

Table for Five

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A One Act Play

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Table for Five

Four friends gather for Thanksgiving Dinner, waiting on a fifth. Donald Trump has been President less than two years. Though these people live in various parts of Los Angeles, they are all well-to-do, with lifestyles to reflect that. But something is different from last Thanksgiving. For this group, who have long-supported the arts, the election cycle and the election of 2016 have frayed and unravelled long-held camaraderies and long-standing marriages. This is not like what happened to conservatives when Obama was elected—conservatives expect things to go wrong—they expect factual loses. This is different. What began when unexplored and emotionally-driven agendas ripped through to the surface on election night, laid bare the stuff of exorcism and panic in these good folks.

Martha and George, the dinner hosts, may or may not recognize that they share the first names of the *first family of the United States*—and bear the same names as Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe*. The second couple, Merimee and Prosper, for the first years they were together, were unaware that their names, taken together, are that of a French writer, famous for a short story in which a father shoots his son for betraying someone to the authorities. These five people (actually six), the characters of this play, would have done well to have watched, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?*—before they married, and after. As should the rest of us. Virginia Wolfe—did her parents see the implications of combining virginity with a wolf in the naming of their child?

CAST OF CHARACTERS

George—who, with his wife Martha, own the house where Thanksgiving dinner is taking place. George is 60 years old. He has been married to Martha more than thirty-five years.

Martha—co-hosts the dinner and is married to George. Though she would never admit to it, Martha is 60.

Merimee—though she doesn't work as such, wherever help is needed, Merimee is nearby—be it a refugee camp in Greece or hucking another bucket of nails for Jimmy Carter at a habitat build. Merimee is married to Prosper. Merimee is 60.

Prosper—is an economist, and a damn fine one. He's also a Rus-sophile (one who loves the study of Russia). For years, Prosper was a likely face on Sunday new shows having to do with Russia. But now he is no longer welcomed or sought after. Prosper is married to Merimee. Prosper is 61.

Anne—for the first time (by choice) in twenty years, is attending Thanksgiving dinner alone. Her marriage is collapsing beneath her, leaving her bewildered and unable to find her way. Anne is married to Moss. Anne is 54.

Moss—is not attending the dinner, but, because of a dozen titles of fiction he's written—he is always present in conversation. For the past two decades, Moss generally had a book on the NYT best seller list. Moss is married to Anne. Moss is 55.

ACT ONE

GEORGE

He's not coming. He and Anne are at odds.

MARTHA

Twenty Thanksgivings and this is the first no show.

GEORGE

No, there was the one he missed, love, when he was first published. I think he was in New York at a book fair.

MARTHA

I remember. She was sad to be without him.

GEORGE

Yeah, that was before all this. They were in love, or at least they thought they were in love.

MERIMEE

What's the 'all this'? Are you talking about what I think you're talking about?

MARTHA

George and I don't talk politics, Merimee. For us, it's divisive and scary. We don't see Anne and Moss as often as we used to. I talk with her on the phone—maybe see her every few months. We've

gotten more into the arts. We don't spend our time talking about our relationship or about the world. It's unsettling.

MERIMEE

I guess that's one way to do it. Prosper's alienated a bunch of people this past couple of years, but most of them needed alienating. In the lead-up to the election, I didn't support his views, but we've been through some tough talks since then, and it's gotten better.

MARTHA

Merimee's comments might bring on active discussion, but Martha deflects them as would an Aikido master.

Anne said she'd be late. We need some wine. I have a good red and a good white—and we have what you brought. Honey, will you do the honors? What would you two like? And dear, would you bring the cheese platter from the fridge. What am I saying? I'll get it.

George waves her off and goes into the kitchen, which, in the open floor plan of the house, is directly adjacent the table that is set for five, and is partially visible from the kitchen. It being winter—though Los Angeles doesn't really have a winter, there is a fine fire glowing nicely in an expensive, round, steel stove, with a curved viewing window.

George and I, and you two, are the fortunate ones.

A chagrined look on Martha's face betrays that she changed the subject only to find that she's brought it up again.

George comes back in with a wondrous cheese plate—on a Lu-Ray serving platter from the 50's (when only the four pastel colors were

offered. This one is the 'surf green'). George goes back into the kitchen.

PROSPER

We shall'n't talk about them, but that doesn't mean we're on mute. In the lead-up to the election and the election itself, I don't know anyone who wasn't affected, or any couple that didn't scrutinize one another. Everything was up for grabs: men's treatment of women, political correctness. I saw the whole thing as a matter of style or lack of style, rather than substance.

GEORGE

Prosper, we see you being like Moss, deep into the big picture. Now you and Mer are seeing it the same way, but we know other couples that woke up not knowing who they were married to.

MERIMEE

When Trump was elected, my friends blamed Prosper, who hadn't vote for either of them. Under a deluge from my friends on the left, I thought I was married to somebody from the *Alt Right*.

MARTHA

Who would have guessed you'd find yourself at such odds with somebody you're married to? That, or finding yourself going against your whole community for the sake of your mate...

MERIMEE

There were a couple of months there when I thought we were done. Like waking up in a world of pointing fingers. As long as Hillary was a shoe-in, Prosper could give her hell because he was seen as some kind of amusement. But after election night...

GEORGE

I sometimes go back and watch election night on YouTube. It's amazing to see the networks staffed by *walking* dead—who just couldn't or wouldn't understand what was happening.

MARTHA

Honey, you watch that stuff? I thought we agreed to steer away from that sort of thing?

GEORGE

We don't talk about politics, love, but I'm not dead. I think about it and that night tells it better than any single thing. That night infected each of us.

MARTHA

You mean *affected*, dear.

GEORGE

No, Martha, I mean infected. It's as if some Biblical plague drifted over us that night and sprinkled tiny droplets that found their way into each of us—with differing symptoms, but no one was immune.

PROSPER

That night told me one thing: the *left* had to change or die. And they decided to die. They dug in. Instead of admitting they lost because they didn't stand for anything—they grabbed on with both hands and continued with the bullshit.

MARTHA

That's just not true, Prosper. The democrats stand for diversity and respect for various groups.

Prosper shakes his head, agreeing with himself.

Enough of this! What else is going on? Any trips planned? Any new series on HBO or Netflix? The series are so much better than the movies these days.

These are people (except for Prosper) who each could name fifteen characters from Downton Abbey.

PROSPER

The series are better than the movies—but last night we watched, what was it Mer? *Born To Be Blue*? Bio-drama on the trumpeter, Chet Baker. In black and white.

Everyone here, besides Prosper, and including Merimee, saw the movie when it first came out, and loved it. These people have films at the center of their universe.

Prosper catches the drift that in this group he spends too much time chasing economic overviews.

MARTHA

You've never been big on films and series, Prosper. I don't remember you once watching the Oscars with us.

PROSPER

That's because the Oscars are nonsense, which doesn't take away from Hawke's portrayal of Baker. Then again we're force-fed

movies like *Zero Dark Thirty*, which was nothing more than Obama reading from a teleprompter, in dramatic form. If you buy that kind of establishment propaganda you'd miss that every episode of *Homeland* is poking the Russian bear with a sharp stick.

MARTHA

Prosper, each of us deals with what's going on in the world in our own way, and some of us don't want to think or talk about it. We choose pleasant things to focus on—things we can all agree on. And we don't come to a Thanksgiving dinner to belittle everything and everybody.

MERIMEE

If only that were true, Martha. You don't want to talk about it—well at least not in person, but you and I are friends on Facebook, and though I don't comment I see your political posts almost every day. At first I thought it was all about compassion, and maybe it is, but the longer it goes on, the more I see someone with fixed opinions...

MARTHA

That's so unfair, Merimee. Most everybody has the same opinion about Trump that I do, and Facebook is where I find support for what I think.

MERIMEE

I suppose, but of those hundreds of friends you probably have on Facebook, I haven't seen one comment that questions what you post.

Martha has downed a glass of red wine and is into a second.

MARTHA

I didn't know that what I support bothers you. I'll make sure we remain Facebook friends but you don't get the posts.

MERIMEE

You've already done that, Martha. It's more than a year since we've really talked about anything.

MARTHA

And you know why it is? Because you changed. We used to be able to talk about everything, then you changed. I couldn't even call you without feeling I was being held under a light—me, and whatever I was thinking!

MERIMEE

That's not what happened, Martha. I was trying to save my marriage, and in the end I was unwilling to trade Prosper for whatever Rachael Maddow was going on about. I needed to ask hard questions, and like George, I went back to election night, where everybody was stupefied to the point they couldn't even post the returns. It wasn't journalism; it was a herd of buffaloes driven over a cliff to their death.

MARTHA

Martha continues with the red wine on an empty stomach (and the reason Jordan Peterson refers to the dark side of women as 'chaos' is becoming evident as her measured cadence slips into a staggered staccato of inebriation).

Things were fine! We had Obama! We had Hillary! Sure, she's not perfect but she's a woman and she would have carried on in Obama's legacy...

MERIMEE

Martha, Obama hated Hillary. He only cared about his legacy, and for that he needed Americans to forget about his personal drone war and his signing off on Hillary's personal destruction of Libya—and having corporations write trade deals where they control and decide everything. Those two, neither of them were in it for the little guy. Obama was like a blind king, thin skinned, and when it didn't go his way, he'd sulk, or take selfies. A golden voice attached to a really stupid man. Trump won because people hoped he would turn out to be a one-eyed man.

MARTHA

We had eight years where things went along—without all this strife. Eight years where we had parties and went to movies. Our stocks went up and our homes were worth more every month...

PROSPER

Yeah, meanwhile Obama was heaping debt on our kids, and telling us it would work out. But was all a lie, Martha—lies from people who came as public servants and left rich. Along the way they saw themselves and their FBI buddies as above the law—the anointed ones who could lie and connive because they knew better than us.

MARTHA

You have your opinion. I have my opinion. It's not that big a deal.

MERIMEE

No Martha, it's a deal breaker that's tearing apart families and friendships. It's tough discussions that need to happen—and don't. Instead, you watch Anderson Cooper roll up his sleeves and say nothing for an hour because one real question would end his career.

MARTHA

This is classic. My friends are right. This is letting Donald Trump off the hook by attacking the liberals. You've been gotten to by the Russians...

MERIMEE

Martha, do you look for real facts—I don't think you do—I don't think you can. You pulled back with George into the golden couple, where I never hear a *me*, it's always *we*—like some insecure, newly married couple using their relationship as an island to protect themselves from a hostile world.

George has migrated back, listening, from the kitchen to the living room. At the same moment Martha gives Merimee a baleful look, beautiful Anne, in a simple white dress and multicolored flats, adorned only with a black scarf around her neck, draped behind, comes through the front door and into the dining room. Anne is so beautiful that everyone who hasn't been there for the whole ride assumes Moss got her because he's a famous writer, but no, those two walked away from high school, hand in hand, as they had each day since the tenth grade.

Anne surveys the scene and, without asking if anyone is using the unoccupied armchair, sits down.

ANNE

I hope no one minds if I greet you all, sitting down? It's been a long day.

PROSPER

How are you, Anne?

ANNE

How am I? I'm bad. How are you, Prosper? How are you, Martha? How are you, Merimee? (*and to George who Anne can see in the kitchen*) How are you, George?

MERIMEE

I'm happy you came. How am I? Better than I was some months back.

MARTHA

Let's not get into this. It's Thanksgiving. Let's just enjoy each other.

ANNE

I can't do that, Martha. I don't have anything I'm thankful for. I want to know how it is that you are doing better, Merimee? Six months ago I would have given you and Prosper five months to live.

MERIMEE

We did—it was do or die, and I had to do what I didn't want to do, or we would have been done.

ANNE

I'm already done—I would rather *do*, but I don't see anything to *do*. Moss and I can't talk about anything and my friends who not that long ago were honored to be Moss's friends see him as the problem. And he just goes about his business as if nothing's changed. At book signings, most of which he's not even invited to anymore, he takes people on. He reminds me of you, Prosper, except everybody knows him, and that means they know me too!

PROSPER

It's curious Anne, that each of you ladies tonight brought up that unnamed group we used to refer to as *the silent majority*, that remind me of the *Village of the Damned*, where young people would turn in unison, like a school of fish, to stare down and condemn someone. When I talked to Moss today, he'd been on Apple Music looking for Patsy Cline—where maybe a dozen songs came up, though she had a hundred hits. So I typed in *Crazy* and I got: 'We didn't turn up anything for *Crazy*. Try something else.' Instead they offered suggested playlists and a suggestion *to follow people you know—browse what they're playing*. Worse than that, songs in Moss's own library, once they get to iCloud, if those songs are not available on Apple Music, they can no longer be played. His own songs, loaded onto his computer from his own CD's, cease to exist. What he's saying Anne, is that *we* live in a world where *we* no longer matter and, if you don't function within the established norms, the culture wants to know if it should—enable dictation—because you seem unable convey something acceptable .

ANNE

All I know is that neither of us cared less about politics, and now my relationship is ruined.

PROSPER

Not Moss, Anne—you. Moss's books are peppered with politics and economic theory. The world's changed and you need to wake up to it, or should I say, in it, but like so many emotionally-driven women, you find yourself unable to sort...

MARTHA

What the hell, Prosper?

PROSPER

Let me tell you what the hell, Martha. You and I have been close for what—three decades? But all this—*Me and George are into the arts*, is an ultimatum that George either stops thinking...

GEORGE

I don't need you speaking for me, Prosper.

PROSPER

...to the point that when he says he watched replays of election coverage on YouTube—you do the censure bit: 'Honey, I didn't know you did that.' Somebody better speak for you George because I haven't heard one cogent comment from you in a year. Remember back when we were into Elia Kazan and we read "The Arrangement" and then went to the film. Remember Florence and what's his name—the *golden couple*—together they did every artsy thing imaginable to keep him from talking about how miserable he was. That's you George, and that's you two—our golden couple.

MARTHA

That's enough, Prosper! This is Thanksgiving, and I'm not hearing a shred of goodwill...

PROSPER

Let me suggest to you, Martha, what occasion this really is. Four of the five of us are Jews—five if you count Moss. What I'm thinking about is the 1930's in Poland, when, in not too subtle increments, the Jews found themselves rounded up and herded into the Warsaw Ghetto, where the optimists among them assumed they would be re-located, as if they were American Indians, to reservations. So, until that time, instead of fighting for their lives, they sat about discussing the arts, when in fact every one of them had one and only one destination—Auschwitz.

MARTHA

That's so over the top, George. And it's insulting (Martha is the only non-Jew at the dinner). The truth is that you and Moss have always been rabble-rousers, and now you finally have center stage to be the consummate outsiders. There's no one here who doesn't know you've always been that way.

PROSPER

I think your forgetting, Martha, that you're hiding in the arts because it's the left that are now the outsiders, who are unable to deal with their loss. And, in the midst of hot yoga, you have huge emotionally-driven opinions about identity politics and how bad the Russians are. People tell me, Martha. It's not as if you're home modeling clay. You're at home hiding, except for the endless links on Facebook.

MARTHA

What I post on Facebook is none of your business, Prosper!

Guffaws. Martha looks to Anne and then to George—aghast.

MERIMEE

Martha, Facebook is the social network.

MARTHA

Not for long it's not—not after tonight, Prosper won't be able to attack me for what I do on Facebook.

MERIMEE

What time will dinner be ready, George?

George backtracks to the kitchen.

GEORGE

Maybe twenty minutes. I checked the turkey and it's not quite brown enough for how I like it.

This is not said with ease—George is upset.

MERIMEE

I like the way you do the bird, George. It's something I look forward to.

GEORGE

Thanks, Mer. I like cooking, but still I don't get why Prosper can't just let us be. So what if Martha posts. She's entitled to her opinion. He isn't required to read it...

PROSPER

It's not that, George. Facebook and YouTube are cults where people get dropped for simply asking hard questions. I can no longer make a living at what I do because I won't go along with the clap-trap—and it's the millions of Marthas, who allow that to happen.

MARTHA

Great! Have at it! All of you! Let me tell you—the kinds of people who go along with what you and Moss think, are like when you get a look from some frumpy, old man. You disregard it.

It's been a long time since Martha got a look

It's because she was a women—that's why she lost! She was attacked by people like you and Moss. Oh yeah, I read his last book. Fiction—right! It might as well have been called why I hate Hillary. And Merimee, sweet Merimee has now crossed over—to save her marriage with a Russian lover and woman hater. And now George...

She gives her husband a twisted drunken smile.

George is the final nail in the coffin. I knew he wouldn't be able to go the course. I knew in the end he'd herd along with his friends. I knew it. Anne's the only one who won't go to sleep so that the *body snatchers* can take her soul. Anne sees it and she won't go along.

ANNE

You don't want George speaking for you, Martha, and I don't want you speaking for me. And I hope you don't drink to the point you regret it in the morning.

MARTHA

I'm the one under attack here and I'll say what the hell I please!

she looks at George

I thought if I could get him away from you all, if we could just continue on the way we had...

ANNE

Anne yells

Stop it Martha! You're being an idiot! Moss and I may be done but we're not going to go down in drunken name-calling.

MARTHA

through angry tears

You don't think I tried—you don't think I tried. You think I wanted this. You don't think I'd give everything to go back to the way it was?

ANNE

There's no going back, Martha. There's no back to go to... and I don't think a donation or a dinner at the Guggenheim is going to fix this, or even cover it over.

MERIMEE

Anne, you said because they all know Moss, they know you too. Does it matter that they know you too? If they are all wrong and Moss is right, do they win you over by numbers? If you had to choose, who's right, them or Moss?

ANNE

It's not that simple. You should see him at these signings—there's no give in Moss. Somebody says something and he just goes off... It's horrible!

MERIMEE

Does he start it, Anne. Or do they go after him?

Martha blurts in

MARTHA

Does he start it? He doesn't have to because he's been going after them forever. They've had it up to here with him. They read his books and what did it get them—Hitler for a president. I blame Moss!

ANNE

Anne pays no attention to Martha as Martha pours another wine.

He doesn't start it, but sometimes I think he needs medical help.

MERIMEE

Anne, think about how it feels like to be Moss? He's devoted his life to what he does. When Prosper talks about the Jews and the ghetto, he's not kidding, People like Moss have been ostracized

from their professions and from society. What comes next, Anne? And nothing's different except Trump is president. Moss and Prosper didn't vote for Trump—but there are many out there who still would like to silence their voices—permanently.

MARTHA

That's it, I'm done. No more Thanksgivings, no more. *she looks at George* No more nothing.

ANNE

Martha, what I see coming from you is nothing but undigested psychology.

Anne turns back to Merimee

And though I feel badly for Moss, I can't do anything about it.

GEORGE

That's because you're a coward, Anne. You're like Martha and me. You were always the pretty one who had everything laid out for her. It was easy for you. But this isn't about pretty or easy. This is about some fucking courage to fight for what you love. You're worse, Anne—even than me—at least I tried to do something to save Martha and me—even if what we have isn't worth saving.

The room is in pause, much like the networks on election night. Except for Martha who retreats into the kitchen, and soon comes back out with a huge carving knife in her hand.

She's other worldly, demonic. Her eyes are clear and the wine slur is gone.

MARTHA

I see what you're doing—don't think I don't. It's you that makes me get up because I can't sleep and walk the halls with this knife, in tears, because sometime I'll have to go into that bedroom and deal with George and me. And I know you want it to be me because I've always been the odd one out...

MERIMEE

Martha, nobody here wants harm to come to you or George. It's just some hard times we've been going through, but we'll get through it...

Martha cuts her off, swishing the blade back and forth like Sergeant Garcia making the sign of Zorro.

MARTHA

Merimee, you're worse than the rest of them. You're the one who made fun of my bunions. Remember that?

Everything turns to consternation when she lunges past George and goes for Merimee. George, anticipating her, sweep kicks her legs out from under her as she lunges past. She lays on her back, undeterred, swinging the knife wildly and screaming, until George steps on her wrist and Prosper subdues her.

MERIMEE

I'll call the police!

GEORGE

No. 911. Tell them a woman has taken ill and we need an ambulance.

In the time before the paramedics arrive. George has taken the knife into the kitchen, washed it, and put it away. Martha has gone from threats and screams to uncontrollable sobbing. When they arrive, George asks the paramedics to restrain her because she is capable of doing herself harm. George goes into the ambulance and leaves with Martha.

Three friends sit in the living room and for a time no one speaks.

MERIMEE

I don't get why she came after me. It was years ago that I made a little joke about her bunions. Tonight George said what they had wasn't worth saving, and she came after me.

PROSPER

It was you who she'd been talking to, Mer. You were the unlucky choice...

ANNE

No. It's because you're a woman, Mer—and you fought for your marriage, something she couldn't do. Either she killed you or she killed herself. There was nothing left to do.

fade to black.

