

Dining for One

A Ten-Minute One-Act Play

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The Characters:

SIMON: 30s-40s, college professor, in 10 years if he takes care of himself physically his looks may approach what one might call “distinguished.” Right now, he needs a haircut, and he wears a suit and tie whose style and cut are at least 10 years behind the fashion.

SCYLLA: 27, his former graduate teaching assistant. She has a seductive quality about her, the sort of young woman who is coy, intelligent, sophisticated, and sensuous/sensual and whom men have found attractive since she was a teenager. And she knows it.

The WAITER: Snooty, of any age, preferably older. If younger, somewhat fey in terms of his delivery. Well-spoken, polite but intimidating. He knows that he’s working in a posh restaurant.

The Setting: A round table laid with linen tablecloth in the posh restaurant that you might find in a college or university town, the sort of place where a candidate for an administrative position, but certainly not for a teaching or research position, would be taken to be wined, dined, and wooed.

At rise of curtain, **SIMON** is sitting alone at the table, evidently for longer than the agreed-upon reservation. He looks at his watch. Music plays, perhaps Chopin or Haydn. It fades to an understated volume with the **WAITER**’s entrance.

WAITER

Will you be dining for one, sir, after all?

SIMON

Oh, no, I'm sure that she'll be here.

WAITER

Very well, sir.

SIMON's cell phone rings, which he answers.

SIMON

(Turning slightly away from the waiter to take the call, he speaks in a hushed voice.) Hi, where are you? Oh, I just thought... No, no, it's okay. I haven't ordered yet. *(A smile to the waiter.)* Okay, okay, I'll see you soon. Bye. *(Perhaps his goodbye is interrupted by her concluding her end of the call.)* That was her, my dinner companion, she just pulled into the parking lot.

WAITER

Sir, we have a strict policy at Chez Balthazar in that we request our patrons to resist, if not desist, from making personal calls on their *electronic* devices.

SIMON

(Looks around the room) But I'm the only person here...

WAITER

Still the same, sir. More bread, sir?

SIMON

Um, yes, please.

The WAITER exits.

SIMON

Euro-trash putz!

A pause. Perhaps we hear the music to fill the silence. SIMON examines his spoon, breathes on it, and with his napkin polishes it. Checks his reflection in the spoon. Returns the napkin to his lap. A sigh or exhalation. He is being made to wait.

SCYLLA enters stage right. She is dressed in clothes that reveal her sensuality, fashionable, contemporary, perhaps a hint of revealing lace in her décolletage. She wears tasteful jewelry.

As she approaches the table, SIMON rises and places his napkin on the table, pulls out her chair for her to sit. She leans into him to be kissed on the cheek, with a slight turning of her face that registers as a rebuff and a turn-on. She sits and peruses the menu.

Pause.

SIMON

You look lovely, Scylla.

SCYLLA

Thank you, Simon.

A beat.

SIMON

Did you run into traffic?

SCYLLA

(Without looking up) No.

SIMON

Oh.

She continues perusing the menu.

Pause.

SIMON

I've heard really wonderful – glowing, in fact – reviews of this place. I feel very fortunate that I was able to get a reservation on such short notice.

SCYLLA

Simon, it is Super Bowl Sunday. Of course, you were able to get a reservation.

SIMON

Oh.

Pause.

SIMON

That's very nice perfume.

SCYLLA

Thank you, you gave it to me.

SIMON

(This is a well-worn joke between them.) Simon says, you're welcome!

SCYLLA looks up briefly, smiles, produces a mirthless chuckle.

Pause.

SIMON

(Becoming testy) So, why were you late? Did meeting me for dinner detract you from attending to another treasured appointment on your overcrowded itinerary?

SCYLLA

(Calmly putting down menu) No. *(Beat)* Truth be told, I was waiting in my car in the parking lot, deciding whether I even wanted to keep this little *assignation*.

SIMON

My wife is suing me for divorce. You needn't refer to my inviting you for a goodbye dinner as an "assignation." Save me the sarcasm.

SCYLLA

Ditto. The sarcasm, that is.

SIMON

Fine.

They sit in silence, perusing their menus.

Just as SIMON is about to say something, the WAITER re-enters.

WAITER

Good evening, Madame, and welcome to Chez Balthazar. If you wish, I will be delighted to review this evening's specials –

SIMON

I don't wish.

WAITER

(Without missing a beat) Would Madame care for a drink?

SCYLLA

(Smiling graciously) Yes, will you please bring a bottle of your Chateau Pey la Tour Bourdeaux Superieur?

WAITER

Sir?

SIMON

(Looking at wine menu) Two glasses.

WAITER

Very good, sir. *(He exits.)*

SIMON

(After a suitable pause that allows for the WAITER's exit) That's the most expensive bottle on the wine menu, you know.

SCYLLA

Why, Simon, don't you think I'm worth it? Aren't you enjoying my company? You certainly enjoyed me when you were fucking me.

SIMON

That's uncalled for.

SCYLLA

Is it? Oh, you are such a simple Simon. What were you expecting to happen from our little dalliance? That I would stay in this two-bit college town, teaching freshman comp as an adjunct, meeting you in the department's copy room for an occasional, late-afternoon grope? Cherishing our stolen moments together in some Best Western hotel room at the Modern Language Convention in – ooh, I don't know – St. Louis or Hartford? That I would laugh at all of your witticisms in faculty meetings? That I would become old and fat, waiting for you to have the courage to leave your wife? Please.

SIMON

Okay, I'm glad that you got that off your chest.

SCYLLA

Really, I don't want to hurt you. I had such plans for you, Simon, for us really. I imagined so much more for you.

SIMON

I'm sorry to have disappointed you. I'm sorry that I wasn't your very own Pygmalion or Narcissus.

SCYLLA

Fuck you, you sexist, ageist, misogynistic pig!

SIMON

Fuck you right back, you entitled, egotistical... MILLENIAL!

Pause. They both feel ashamed of their behavior and at a loss for words.

SIMON

I'm sorry.

SCYLLA

Me, too.

Pause.

SIMON

But did you have to apply for the job at Cornell?

SCYLLA

Yes, and I'm sorry they selected me over you, but you know the market. Besides, by hiring me they're shoring up their department with a semiotician... All that post-modernist cant, you know, is so, well... post-modern. Its pop-culture afterlife should be confined to describing desserts, don't you think? The idea that meaning cannot be pinned down, that clear-cut moral judgments are impossible – is, well, meaningless.

SIMON

And, of course, hiring a fairly newly minted PhD. will be easier on the university's bottom line. Isn't that true meaning of this academic exercise?

SCYLLA

What the market will bear.

SIMON

So off to Ithaca you go, while I ply away my trade here in sleepy college town, content to remain an assistant professor for the rest of my academic career because I fucked away a promotion because I fucked you and "fraternized" with a grad student.

SCYLLA

What, you never read the faculty handbook on fraternization with students? Simple Simon! Besides, I had a moral obligation to report to the rank and tenure committee – and your publisher – your appropriation of nearly 1200 words – verbatim – from my dissertation without proper citation or attribution for your collection of essays on contemporary literary analysis.

SIMON

(After a beat) So you don't want to ever see me again?

SCYLLA

(Staring at him blankly for a moment) As a semiotician, I would take my silence as a sign.

SIMON

My wife won't talk to me, the seven-year-old is shell-shocked, my colleagues regard me as a cautionary tale, and all you can offer me is a soupcon of irony. Your lack of compassion is revelatory.

SCYLLA

(Looking at her menu) I understand that the *foie gras chaud, compote a' l'ananas* is really very good.

SIMON

I love you, Scylla.

SCYLLA

You never loved me. I was a diversion from an academic career that was yielding diminishing returns upon its investment. You brought this all on yourself, Simon. That the university has not fired you is a testament to a strong union and your having secured tenure. You've only yourself to blame, and I'm sure that you will recover and that you will find your way through all of this. No, you never loved me, and I never loved you.

SIMON is stung deeply, perhaps devastated by the truth of SCYLLA's words. After a long silence, he folds his napkin with care, places it on the table and rises.

SIMON

Good luck at Cornell. Goodbye, Scylla.

SIMON leaves, and she watches him exit. After a moment, she takes a sip of water.

After another moment, the WAITER returns with the bottle of wine and two glasses. He goes through the business of letting SCYLLA taste the wine, etc.

SCYLLA

Yes, that's quite wonderful.

WAITER

Will Madame be dining for one?

SCYLLA

No, I'll just finish this bottle of wine.

WAITER

Very well, Madame. I'll bring more bread – and the check.

Blackout