby,” mom squeaked out. Mrs. Hinrich hid her face in her hands and Penny watched Abby without any discernible emotion on her face. Larry and Clarence both jumped out of their chairs and raced around the table just as Abby lunged across the lima beans, cranberry sauce, and potatoes, grabbed Mr. Hinrich’s tie and stuck the steak knife right into his chin. Mr. Hinrich, meanwhile, lurched back from his chair, screaming “you crazy psycho girl, I’ll fucking kill you,” as he yanked the tip of the knife out and Larry pulled Abby off of the table and restrained her arms until she shook him off of her. There was a bit of blood on Mr. Hinrich’s chin and a perfect slice where the knife had been. Mrs. Hinrich grabbed her cloth napkin and rustled over to press it against his chin. He smacked her arm away and grabbed his own napkin, swearing under his breath at the ‘hippy freak’ who’d assaulted him.

This was proving to be the best holiday in recorded history. I was already seeing double from all the wine, so that added to the blurry slow-motion aspect to it all.

“You, disgusting creep, are one fucked up species. I see your kind on every street corner shirtless, belly the size of the fucking Himalayas and shorts your ass cracks through. Fuck you! You think any girl finds that HOT? I’d like to take you in the alley with a few of my friends and beat the crap out of you, you repressed dildo...”

“STOP,” mom screeched. “Please, just stop.” She held her hands to her ears, started to tremor, then clutched her throat again.

I kicked Peter under the table. “Is anyone ready for some incredible dessert?” I blurted out.

I started clearing the table, stacking plates and Peter grabbed the platters as we reconvened in the kitchen.

“Open another fucking bottle,” I demanded. Peter was already on it. We layered the kitchen with the dirty dishes. Peter and I sucked down another few blasts out of the wine bottle and then grabbed dessert plates and pies.

When we got back to the dining room, Abby was already gone and Mr. Hinrich had a beige band-aid on his chin. He was attempting to gather up his posse. Mrs. Hinrich had a quivering smile on her face as she thanked mom for the amazing meal. She pulled at Penny’s sleeve, but Penny wasn’t budging. “Come on, honey, it’s time to go,” her mother said. Penny stared at Peter and whispered, “I love you,” loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Please don’t leave yet?” mom asked without any conviction behind it. “We have dessert and coffee. I’m so sorry,” she added.

Larry and Clarence were discussing some class they were both in as though the scene with sister had never happened. It was something about University of Chicago students. They were able to deal with extremely bizarre behavior and then let it pass through their heads like a faulty faucet. Nothing more. There were rampant psychotics on the U of C campus that made sister's attack look like a mild Tourette's moment for the two of them.

Mr. Hinrich pulled Penny's chair back from the table. "Time to get up, missy," he blasted out, seething brutality.

That's when Penny spoke up for all of us. She belted out a high-pitched scream that I'd only experienced in horror movies, but always hoped to hear in real life. She let her murderous cry drag out full-throttle for over two minutes. Everyone stood stock-still. It was momentous and exquisite. The fear that she manifested in the dining room brought up nightmares on every manic face that was worthy of a trophy.

When her flaring nostrils and reddened face suddenly subsided, there was a ringing in my ear that lingered in the air long after her mouth had closed.

"My friends are hungry. We want pumpkin pie with whipped cream," she said and wrenched her chair back in.

God, I loved her. Peter poured more wine in our glasses as I took the knife and carved out a huge piece of pie for our guest of honor.

