

DINNER
WITH A PERFECT
STRANGER



An Invitation Worth Considering

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*To Rick and Denise,
who made this book possible*

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The Invitation

I SHOULD HAVE known better than to respond. My personal planner was full enough without accepting anonymous invitations to dine with religious leaders. Especially dead ones.

Amid a stack of credit card applications and professional society junk, the invitation arrived at my work address:



It came typeset on beige Crane paper with matching envelope. No return address. No RSVP.

*You are invited
to a dinner
with
Jesus of Nazareth*



*Milano's Restaurant
Tuesday, March 24 • Eight o'clock*

At first I thought the church down the street was having another one of their “outreaches.” We had been outreached on more than one occasion. Their mailbox flier awaited us the minute my wife, Mattie, and I moved here from Chicago three years ago. An endless stream of what some church worker considered promotional material followed. I actually started looking forward to them, just for the amusement the sermon titles provided:

The Ten Commandments, Not the Ten Suggestions
 If God Seems Far Away, Guess Who Moved?
 Spiritual Aerobics for the Marathon to Heaven

Did they mean to attract anyone with those or just make the neighborhood disdain them?

Then came the events: the church bowling-league invitation, the spaghetti cookoff, the marriage-retreat weekend, the golf-scramble invitation. In a moment of insanity I actually broke down and went to the golf scramble. Utter agony is the only way to describe it. Parking at the course behind a guy with a “My Boss Is a Jewish Carpenter” bumper sticker set the tone. As it turned out, I was assigned to his foursome. He had this perpetual smile, as though someone had hit him with a brick and the plastic surgeon had patched him up on an off day. As for the other two, one guy shot a nice front

nine but fell apart on the back nine and started swearing every time he hit a shot. I learned he headed the deacon board. The other guy never said a word except to track our score. He must have chaired the welcoming committee. That was the last church invitation I accepted.

So if that church had concocted it, there was no way I was going to this bogus dinner. But the more I thought about it, the more I concluded that someone else had sent the invitation. For one thing, how would the church have my work address? They were persistent but not particularly resourceful. For another, this just wasn't that church's style. The spaghetti cookoff was more their bag than Milano's, an upscale Italian restaurant. Besides, they would never send an anonymous invitation. If there was one thing they wanted you to know, it was that *their* church was sponsoring an event.

That left me in a quandary. Who would send me such an odd invitation? I called the restaurant, but they denied knowing anything. Of course, the staff could have agreed to play dumb about it, so that told me little. Cincinnati had lots of other churches, but I'd successfully avoided all contact with them. Our friends Dave and Paula went to the Unity Church, but they wouldn't invite me to something like this without Mattie.

One logical set of culprits remained: the guys at work. Les and Bill in particular were always putting together some-

thing crazy, like my bachelor party at a local mortuary and my guy baby shower (thankfully, they left Mattie off the invitation list; I'd never seen such a raunchy celebration for the birth of a baby). I admit, this invitation seemed a bit strange even for those guys. And they should have known better than to send me the invitation at work. It was too obvious. Otherwise they had done a pretty good job: classy envelope and printing, bizarre event, nice restaurant.

I decided to play it cool with them, never mentioning the invite. And for three full weeks they kept cool too, letting slip not so much as a sly grin. As the twenty-fourth approached, my anticipation grew, wondering what their fertile imaginations had conceived this time.

Only one thing stood between the dinner and me: Mattie. Three seventy-hour workweeks had already placed me deep in the doghouse with my other half, who chafed at even my usual sixty-hour pace. I couldn't think how to justify a night out with the guys, leaving her home again with Sara, our daughter.

Granted, it's hard looking after a twenty-month-old by yourself all day and then all evening, too. Not to mention that Mattie ran a home graphics business on the side. If we had stayed in Chicago, either of our mothers could have helped her out with Sara. Well, hers anyway. My mother would have squealed at the chance to keep the baby, but

staying at her house too often would probably have made Sara...like me. Hopefully, the three hundred miles between Cincinnati and Chicago sufficiently insulated my daughter from that fate.

Mattie knew when she moved to Cincinnati with me and we married that I'd be working long hours. You can't have a job like mine and clock out at five. I can just imagine waving my hand at Jim, my boss, as I pass by his office on my way out. "Sorry, man, got to go again. Mattie needs me home at five thirty to dice Sara's vegetables." A few five o'clock departures and Jim would insist I stay home as a full-time nanny.

I can see my résumé now:

EDUCATION

BS, Chemistry, Northern Illinois University, 1996

MBA, Northwestern University, 2001

WORK HISTORY

Research Chemist, Abbott Laboratories, 1996–2000

Corporate Planning Analyst, Abbott Laboratories,
2000–2002

Director of Strategic Planning, Pruitt Environmental
Testing, 2002–2005

Nanny, 2005 to present

Keeping my current job seemed preferable, despite the dangers it presented. Truth was, between the pile on my desk at work and Mattie's perpetual displeasure at home, getting away from both for an evening appealed to me. I just wondered whether Milano's knew what it was getting into with Les's and Bill's antics.

The restaurant's problems were far from my mind, though, as I approached its parking lot. Mattie shouting into the cell phone, "Nick, I might as well be a single parent for all you—" were the last words I heard on the way over before static saved me. That was enough. I never had figured out how to rationalize my plans for the evening. In retrospect, I should have given her more than twenty minutes' notice.

Blasting some R.E.M. while speeding down Anderson Ferry didn't completely drown my guilt, but it gave it a good dunking. I pulled the Explorer into the parking lot, cut the engine, and reached once more for the invitation, hoping it would give me one last hint about what to expect for the evening. It didn't. Suddenly nothing about this dinner seemed worth the cold shoulder I would get from Mattie later on.

I was here, though. And if the whole event was a wash-out, I could save face with Mattie by leaving early. Showing up at home sooner than expected at least once a month

seemed to buy me a little grace. After the last three weeks, I needed some—badly.

Contingency plan in hand, I crossed the parking lot, breached the threshold, and glanced around the twenty or so tables. No guys with long hair in flowing robes. No guys from work, either.