Command Performance

Robert H. Harvey*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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JOE THOMAS spears at a chunk of boiled carrot on his plate. The carrot skids sideways, caroms off the slice of liver and and bounces off the plate into his lap. He flips the edge of his napkin over it and glances nervously around the dining room of the fraternity. No one else seems to have noticed, thank God. Of course, in the candlelight it’s hard to tell whether they did or not. It’s even hard to tell where the food is.

The table looks nice, though, he thinks. Have to admit that. The white tablecloth shining softly in the light from the row of tall red candles spaced in military precision down the center. At intervals silver trays holding groups of small varicolored candles arranged in the form of flowers. Most of these had gone out earlier in the evening.

Joe takes a bite of bread, glancing up hurriedly as the man across the table says something. He doesn’t catch what it was, but he smiles broadly and hopes that will be enough. What was that guy’s name, anyway? He can’t remember. He’s met so many during the few minutes before dinner. Jump up, shake hands, sit down, jump up, shake hands, sit down. “Hello, I’m very glad to meet you. What did you say your name was? Oh yes. What are you majoring in? Where are you from? No, I’m afraid I never heard of it. Yes, it certainly is cold. Oh, bound to be cold this time of year—usually is.” Granted that frat men are gifted at carrying on conversations, did they all have to carry on the same one?

Why was he here, anyway? He didn’t want to join a frat. He’s been saying it ever since he’s been in college. “Too expensive. Undemocratic. Lot of nonsense,” he’s said. Yet they’d invited him and he came. “Come to dinner tonight,” they said. “We like to have a few men in toward the end of the quarter, you know.” So he came. But why? Because fraternities were traditionally gay lovable groups bubbling over with good fellowship and brotherhood which he wanted to share? Possibly. He remembers last week when he called to break the first invitation they gave him. A thin, correct icicle of a voice had answered. “Good afternoon. Who? Who is calling? Joe who? What—oh, you’ve been invited to dinner. . . .” The icicle melted into spark-
Sketch

ling warmth. "Why yes, Joe. Yes of course, Joe. You can’t? Oh, that’s too bad, Joe. We certainly have."

Joe traps the last bite of liver against the side of his plate and leans back to wait for the table to be cleared. He avoids looking at the man across from him. No use launching another discussion on the weather. The man has other ideas. He leans forward, rumbles a time or two in his throat, and says, "Uh—I see you’ve got a Legion button on, Joe. Uh—guess that means you were in the service, huh?"

"Guess so," Joe answers.
"Uh-yes. What were you in, Joe?"
"I was in the Army."
"Oh? I’m Navy, myself." The man sitting beside Joe suddenly comes to life. "I was in the Navy, too," he says proudly.
"Oh?" Joe is polite.
"Yeah. You weren’t, huh?"
"No, I was in the Army."
"Oh."

By leaning forward and squinting just a little, Joe finds he can see the outlines of the house-mother looming vaguely around the end candle. What do they call her? Mother Harper? He recalls the introduction earlier in the evening. The brother who’d acted as guide or master-of-ceremonies, had led him up and in the tone of one bringing Christ to the nation, had said, "And this, Joe, this is our Mother Harper." Mother Harper’s frozen, dough-like face had splintered momentarily into a smile aimed at his left shoulder; then she had reformed her face and turned away to bestow her bounty on another guest.

The waiters aren’t finished clearing the table yet, and Joe settles back to wait. Suddenly a man two chairs down from him takes a deep gasping breath and begins to sing. Others in the room join in. The song ends after fifteen verses, and another one is begun immediately. Joe sits in shocked bewilderment. Damned if he’d ever join a frat where he had to sing for his supper. Enough is enough. He would explain it to them kindly but firmly when they ask him to join. If they do ask him to join. But of course they would ask him. Why else had they invited him? But—supposing they didn’t. Supposing they didn’t even give him a chance to refuse—how would he feel then?

He smiles suddenly at the man across the table. "Uh-nice singing," Joe says eagerly, "I am enjoying it a lot—I really am."

—Robert H. Harvey, FO Jr.