**Staying For Dinner**

Harold was drunk, very drunk, having been informed that morning of his dismissal from the company due to inappropriate behaviour the previous week. ‘Inappropriate behaviour!’ Harold snorted. There had been an office party and one misinterpreted-look in his direction had nearly landed him in court for sexual harassment. Having stormed from the building in a rage Harold spent the next 8 hours in the nearest bar until an irate barman had forcefully evicted him from the building.

Perhaps it was Harold’s drunken mind, or maybe it was a primal need to escape from his problems, but at 3 o’ clock in the morning he found himself driving along the starlit highway in his old Chevrolet pickup. Looking up through the dust coated windscreen Harold marvelled at how far he must have driven from the city. The entire night sky was awash with stars and distant galaxies, no longer being overwhelmed by the city’s light pollution. Harold was so engrossed in looking at the cosmos above that he hadn’t realised that his pickup had drifted to the wrong side of the road. Suddenly the blaring horn of an approaching truck snapped Harold to his senses, blinded by the bright lights of the truck Harold desperately twisted the wheel and the battered Chevrolet swerved from the highway. The bone-shaking ride which followed was made even worse by Harold’s truck-induced blindness. Harold’s eyes finally began to clear just as his truck crunched into a boulder and then everything went black.

Harold awoke to the sound of a loud tapping. Trying to open his eyes, and failing, Harold feared he was blind. Bringing his hand up to his face he realised that his eyes were covered with dirt. Wiping his eyes clear again Harold looked up into the pitch black eyes of a vulture standing on the hood. He let out a yell of surprise and the vulture screeched in unison before flapping away. Without the vulture in the way Harold could now see the damage the boulder had done to the Chevrolet. The engine compartment had crumpled inwards and some steam was drifting lazily skywards from the lightly hissing radiator. He tried turning the key in the ignition but wasn’t surprised to hear nothing from the now-totalled engine. He reached down and released the belt buckle. Opening the creaking door he stumbled out into the blistering sunshine. Looking around all that he could see for miles was dry, parched land with heat haze shimmering in the distance.

Harold patted his pockets for his phone, then came to the the sickening realisation that it had been taken back by the company the previous day. Scanning the surrounding landscape he could just about discern some telegraph poles in the distance and decided to head for them. Leaving a note in his car stating where he was headed he began walking towards the poles. Reasoning the poles would eventually lead him to some form of civilisation, at least somewhere that would have a telephone. After shambling along underneath the wires for what felt like forever, Harold stared into the distance at what he was sure had to be a mirage. The small rectangular shape was shimmering in the haze and Harold feared to get his hopes up but realised that it was his best chance for salvation. Stumbling on his eyes began to well-up as the shape finally began to materialise into a wooden house.

By the time he reached the house Harold was completely exhausted and his legs gave out while he was climbing the steps of the porch. Collapsing to his knees at the door he could only just raise his arm enough to rap on the door. Staring blankly upwards Harold almost cried with joy as the door cracked open and a white robed figure stepped out. “Wat…er plea….se” Harold croaked before he passed out.

Harold awoke to the feeling of water splashing over his lips. Spluttering as the cool liquid trickled into his throat he gratefully gulped down the glass as he looked up into the face of his saviour. A slightly wrinkled face smiled back at Harold.

“Welcome to my humble abode, my name is Joseph; Joseph Grant. May I enquire as to your name?”

Taken aback by the polite and formal greeting Harold stammered in response

“N-n-n-nice to meet you Joseph, I’m Harold”

“Well Harold, it’s nice to meet a new face, even if it is a surprise guest turning up here unannounced”

“Well Joseph, not to be rude or anything but do you have a telephone I could use? I could really do with calling someone to fix my truck and I wouldn’t like to take up any more of your time than I have to”

“Of course it’s just down the hall on the left. I’ll just prepare us some food, you must be famished! I do hope sandwiches will suffice, I’m afraid I’m running low on food at the moment” Joseph said with a hint of dismay “I was expecting a delivery any day now”

Walking down the corridor Harold looked at the various pictures hanging from the wall. Looking closely at the largest picture Harold was mildly surprised to find a picture of a much younger Joseph smiling beside another man in front of the house. Reaching the phone Harold picked up the receiver but instead of the usual constant hum of a connection there was only silence. Harold checked the connection between the phone and the wall socket but couldn’t find any fault. Walking back into the kitchen Harold smelled the cooked meat and was surprised to hear his stomach rumbling.

“Ah Harold, that was a quick call. I do hope you’re hungry, the sandwiches are ready” Joseph said with a smile, while plating up the sandwiches on the table.

“Thanks, I’m famished! Your phone in the hall wasn’t working I don’t suppose you have a cell phone on you?” Harold asked, already predicting the answer.

“I’m afraid not, the line must be down. It happens from time to time.” Joseph said with a sigh. “I’m expecting a grocery delivery any day now so you could get a ride back from them I’m sure” he grinned with a hint of optimism. “Please sit” he indicated to the seat on the far side of the table. “I hope you don’t mind staying for dinner.”

“Thanks, I suppose I don’t have much of a choice really.” Harold sat down on the chair and picked up the sandwich. “It smells delicious” he took a bite. “What meat is it? I can’t place the taste”

“I’ll give you the recipe sometime,” Joseph said with a wink, “It contains kid.”

“Ah right, that must be it, I haven’t eaten goat much. I saw the pictures in the hall, have you lived here long?”

“You mean the picture beside the mirror?” Joseph said with a knowing smile “Don’t worry I get asked that by most people that come here, which isn’t many to tell the truth. That is a picture of me and my late-partner Derek” A distant look came into his eyes “We came here together nigh on 20 years ago now. He was the sweetest man I’ve ever known” Joseph turned his attention back to Harold “Are you feeling alright Harold? You look a little pale”

The entire room was spinning and going dark for Harold “I must have…hit my head…harder than...I…thought” He managed to blurt out before the floor rushed up to meet him.

Upon awakening Harold was in pitch blackness. Hearing scratching behind him, Harold scrambled away from the noise, fearing rats. Slowly his eyes began to adjust to the darkness until he could just about discern a hunched-over shape in the far corner of the ‘room’. Turning his head marginally to the side, so as to take in his surroundings while keeping an eye on the shape, Harold realised that the room was in fact a cell with iron bars across the entrance.

Suddenly, blinding white lights flashed on in the room on the other side of the bars. Harold blinked his eyes clear, and immediately regretted it. There were two tables outside his cell, one set out as a dining table for one, complete with candles and silverware, and the other was clear, bar 4 manacles and blood stains. The floor was absolutely covered in blood around the table. Holding back his gag reflex, Harold looked desperately over towards the bundle in the corner and was horrified to see a small child looking fearfully back towards him. The child looked to be no more than 3 or 4 and looked to be of Asian origin. Harold was about to ask the boy his name when a familiar voice called out.

“Ah Harold; you’re finally awake, I was worried I might have gotten the dosage wrong” Joseph boomed jovially as he walked down the stairs and into the room on the far side of the bars. Opening a locker against the wall, Joseph pulled out a white butcher’s apron and slipped it on over his person. “I see you’ve met Jethro, I’m afraid he doesn’t speak much.”

“What do you want from me? Why am I down here? Where is here?!” Harold demanded.

“Now, now Harold one question at a time please” Joseph grinned mischievously, “This is my basement, you are down here because I put you here and what I want from you is you”

“What do you mean?” Harold asked exasperatedly “I have nothing to give you! I don’t even have a job!”

Joseph picked up a wicked looking meat cleaver. “You misunderstand me Harold, I don’t want anything from you, I want you to stay for dinner, as dinner” and as Joseph slowly advanced he licked a drop of blood from the cleaver and Harold just closed his eyes to the inevitable. The harsh screech of the Iron Gate heralded the end and the last thing Harold ever heard. “I’m so glad you could stay for dinner.”