

## The Dinner Plan

By A. C. Zito

“Do you all know why I asked you here today?” Martin looked at his guests expecting an answer. They all looked at him, quizzically. One woman began turning her head vigorously around as she studied the other guests that stood beside her.

“What’s going on?” she blurted out, “Raymond? Molly? Suzy? You all weren’t invited to this!” The three looked back at the woman, showing faces just as confused as she was.

“Martin,” Raymond, the only other man in the room, let this out with a *humph*. “We were supposed to have a date for just the *two* of us! You didn’t say it was going to be a *double date!* And Margaret’s *your maid?*” Margaret didn’t look at all pleased to be called the help, and Molly and Suzy didn’t seem all too excited to be referred to as: *the other couple* on this awfully strange double date Raymond seemed to have imagined in his mind to be the case. Come to think of it, Martin thought *none* of his guests looked to be *at all* happy that they weren’t the *only* person he had invited. He had actually invited six guests in all. That was when he first planned the dinner party all those nights ago.

*That’s how many people I always invite* he thought to himself. Well, at least from the last two dinners that’s what he had done. But tonight showed to be the first time that only four showed up instead of his usual three men, three women routine.

“Where’s Bradley? And Raj? I invited them as well, but I don’t seem to see them anywhere at all in this *awfully* dusty place I call a home.” He examined his fingernails, seeing specks of red that he had been having trouble removing.

They all stood in a dining hall that only seated seven people. No more, no less. The silverware was all laid out and the plates along with them. Each person had a wine glass to accompany their meal. Everything was arranged ever so precisely. Even the embroidered cloth that was folded ever so perfectly looked in balance with the fine China it was laid upon.

“I suppose we’ll have to start without them.” turning to the dark-haired woman to the left of him, “Margaret, go fetch our dinner for us.” The other guests looked at him, confused, but Martin decided he would let that pass for now. If they wanted him to like him then they would have to earn what they had coming instead of just standing there and looking stupid. He then chuckled, nonetheless, at his silly joke that was lined up so perfectly due to Raymond’s earlier remark.

At that moment, Raj and Bradley entered the dining hall. Martin’s maid quickly shut the door behind them. Martin looked at Raymond as she left. “Look everyone,” Martin stated in a dreary monotone of a voice. He was beginning to feel droll standing there and was ready to get things moving. “The rest of our guests have made it.” Directing his attention to the two stragglers, “You’re late.” They shrugged their shoulders and went ahead in seating themselves before Martin could motion to the rest of the group to do the same. But everyone quickly followed in their example.

*Good thought Martin, They're ready*

Martin took his seat as head of the table. He looked down upon his table of guests. They looked famished.

*Good Martin thought again, let them stay famished*

As Martin curled his fingers into a conniving web of unsolicited glee, the first guest's meal had finally arrived. Martin watched as his butler placed the many dishes in front of the first contestant.

"*Awh*, the first contestant," Martin whispered. No one heard him; no one but the butler. The butler was used to it by now. What lay in front of Bradley consisted of a various assortment of intriguing dishes that even left Martin mouthwatering. And that didn't happen much of late.

The various dishes included a bowl put upon the side with certain husks of corn. They were especially plucked for the young lad. The potatoes, mashed. And to a pulverized plump of glistening, buttery, creamy goodness; the other guests couldn't help but sniff their little noses over towards the dish with delight. It had steam rising from it, alongside the corn, forming a cloud of warm, fluffy goodness. And it looked delectable, nonetheless. But what horrified the young Bradley as he looked down at what the strange, creepy butler lay in front of him was what happened to be raw lard and mutton lying out in one great mound of an utterly gruesome pile; flies swarmed in every which direction around it. It didn't look anything like what a fine gentleman dressed in his finest of occasions would have received from his loving and caring hospitality. A hospitality with such wealth; a hospitality with such prosperity and indulgence; a mansion with six acres here for all of Longington Halls to gaze upon; another on Star Dine Drive right beside the beach where the ocean met the shores on all sides; and last but not least, his mountain house. It was of an exquisite size taking up half of Mount Firelong.

Bradley was probably wondering if the other two of Sir Maximillian Martin's mansions were six acres as well.

*Why would you wonder that?* Bradley asked himself. He didn't understand. Bradley looked up at Martin with questioning eyes at his mutton and lard. Martin was only able to perk up with a tiny flicker of a smile before waving his hand up.

*Summoning the butler?* Bradley wondered. No, no; no, he wasn't. His hand was waving for something else.

"Bradley!" Raymond yelled out, feeling hysteric. He stuttered out something incoherent under his breath. His breath; his breath; it felt colder against his lips. Like the fire in the great hall had went out, suddenly. And plus, he could see it too. He didn't see it before. It had always felt warm and cozy once he had first stepped into the mansion. It was certainly a blessing when he and Raj were in the main room with the chimney fire roaring. The massive bear that was slain, now a rug, was brushing up dreamily against his naked toes; and there he was, Raymond thought, bewildered. Bradley sat in front of his group of friends, once again and his remanence, gone from his mind. But... it wasn't the same Bradley that sat in front of them from before. No, this Bradley was now *wearing* the bear rug he had

brushed his warm, plump toes upon earlier that evening. It was dirtier, now; grimier. A nasty piece of a thing turned into a muddy rag that barely covered the ravaged flesh of the Bradley he once knew. Now, he didn't seem to know this man at all. This man... this man; it wasn't, *couldn't* be Bradley? Bradley was someone who liked the finer things in life. Who was always dressed to impress. He had an air of sophistication about him. Now; now, he was a man that looked like he spent most of his days smelling his own feces. He was covered with disgusting grime that left the room smelling like an awfully dead carcass had somehow been dragged into the room when no one was paying any attention.

*Clap, clap*

"Alright," Martin exclaimed. "Get him out of here! I can't take the smell any longer." And just like that, Bradley vanished. The room was silent. None of the women had said a word except Molly to Raj about his nice sweater since they had sat at the table, and Raj had finally finished his story to Raymond about his trip to Paris, not realizing what all had just occurred to his beloved friend. But Raj was now getting the whiffs of Bradley that still hung in the air. His fingers trembled in horror as he moved them ever so frantically over the lower lips of his mouth while he now gazed over upon the vacant seat of what was all that was left of his fellow colleague.

*Now, no one talks but me!* thought Martin to himself. His smile now glowered with malice. By the end of this, he would have every one of these...

*SMACK!* Martin fell to the ground. The butler stood over him, breathing heavily, with the broken shards of wood still clinging in his hands.

"Now run," he whispered. The look on the frightened butler shook every one of the frozen guests to the core as they looked down in horror at their esteemed host... the very elegant, the world-renowned... Sir Maximilian Martin.