

Indeed, had I known what it would be like, I think I would have done things a little differently. Seeing poor Mother quite beside herself with grief—I suppose I should not have done this, I her brilliant, I her highly educated, carefully raised, albeit a bit like a hothouse plant, son. I, Oscar, after my maternal grandfather, who also chose my way of making a grand-not-entrance-into-but-exit-from this vale of tears. I should not have given in to despair— if I were more honest, I should have to say that I should not have given in to a fugue state. No, that's not right, a toccata of ratcheting rage. The fugue was merely the release—da-da-da-da-dada-da da—then an incongruous "voluntary."

Giggle. (Mental snicker, of course, as I can hardly give voice to my amusement gotten up like this.) Not this, but the feast I had prepared for all my friends was the momentous one: several racks of lamb, rare and seasoned with rosemary, stuck with garlic cloves, given a slight dusting of cinnamon and turmeric. Duck confit. Squab wrapped in grape leaves, seasoned with sage, drizzled with grenadine. The crowning glory, goose—Wafna!, as *Carmina Burana's* chorus goes—crisp skin, never greasy, achieved with generous pokings and baptisms of a good French burgundy. We had mountains of greens, baby onions, caramelized sprouts, saffron rice with currents, carrots and parsnips in butter and dill. Lovely olive bread twisted into knotted rolls. Wine for every course.

Flaming puddings. Perfect pears. Ah, now that was a meal!

I wore my best suit, a white silk scarf draped carefully around my neck. I had cut my hair for the occasion and besides the invitations, even printed out the menu, the courses and the course of events, right down to a

"Grand Finale & Denouement.....Final Toast"

I suppose it was a bit mean, though, as no one had the slightest idea what that meant, except that I noted it would be accompanied by chocolates and a lovely Hungarian dessert wine that I had been saving for just such a special occasion.

Having then taken my special "aperitif" just before the guests arrived, I knew that the drowsiness I felt as I stood up and raised my glass for that denouement presaged an irrevocable sleep. "My dear Friends," I began and launched into my ultimate tirade. I carefully explained that I would be leaving them, but before I went, I had some things I had been wanting to say for a long, long time. I turned to Eusie, my best and dearest friend:

—To you I entrust the job of overseeing my Mother when I am gone— I handed him an envelope in which I had enclosed a long and loving letter I had written to my dear Mater before the meal— Simply make sure that she is comfortable and well and doesn't tittle too much. Get rid of that damn bloodsucker of a maid she has and find someone new; don't let her run through too much money—

—Oscar-r-r-r-r, how long will you be gone?

—Stop trilling the 'r's in my name—you know how I hate that.

Besides, I know you don't think so, Old Man, but your Spanish has always been wretched! (I'll get to the details in a minute.) I turned to my next closest friend—

Denis, for years we have known each other but I have always wanted to tell you that, though you have been in some ways quite socially generous, you are one of the most miserly, mean-spirited men on earth...

And I went around the room, which was now sepulchrally silent, naming friends and telling each one precisely what I thought their strengths and characterological weaknesses were: Maude and her friend, Daisy, had spread malicious gossip about me only five years ago: Harold had deliberately cut me out of important social occasions; Dean, when I was a fledgling journalist, had gone behind my back to take the art column away from me; Jane filched a silver spoon from my kitchen (at least, she had never, ever, returned it); and Charles had forgotten to feed the cat for a whole day when I was away on vacation. Madelene had yelled at me, then, because *I* had neglected my cat; she, in fact, I said, had the patience of dog in heat. Hugh and his third wife who was not there, thank goodness, Hugh had terrible taste in wives, second only to his egregious failure to take responsibility for the character of his child when, upon its only visit to my house, it had pulled my beloved's tail and reached in and not only taken the goldfish out of its bowl, but *swallowed* it whole—That child is a *monster*, Hugh, I said. Only Eusie was spared but for that one earlier, milder reprimand; for, after all, I had entrusted my dear mother to his supervision.

No one around the table seemed to have the wherewithal to respond, and so I turned, finally, to Father Jack— Father Jack, I said. Father Jack while you are brilliant, fun at a party, and debonair, you are morally reprehensible and a discredit to the priesthood. You—

—Hold on. Father Jack bristled. —How dare you call all of us, your friends over all these years, together and then abuse us? "Judge not, lest ye be judged, Oscar." And he stood up, immaculate in his collar and clerical black and, with his belly bulge, looking not unlike a penguin, he dropped my good linen napkin on his dirty plate and turned to leave the room.

I realized that people were stirring and would leave soon if I did not hurry up with my final toast. —Friends, friends, please sit down. My intention is only to be honest. My health has been failing, you know that; and I do so hate pain. You must know that just before this meal, I took a slow-acting poison and shortly after the last of you leave, I shall be no more. There is no antidote.

Even Father Jack stopped in mid-escape., He whirled around— Sinner! You're playing God, Oscar. You do not have the right! Only God can decide when your hour has come.

—And YOU? Father Jack-Off? I replied. Just like a priest to mind *my* business. I could feel myself fading. —I'm on my way out. And I lifted my glass of special Hungarian dessert wine. —Hear, hear! I don't have to put up with you any more!

The voices of my friends all murmuring in dismay (that will fix them!)—Go ahead, feel guilty!—became a buzz which turned into a loud sound of fluttering, as if a thousand hummingbirds were hovering in the air, amplified, and lights came on and the most comforting feeling,, brilliant, warm lights glowing, as if from a bank of candles that had been all lit at once, orgasmic release from this weary old body of mine as if I were being bounced from one side to another of a channel of some sort, I fell down, so slowly and easily I went down, down, down, and I could see the

candle flames going higher, higher, and I remember as I passed through a ring of cool fire, cool as though it were the false flames of an electric heater made to look like a hearth, a ring of cool fire—I remember thinking why all the fuss as there was really nothing to fear...

As I drifted away, like a helium balloon let loose from the grip of a child, I thought I heard some among them say— Just like Oscar. I bet he's just dead drunk, as usual!

Fools.

But now I am forced to witness—from afar, as it were—my own g.d. funeral, a gauche affair with an *electric* organ playing, of all things, "Steal away, steal away, ste-e-e-eal away to—ooo Je-ee-sus." Then, even worse, Sinatra's "My Way!"

Tacky. Just too tacky. Where was Eusie when they planned all this?