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An Invitation Worth Considering

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WATERBROOK  
P R E S S

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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-scamble 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.

# The Seating

“DINNER FOR ONE, sir?”

The maître d’s appearance from behind the wine bar dashed my option of bolting before anyone noticed me.

“Sir? Dinner for one?”

“No, I’m...I’m supposed to meet someone. I’m Nick Cominsky...”

“Ah, Mr. Cominsky. Right this way.”

He grabbed a menu and led me past the wood lattice that bordered the single dining room. The place hadn’t changed since I had brought Mattie for Valentine’s two years back. Two staggered tablecloths, one white and one red, covered each of the tables. Large mirrors created the image of a side dining area. The windows on two sides of the room overlooked the Ohio River. I could see lights from the Kentucky side reflecting on the water. The current provided nice background noise, like those ocean CDs you can buy to help

you sleep. Unfortunately, some lame Andrea Bocelli song that Mattie loved virtually drowned out the river.

Tuesdays looked slow at Milano's. Guests occupied only four tables. I inhaled the smell of toasted bread as we passed an older party of six laughing at a front table. A couple in their early twenties held hands and made goo-goo eyes at each other in the far right corner, the guy oblivious to his shirt sleeve dangling in his ravioli. In the middle of the room, two weight-challenged women giggled as they plunged into a monstrous chocolate torte. And in the far corner on the left, a thirty-something man in a blue business suit sat by himself, perusing a menu.

The *maitre d'* led me over to him. Rising from his chair, he stuck out his hand and firmly grasped mine.

"Nick Cominsky," he said. "Hi. Jesus."

In retrospect, a thousand comebacks were possible—"Jesus H. Christ! So good to finally meet you!"... "Are twelve of our party missing?"... "I didn't know they buried you in a suit."

The absurdity of the scene, though, stunned me into silence. What do you say to that? The man and I continued shaking hands a little too long, until I issued a weak "Uh-huh." He released my hand and sat back down.

My eyes caught the *maitre d's*. He quickly averted his

glance and picked my napkin off my plate, cueing me to sit. He placed the napkin in my lap, handed me a menu and, with an “Enjoy your dinner,” left me alone with...

“Thanks for meeting me,” the man started. “This probably wasn’t the most convenient time for you, middle of the week.”

We stared at each other. Well, I stared. He resumed looking at his menu. He had an average build and was a little shorter than me, maybe five foot ten or so. His complexion toned olive, his hair dark and wavy, cut short and combed forward. His bushy eyebrows (*Mattie would make me trim those*, I thought) hung over deep eye sockets and brown eyes dark enough that you couldn’t quite tell where the iris ended and the pupil began. His slender nose and thinnish lips matched a chin that receded slightly, as if knowing it couldn’t compete with the brows above. He wasn’t *GQ* cover material, but he definitely spent more time in the gym than I did. His suit wasn’t Armani, but it wasn’t Discount Warehouse, either.

He looked up and caught me scrutinizing him, but he didn’t seem the least bit uncomfortable. Since my eyes provided few clues as to what this whole thing was about, I decided to give my ears a shot.

“Excuse me, but am I supposed to know you?”

“That’s a good question,” he smiled, to himself I guess. “I would say the answer is yes.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never met you, as far as I can remember.”

“That’s true.”

I looked around the room, waiting for the guys to jump out from behind the lattice or maybe from the men’s room. But no one hid behind the lattice. As for the men’s room... I turned my attention to the guy across the table.

“Come at me again. You are...”

“Jesus. My family called me Yeshua.”

“Your family, from...”

“Nazareth.”

“Of course.”

“Well, I grew up there. I wasn’t born there.”

“No, of course not. That would have been in...”

“Bethlehem. But we didn’t stay long before we left for Egypt.”

That was about all I needed to hear. This guy was a nut. Without saying a word, I got up, retraced my steps past the lattice, took a right, and entered the bathroom. Mr. Ravioli was rinsing off his sleeve, but besides him, no one. Backing out, I momentarily considered cracking the door to the women’s room, but I wasn’t that desperate to find Les and Bill. I took

a left and peeked through the circular window to the kitchen. Nothing. I paused, scanned the restaurant, and, deciding this warranted a more direct approach, returned to the table.

“Look,” I said, sitting on the edge of my chair, “I’ve got better things to do tonight than have some mystery dinner with... Who are you really, and what’s going on here?” My question had an unintended edge. After all, the guy hadn’t done anything to me except meet for dinner.

“I know this isn’t quite what you expected. But I think if you give this evening a try, you’ll find it meaningful.”

“Of course!” I retorted. “Who wouldn’t find a dinner with Jesus meaningful? Last week I had dinner with Napoleon. Socrates the week before. But Jesus! Thank you so much for coming all the way from the Holy Land!” I realized my voice was carrying more than I wanted. The two women had turned our way.

He sat silently.

“Hey”—I rose again from my chair—“I need to get home to my wife and daughter. Thanks for the invitation.” I stuck out my hand in a conciliatory gesture.

“Mattie went out to a movie with Jill,” he said without flinching. “She got Rebecca to baby-sit Sara.”

Okay. Finally a few pieces were starting to fall into place. He knew my wife. He knew Jill Conklin, the wife of my best



friend, Chris. He knew our regular baby-sitter, Rebecca. He knew Mattie and Jill had gone to a movie. Once more I reclaimed my seat.

“Did Chris put you up to this?” I couldn’t imagine how Chris could be involved; it was way too weird for him.

“No, he didn’t.”

I returned to my original suspects. “Are you a friend of Bill Grier and Les Kassler?”

He slid his menu aside and leaned forward. “I’ll tell you what. If you stay for dinner, I promise to tell you at the end who set it up.”

The last time Bill and Les had done something like this, I ended up wearing fake cement overshoes and getting tossed into a swimming pool on Halloween. A heated pool, fortunately. Now I was having dinner with some guy claiming to be Jesus.

The waiter interrupted my thoughts, addressing the man across the table. “Have you selected a wine, sir?”

“I think I’ll let my friend decide,” he responded, turning to me. “Would you care for some wine?”

“Who’s paying?”

“I am.”

“Okay,” I replied, “sure.”

I opened the wine list and scanned thirty or so offerings, none of which I recognized. I was tempted to order the most

expensive one on the list, but instead I pointed to a midrange white. “We’ll take the Kalike.”

I handed the wine list to the waiter. He looked back at my host, who gave a slight nod.

“The Vermentino di Gallura–Kalike ’98,” the waiter confirmed to me. He departed, passing a busboy with a water pitcher. The busboy filled my glass first, then the other guy’s, eliciting a “Thank you, Carlo.”

We both picked up our water glasses and took a drink. I had to admit, this guy was good. Where did they find someone willing to play Jesus for an evening? And in such an unassuming way, as if he were just a normal guy. My co-workers had outdone themselves this time. But why? What was the point to all this? Les and Bill weren’t particularly religious. Bill went to Mass on Christmas and Easter, when his wife dragged him there. As for Les, he worshiped only at Western Hills Country Club.

Glancing back over at the pre-honeymooners, the mirror caught my eye. Could the restaurant have a two-way mirror? That seemed a little far-fetched, but no more so than the evening had been thus far.

Our waiter appeared behind me with a bottle of wine, opened it, and set the cork down for me. I picked it up and took a whiff. “Smells good.” I looked up at him, detecting a slight roll of his eyes.

He poured a small amount into my wineglass and handed it to me to taste. Mattie and I frequently had wine at home but not in this class. “Very nice.”

He poured me a full glass, then one across the table before leaving the bottle, prompting a “Thank you, Eduardo” this time. *Is he on a first-name basis with the entire wait staff? He must come here weekly.*

I was tempted to ask, but I had already decided on a different strategy. I leaned back in my chair and turned to “Jesus,” suppressing my customary sarcastic smile. “So your family called you Yeshua?”

“Most of them. James called me a few other things.”

“Well, Yesh— Do you mind if I call you Yesh?”

“Whatever suits you.”

“Yesh it is, then. Tell me,”—I held up my wineglass—  
“can you turn this wine back into water?”