

DINNER DATE

By David Mills

I knocked at the door, then anxiously waited.

From inside, a cat meowed, then a female voice called out, "Just a minute".

I shifted my feet and gazed behind me into the blackness of an empty yard. I was suddenly seized with the feeling that this was the wrong house – this was not the home of the girl I had met the night before. This house belonged to a vulnerable old lady who would think I was there to steal her jewellery. Maybe she had peeked out the bedroom window and had called the police already. Now she was just stalling for time.

Another thought struck me. Maybe the events of the night before had not really happened. You know how some dreams seem so vivid that we're tempted to think they're real. The party did have a very vague, hazy glow about it, but that could've been because there were so many smokers on the patio.

The way I met Marlene, then sat and talked with her hour after hour *did* seem unreal. It was like I was watching myself and not really a part of it. Things seemed to happen beyond my control and I felt I was not quite myself. I was pleasant and more charming than usual, I had the gift of the gab, and I told jokes that I don't usually remember. Perhaps, in a need for companionship, I had contrived the whole thing. Maybe I had never gone out last night. Maybe I had fallen asleep on the couch watching old episodes of "The X-Files".

If so, I could knock on every door on the street and not find her. The telephone number I had would not be registered to her. I would have it traced to a phone booth on Dufferin. Some wino would probably answer when I called.

Inside the house, another light came on and I heard the sound of footsteps.

I put on my 'taking a picture' smile and ran my fingers through my hair. Why was I so nervous? I had already talked to her endlessly and easily at the party and she had enjoyed herself enough to invite me over. Everything was fine, except that sweat was pouring down my arms changing the colour of my shirt.

Marlene opened the inside door and smiled weakly. It was a curious look that seemed to say, "I think I'm happy, but let me think about it."

I broadened my smile, then stepped inside.

"You came," she said, with a hint of surprise.

I was tempted to answer, “Did I?”

I could be very sarcastic on occasion, but I knew this was not the right time.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

I closed the door behind me as she offered to take my coat.

In all my twenty years, I had never seen such a tiny apartment. The little bungalow, already smaller than most on the street, had been converted into three separate units and I was willing to guess this was the smallest. I had a tour of it while I stood at the door.

The living room had all the basic amenities – a couch and coffee table, TV on a small table, and a tall, thin bookshelf with a stereo and a row of paperbacks and various knick-knacks of cute animals, proving it was a woman’s apartment. There was a bedroom in the back corner shrouded in mystery, a tiny bathroom beside it, and a narrow kitchen in which various concoctions bubbled away in separate pots.

She explained that dinner would be another half hour and offered me a beer. Just then her cat – a little black thing called Candy – came bursting out of the bedroom and leapt onto the couch, the bookshelf and the TV table within the blink of an eye. It meowed mournfully, scratched at the door then dashed across the room and back. She casually caught the pet, put her in the bedroom and closed the door, then took four steps into the kitchen.

As I sat and drank, I began to wonder about the type of person she was since I hardly knew her. I did know that she liked beer. Television commercials tell us beer drinkers are hard-working, sociable, sometimes adventurous people who like sharing good times with others. I supposed those were good qualities for a girl to have. While she attended to supper, I looked about for other clues.

I saw a squash racquet in the corner which suggested she was into sports and concerned with keeping fit. That was good. On the other hand, there seemed to be an upper-class association with squash that didn’t suit her. Still, she could be an entirely different person from the one she seemed to be last night. After all, I didn’t know her motives for inviting me. If she just wanted a night of fun with a cute guy, then something would’ve happened at the party – unless there were circumstances preventing it that I didn’t know about. I mean, when a young woman asks an attractive man over to her apartment for a quiet evening in, what is he to expect?

She was still in the kitchen (at least ten feet away) so I went over to the bookshelf to look for objects of conversation. Since we had established that we both read classics, I thought we would have a lot in common but I browsed over forty titles before finding one I had read.

“Oh, I see you have ‘The Grapes of Wrath’. That was a fantastic book!”

“I thought it was boring.”

“Uh, yeah, parts of it were slow, ...but I just love the characters.”

“They were so ordinary, though. They just seemed like people off the street with no exciting characteristics to keep me interested.”

“They were supposed to be ordinary people because it’s a realistic story. It’s about real people reacting to a real crisis.”

“But it’s fiction. Writers are supposed to make the story interesting and exciting. They can’t just write about life and expect us to rave on about it.”

“But if it’s well done, a story should be just like real life. Life itself is exciting.”

“No it isn’t. Life is boring.”

So she doesn’t like Steinbeck, she’s loud and opinionated, she talks too much, she’s got a shoe-box apartment and she thinks life is boring.

“Do you want any help in there?”

“No. Everything’s ready. Just have a seat and I’ll be right there.”

She came over and moved the TV on to the floor. Apparently the TV stand doubled as the dining table. Then she found a couple of folding chairs behind the bookshelf and set them in place.

I was hungry so I came over and sat at the renovated table. The aroma of good food filled the room. As she served the meal she explained, “It’s a Hungarian dish. I hope you like it.”

It was a kind of stew with tempting bits of beef, delicious vegetables and spices surrounded by rings of green peppers and covered in sour cream. I *hate* sour cream.

I stared at the tempting meal hidden underneath that tasteless topping and noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that she was watching me like a hawk.

“Okay, let’s eat!” I smiled.

After twenty minutes, I had cleaned everything off my plate with the exception of three mounds of white cream I had scraped off the top of the vegetables.

What did she think of me, I wondered? Was I rude not to eat the sour cream? Was I polite to eat all that I could possibly stomach? Was I able to keep the look of distaste from my face or had she decided she would never cook for me again? She said nothing, but had a smirk of amusement.

Supper was followed by tea and a discussion of our jobs. As we talked, I was reminded of how little I knew about this person. We had spent most of the previous evening discussing books and movies, volunteering only basic facts about ourselves. This woman (she was all of twenty-four) could be anyone, and her motives were still unclear.

As I sipped my tea, I imagined an almond flavour reminiscent of 'Arsenic and Old Lace'. Maybe, like the elderly ladies in that old movie, she lured single men into her apartment and gave them a cup of tea that was just a little too strong. The dead bodies were probably needed by a chemistry professor she knew who was doing illicit experiments on reviving the dead. She would get a generous commission for each body she provided.

No. If all that were true, she would be able to afford a larger apartment.

We sat on the couch with our tea and the discussion turned to television shows. I decided to avoid a repeat of the Steinbeck incident by not giving my opinion till I knew hers, ...then I would agree with her. I would say, "What do you think of such-and-such?" and if she asked me the same question, I would stall, saying something like "I'm not sure if I like it". Sometimes I would play dumb by saying, "I don't think I've seen that show" or put the emphasis back on her with "I don't know – what do you think?"

It worked. After all, everyone likes people who share their own opinions. It reinforces those beliefs and strengthens their conviction that they are right.

She opened a couple of beers as we continued talking and exchanging thoughts on other issues. Once in a while I would disagree with something so she wouldn't get suspicious, but I would first make sure it was something trivial which wouldn't lead to an argument. For example, I disagreed that fat people should be denied access to smorgasbords. Other times, if she expressed an opinion that I felt was stupid, I simply hinted that perhaps she could be a little more open-minded.

I enjoyed sitting and talking with her over drinks and she did have a number of interesting and intelligent things to say, but I couldn't get over the feeling that I was talking to my aunt.

There was three feet between us on the couch and we were talking so neutrally that again I had to wonder about her motives. She was a good-looking woman who obviously enjoyed my company. I was being pleasant, amusing and agreeable, and I couldn't understand why nothing was happening. I didn't expect too much too soon but felt there should've been a caress of the shoulder, a squeeze of the hand – something! With an attractive single young man in her apartment, she must have some desires. I felt attracted to her and I was also at my sexual peak. Something should've been happening. There should've been sparks galore.

What compounded the situation was that her cat was clearly in heat. I heard it leaping about the bedroom erratically then somehow it escaped and dashed in front of us, jumped up on the couch, hopped over to the bookshelf knocking over a stuffed dolphin, fell to the floor and scurried into the kitchen, ...several times a minute. She was trapped inside, with all those tomcats outside waiting in the bushes.

I was inside, with a beautiful woman sitting beside me (or close to me) on a nice soft couch – a woman who had invited me over for a quiet dinner, alone with her, in her private apartment.

Suddenly her motives were crystal clear. She had invited me because she was very attracted to me and I was the one she wanted to be with when relieving all the sexual pressure that had built up inside her over the past few months.

I sat there thinking of the three of us steeped in sexual frustration. Candy couldn't do anything about her feelings but Marlene and I certainly could.

So, when was she going to make her move? It was almost 10:00 now and supper had been cleared away long ago.

Again, Marlene picked up the cat (anticipating where it would bounce) and returned her to the bedroom, this time ensuring the door was closed tight.

As I considered our situation, it suddenly struck me. Even though she had made the first move by inviting me here, she was probably waiting for me to make the next move so that she didn't appear too aggressive.

I slid a little closer to her on the couch then watched her facial expression. No reaction. I moved even closer so that our bodies were almost touching.

"What are you doing?" she asked. It was as if she had asked, "Is that picture crooked?"

"I'm moving closer," I said, hesitantly.

"Why?"

That was a good question. I couldn't say "Because I want to make love to you and I thought getting closer would be a good way to start". I didn't have another answer so I shrugged my shoulders and moved further away.

She seemed undisturbed by my attempt at intimacy so I concluded that she *did* want to get closer but that the time was not right. This suggested that she was looking for a serious relationship. She wanted my respect by not doing anything right away. I didn't care about respect at that point in time, but I could see her point of view. If we got married, there would always be stories of our "first date" and our "first kiss", etc., and a girl wants it to be just right.

Marriage!? Did I say marriage?! What if she is looking for a husband? After all, at twenty-four she's getting on a bit. She probably wants to settle down, get a home (or at least a bigger apartment), and start a family before her biological clock runs out. Maybe she feels she's hit the jackpot with me – an intelligent, good-looking guy who agrees with everything she says! I had better tread carefully and be sure not to lead her on.

She got up for more drinks and I began to realize how ridiculous I was being. Since she lived alone, she likely just wanted some company. Nothing more, nothing less. Maybe she had no master plan at all and hadn't even decided if she was going to see me again.

No, things were going too well. She'd be calling me every night this week. She was just lucky no one had snapped me up before now.

We continued talking (and sitting apart) and eventually the discussion turned to our families. I told her about my sister and my niece but my stories seemed dull compared to hers. Her brother had been arrested for possession of marijuana and her sister was recently charged with causing a disturbance at a rally. The brother was also notorious for his consumption of food. She had stories of him eating cereal from a large soup pot, having his supper on two plates, ordering family platters in restaurants, eating a dozen donuts on his coffee break and taking his lunch to work in a knap-sack. Needless to say, he was a little heavier than he ought to be.

Then she brought out a photo album full of pictures of aunts, uncles, cousins and other relatives. She showed me her brother and her mother who, together, weighed more than the average automobile. They say you should take a good look at a girl's mother if you're thinking of getting serious because she will look like that in thirty years. If that was true, I ought to stay clear of this girl. Her mother had a huge round face like an inflated balloon and enough fat on her to keep Colonel Sanders going for a year.

I glanced over at her, looking for rolls. She wasn't fat by any means, but she did look like she might be fighting a weight problem. If she wanted to get serious later, I should keep that photograph of her mother in mind.

Speaking of getting serious, why was she showing me photos of her family anyway? Was it just to provide interesting conversation or was there an ulterior motive? If I were thinking of getting hooked up with someone, I'd want them to know a little about my family. I assumed she felt the same way. After all, her relatives could become *my* relatives. That woman in the photograph blocking out the sunlight could be my mother-in-law!

I got up to use the washroom, almost tripping over the cat. I had better decide quickly how I felt about this person, before things got too complicated. I did some breathing exercises, washed my face and hands, then returned to the living room. I tried to calm down, reminding myself that whatever was going through her mind did not matter. I wasn't compelled to marry her and watch her inflate; I wasn't even obligated to go out with her again. I was in control and I could do whatever I wanted. I could steer the direction of this relationship, within reason. Having come to that conclusion, I was ready to relax and enjoy the rest of the evening.

At this point she said, "I wonder what time it is. I do have to get up at 7:00 tomorrow."

It was near 11:00 and she wanted me to leave. I may not be good at motives but I was good at hints. I rose saying that I should be going since I had to be up early as well.

She smiled and told me she'd had a good time, then went to retrieve my coat from the closet.

I watched her walk over and wondered if a kiss was in order. A kiss was innocent enough and often did not even imply anything physical. It was simply a gesture of appreciation. "Thanks for the

meal and a lovely evening.” That sort of thing. Of course, a passionate kiss could lead to something more – an uncontrollable embrace of unbridled lust culminating in nothing less than the physical act of sexual gratification.

It was worth a try.

She returned with my coat, then strode toward the door and said rather quickly, “Well, goodnight.”

A kiss was not in order.

There was something negative in her mood that I didn’t like. Although there were things that I didn’t like about her, I was still attracted to her and I did want to continue seeing her. And I wanted to know right away if I’d be seeing her again.

I asked her to a movie.

“Sure,” she said rather flatly.

Of course she said sure. She was crazy about me. Why did I have any doubts? I said goodnight with a warm smile and turned to leave.

Just as she was closing the door her cat, who had escaped from the bedroom when she went to get my coat, darted outside and into the bushes, ...and was not seen again for the rest of the week.

END