

Groundnut Stew

The Persons of the Play

Thalia, unemployed.

Pstephani, formerly Stephanie.

Cleander, geochemist.

Humphrey, husband to Cleander, host of the dinner party.

Anastasia, allergic to peanuts.

Howitzer, clairvoyant detective

Giuseppe, Anastasia's fiancée.

Sebastian, a pizza delivery boy.

Scene I: Humphrey and Cleander's living room/dining room. There is a front door, a door to the kitchen, and a door to the hallway.

[Cleander, Pstephani, Thalia, Anastasia in the living room, enjoying cocktails.]

Thalia

You know that whole thing about goldfish and their three second memory? [downs her cocktail] Total garbage. It's a lie. Goldfish have surprisingly good memories.

Pstephani

Don't be naïve, Thalia. It's not a lie, it's a socially constructed truth. It is part of the cultural self-perpetuation dynamic that keeps us thinking we can transcend the realm of the animals.

Thalia

Shut up, Stephanie. [Turns back to Cleander and Anastasia] Bottom line is, don't fuck with your goldfish. It will hold a grudge.

Cleander

Well, that's... something. Do you tend to lead abusive relationships with your aquatic pets, Thalia?

Thalia [laughs forcibly, and touches Cleander on the shoulder unnecessarily]

No, silly Cleander. Cleander-- where's that name from?

Cleander

Haven't I told you?

Thalia

Well, you did, but I like to hear you talk. Your voice is like the pleasure derived from eating cheese.

[Humphrey enters with a cheese platter.]

Humphrey

Did I hear the word cheese? The platter is ready.

Thalia [sighs]

Great.

Humphrey

We have a smoked camembert, a vivacious Belgian Brie and a twenty seven month old white cheddar from New Zealand-- extra sharp.

Cleander [kisses Humphrey on the cheek]
Looks delicious. Do we have any crackers?

Humphrey
I was just on my way to get them. But here are some freshly sliced figs, and some chili dusted peanuts. Anastasia, would you care for a peanut?

Anastasia
I'm *allergic* to peanuts, Humphrey.

Humphrey
My mistake. I'll just go get those crackers.

Humphrey exits towards the kitchen.
Thalia edges in on Cleander again.

Thalia
Where were we before Humphrey so rudely interrupted us? Oh, I remember-- you were going to tell me about your beautiful name.

Cleander
Well, my mother was a classical historian, especially interested in Roman Emperors. She was tempted to name me after Emperor Commodus--

Thalia
Is that the one who invented the salad?

Cleander
No, Commodus is the one with the paranoia and the midget torturing.

Thalia
And then who's Cleander?

Cleander
Cleander was Commodus's chamberlain.

Thalia
What's a chamberlain?

Cleander
I'm not entirely sure...I think it involves filing paperwork. Which doesn't sound historically impressive, but he did enable the megalomania of Commodus, leading to the Emperor's assassination-- so that's something.

Thalia
Oh my, how nefarious!

Pstephani
Could you please stop using that word?

Cleander
What word?

Pstephani
History. That is such obtuse terminology.

Cleander
What are you talking about?

Pstephani
The concept of “history” presumes cause and effect.

Thalia
Are you arguing against cause and effect?

Pstephani
I'm arguing against your westernized metacultural teleological inertia, you coxcomb.

[Humphrey re-enters with crackers.]

Cleander
Let's keep things a bit civil, if we can, okay? We're all friends here, right?

Anastasia
I don't even know why I came.

Humphrey
Don't say that. This dinner will cheer you right up.

Anastasia
Really? Do you have some culinary remedy for a scumbag fiancé-- ex fiancé?

Humphrey
Well-- well no. But the appetizer will consist of a delightful groundnut stew-- I will be discussing it in next month's issue.

Anastasia
What does a groundnut stew contain?

Humphrey
Well, you know-- cilantro, tomato, crushed peanuts, cabbage.

Anastasia
I am allergic to peanuts! Why do you keep forgetting that?

Humphrey

I'm very sorry. Fig? (offers her a fig)

Anastasia

Yeah, fine. I'll take a fig.

Humphrey

You see? This will still be a great dinner. In fact, I can say that this will be the best dinner party of the year. I am calling it, right now.

Pstephani

You're "calling it"? What are you, twelve years old?

Doorbell rings.

Anastasia

It's Giuseppe. He's here to apologize and beg my forgiveness.

Cleander

I mean, maybe. I'll get it.

Cleander opens the door and Howitzer steps in. His trenchcoat is soaked.

Cleander

Uh, can I help you?

Howitzer

Howitzer's the name. Detective Melvin Howitzer. I'd like to speak with all the witnesses, while they are still present.

Humphrey

I don't understand. You're with the police?

Howitzer

Yes, yes of course. Here's my badge. Where's the body?

Thalia

Body? What body?

Howitzer

Wait...one, two, three, four, five. All alive.

Cleander

I think I speak for everyone when I say I'm really confused.

Howitzer

Well, to beat around the bush-- one of you is supposed to be dead.

Anastasia

Excuse me?

Howitzer

Ah, I am sorry, I've arrived too early. Damn it, I always do this.

Cleander

Do what?

Howitzer

Show up before the crime has happened. It's a major flaw in my investigation technique-- but it's not my fault. I suffer from clairvoyance.

Thalia

You can speak with snakes?

Howitzer

What? No. It means I can see the future.

Anastasia

You expect us to believe that?

Humphrey

What toss.

Cleander

That does sound a bit far fetched.

Pstephani

I think it sounds credible.

Cleander

What?

Pstephani

Is seeing the future so unthinkable? We assume we're all seeing the present, and yet all we have is sensory evidence and social pressure to back up that claim.

Anastasia

If we say we believe in this guy's gift of seeing the future, will you stop talking?

Howitzer

It's not a gift, really. I get jumbled, you see-- things appear without any logic. My mind feels like a pair of jeans, being rubbed up against one of those old fashioned washing boards. It's tough to keep perspective. That's why I eat so many Starbursts. Starburst, anyone?

Humphrey

Look, Mr. Howitzer, I'm in the middle of hosting a modest yet dignified soirée for my friends and my husband. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, could you let us enjoy our dinner party, or at least not sabotage my appetizers with sweets?

Anastasia
Hand them over. I need sucrose.

Humphrey
Anastasia!

Anastasia
I will be like an elephant about these peanuts, Humphrey.

Humphrey
And why is that?

Anastasia
An elephant never forgets!

Thalia
Neither do goldfish.

Howitzer
Look, I don't mean to be rude, but even though I made a little mistake in terms of timing, I know I wasn't wrong. You folks are rife with tension. There's a murder just waiting to happen here, and I need to interview all of you so I can find out who the murderer is, before it happens. Got it?

Humphrey
The flank of prime venison currently in my oven was marinated for over eight hours. I will not allow you to sabotage this labor of love. Could you not save your questions until after the meal?

Howitzer
I'm afraid I can't acquiesce to that. I don't want to run the risk that my psychic tendency flings me into the past or hurls me into the future. While *this* last vision is fresh in my head, I think we should proceed with some questions, but I will compromise and not call for backup.

Humphrey
Backup was never an option! There has been no crime, and there won't be! Please excuse my saying so, but I wish you had never shown up!

Cleander
Humphrey, not so loud. It's okay.

Humphrey
You're right. I'm sorry, Mr. Howitzer. But if possible, could you keep your questioning brief? Again, we would be happy to talk to you tomorrow, but right now it isn't ideal.

Howitzer
Understood.

Cleander
Can I get you a drink?

Howitzer

Nothing alcoholic for me, thank you. I am on the job, after all. But I would not say no to an Odwalla-- maybe one that looks like green sewage but probably is very healthy.

Humphrey

You can't be ser-- never mind. I'll go check the pantry. Cleander, you can answer any questions on my behalf, right?

Cleander

Of course.

Humphrey exits through the kitchen.

Howitzer

Okay, okay, let's all take a seat. I'm quite muddled already-- I feel I know you all well, but only visually. If it isn't too much trouble-- could you tell me your name and current occupation?

Thalia

Well, I can go first. Thalia Pull. I'm sort of between jobs right now.

Howitzer (writing stuff down on his notepad with a stubby pencil)

Unemployed?

Thalia

I prefer to think of myself funemployed. In some ways, I am a Tibetan monk, spending my days pursuing spiritual perfection through various BuzzFeed quizzes.

Howitzer

...through various BuzzFeed quizzes. Got it. Next?

Anastasia

Anastasia Tuff -- V.P of marketing for The Jarl Company.

Howitzer

The what?

Anastasia

The Jarl Company. We design toys for children that digest quicker than plastic, for parents who cannot afford to take their young ones to the emergency every time little Timothy ingests something by accident.

Howitzer

I didn't know that market existed.

Anastasia

You sound just like Giuseppe.

Howitzer

As in, one of the founding father's of unified Italy?

Anastasia

No. As in my ex. A cold hearted piece of scuffed carpet. No, don't write that down.

Howitzer

I have to write it down. I can't remember if it's important or not. Okay, you with the crooked posture.

Pstephani

The name is Pstephani Millstone, and I work as--

Howitzer

Sorry, one sec. You said your name was Stephanie?

Pstephani

No, Pstephani.

Howitzer

Stephanie.

Pstephani

No, Pstephani with two P's and no E at the end.

Howitzer

I really don't follow.

Pstephani

Pstephani: P-S-T-E-P-H-A-N-I

Thalia

What are you talking about, Stephanie? Since when do you spell your name like that?

Pstephani

I defy the tyranny of assigned nomenclature with my silent P.

Anastasia

So what you're saying is that your name is pronounced the same way, but spelled entirely differently?

Pstephani

As if! The silent P causes the briefest involuntary pause when saying my name, thereby increasing my relevance.

Thalia

I refuse to pronounce your silent P.

Pstephani

You shall rue this day, Thalia.

Howitzer

Anyway, you were telling me about your job.

Pstephani

I'm a food critic. I used to work for Humphrey's magazine before he decided my views were incompatible with fine dining and etiquette. It's tough being a neo-deconstructivist these days.

Howitzer

So what do you do now?

Pstephani

I run a hedge fund.

Howitzer

Ah. You have a diverse set of career options. Very impressive.

Pstephani

Don't patronize me with your antiquated notions of capitalistic valuation. The hedge fund is just a coping mechanism for the loss of my true calling-- the cultural deconstruction of the human meal.

Cleander

Stephanie--

Pstephani

Stop saying my name incorrectly, "clean-durrrr"

Cleander

Okay, wow. *That* was uncalled for. It's Clee-Ann-Der". Everyone knows that. Excuse me for mispronouncing your silent P.

Anastasia

Wow, Cleander, way to actually show some sort of emotion for once.

Cleander

Hey! What does that mean?

Thalia

Don't talk smack about Cleander, you broken hearted lump of bonnyclabber!

Anastasia

Take that back or I shall curse your family.

Howitzer

No offense to anyone, but this conversation is making my brain feel like the underside of a jellyfish, after it has been dragged along a pebbly beach. Can we move on?

Cleander

Perhaps that would for the best. I'm Cleander Latchley. I'm a geochemist. My husband, who's busy getting you your juice, Humphrey Oberon-- editor in chief of *Succulence and Style Monthly*.

Howitzer
Thank you, Mr. Latchley. Very helpful.

Cleander
May I ask a question?

Howitzer
Certainly.

Cleander
How do you know that one of us will murder someone else? If you saw it happen, then surely you saw who did it, or at least who died.

Howitzer
Not exactly. I saw myself interviewing several of you-- I remember that face, and that face-- and your elbow, for some reason.

Anastasia
Then surely you know who died, by a process of elimination. Or if you were actually investigating, you would have seen a corpse.

Howitzer
It doesn't quite work that way. The problem with the future is that everyone sort of blends together-- it's hard to distinguish a corpse from a living person. I just know the address, the suspects, and the fact that I will receive one bottle of "original superfood" flavored odwalla from the charming Mr. Humphrey Oberon.

Humphrey enters, carrying a bottle.

Humphrey
I have *no* idea how long this has been sitting in our pantry. Here you are, Mr. Howitzer.

Howitzer
Very kind. Do you have any ice?

Humphrey
In your protein drink?

Howitzer
I wouldn't say no to a little lime too.

Cleander
I'll do it. You relax, Humphrey.

Humphrey
As if I could possibly relax when I have a shank of venison in the oven. Excuse me.

Humphrey exits again.

Cleander makes Howitzer his drink.

Cleander
What now, detective?

Howitzer
I-- well-- I think I will do what any good detective would do at this point. Try to figure out who has a motive to commit murder here, and then enact justice upon that individual.

Anastasia
You do realize it doesn't work that way, right? You can't arrest someone for murder if they haven't murdered anyone.

Howitzer
I know, I know! But what do you suggest? Should I step outside, lean against the garden gate and listen to the most recent episode of "This American Life" until I hear a blood curdling scream from inside? That's a problematic solution. Perhaps after I compel the would-be murderer to confess to their intentions, I can convince them to turn themselves in as well.

Anastasia
It's as if you have no police training nor even the most basic grasp of human psychology. Frankly, I wish Cleander hadn't let you in, because you seem like the person most likely to commit murder here.

Howitzer
If you trust your dinner companions and want to take your chances, I can go. I'll investigate later in an official capacity, once one of you has been sliced into chunks and spread across the carpet. It's really up to you.

A brief silence.

Pstephani
Let's all sit down and talk, then.

Cleander
Stephanie!

Pstephani
What? I don't necessarily put it past any of you to slice my jugular with a butter knife.

Thalia
Well, in self defense, I wouldn't hesitate.

Pstephani
You'd kill your firstborn daughter if she was clutching your gin bottle too tightly, you lush.

Cleander
Okay, I'm voting we sit down and talk-- NOT because I think any of us could be a murderer, but because clearly we have some things to work out. No need to get all angry. [Everyone sits down.]

Humphrey!

Humphrey (offstage)
What?!?

Cleander
We need you here.

Humphrey (offstage)
Do you remember when you said a caterer or a private chef would be too expensive for this occasion? Because I do. That means I'm going to embellish these five bowls of groundnut soup with clotted cream and thyme sprigs BY MYSELF.

Cleander
Humphrey, that's not fair! Please come out here.

Humphrey (entering, sourly)
I have three minutes to spare, or the soups will get cold-- or worse-- lukewarm. What is so urgent?

Cleander
Mr. Howitzer is going to ask a few questions, I think, and clear this business up. I'll help with the soups, if you want.

Humphrey
No, no, I can't entrust you with such a delicate task. Let's get this over with.

Howitzer
Okay, okay, I'm sensing I might be interrupting your evening-- so I'll get right to it. Does anyone here have a motive to kill anyone else in this room?

Humphrey
You mean except for me towards you for interrupting my dinner party?

Thalia
Humphrey, be serious!

Humphrey
I was out of the room, but I can't imagine the logical flow of rational argument that led to that question being serious.

Pstephani
The terminology of seriousness shows your cultural entrenchment. Nothing is serious until society deems it otherwise.

Anastasia
So pretty much everyone has motive to kill Puh-Stephanie over here, right?

Pstephani
And why would anyone have motive?

Anastasia

Because leading scientific research claims that corpses don't talk.

Cleander

That is technically true.

Howitzer (writing on his notepad)

Everyone wants to kill P-Stephanie Millstone, because she talks.

Pstephani

Don't write that down! It's probably better to note how much money Anastasia owes these two monkeys.

Anastasia

Outrage!

Cleander

How do *you* know about that?

Pstephani

Perhaps you should discuss your financial disputes in places more private than the gazebo, if secrecy is your objective.

Howitzer

You have a gazebo? (starts writing) Loan shark dinner hosts own a clandestine gazebo.

Humphrey

You have gone too far, sir. Our gazebo is not clandestine. It is proud and prominent in the garden.

Anastasia (to Pstephani)

You were *eavesdropping* on our conversation?

Pstephani

Oh, calm down. It's not like we didn't know about your gambling addiction.

Howitzer

Ooh. Awkward.

Anastasia (standing up)

I don't have an addiction. It's fully under control.

Thalia

I seem to recall Giuseppe telling me about the time you put your neighbor's speedboat on eBay to pay off the losses of a Poker game. Or was it a yacht?

Humphrey

Is that why he ended things?

Cleander
Humphrey!

Anastasia
You know what? Fine. You're right. I gamble, and sometimes I lose. True. It is partially the reason why I no longer have a fiancé. I'll acknowledge all of that, no problem. But that has nothing to do with an intent to murder. On that front, I am clean.

Thalia
Whereas Humphrey could easily want his revenge for robbing him of his money and get it by burying you beneath his Gazebo.

Humphrey
Outrageous! I would never undermine a perfectly good gazebo-- OR murder anyone! And why only me? The money technically came from Cleander's checking account.

Anastasia
She's not accusing Cleander because she's in love with him, and thinks she has a chance with him if you get carted off to jail.

Thalia
I do NOT. That's so not true. I like Cleander as a friend, and only as a friend.

Pstephani
I saw you stealing a picture of him from the photo album last Thanksgiving.

Thalia
How are you everywhere a private moment is happening?

Humphrey
This is getting a little odd for me.

Howitzer
I'm not going to lie, Mr. Oberon, it's a little odd for me as well. Let's keep track here. You and your husband might want to kill Anastasia for not returning your money, and Thalia might want to kill you because she's in love with your husband--

Thalia
Cleander, it's not like that-- it's purely platonic.

Anastasia
Remember when I had to drive you home from the bar and I put you to bed-- why is one of your pillows embroidered with the name, Cleander?

Thalia
A Christmas present! For Cleander! I thought he'd get a kick out of it! Is it a crime to test out a Christmas present?

Humphrey

Thalia, it's February.

Howitzer

This is going way better than I was expecting.

Humphrey

Thalia, are you in love with Cleander?

Thalia

So what? So what if I am? Cleander and I understand each other-- he doesn't mock me like the rest of you. He makes me feel valued. But I wouldn't kill you because of it. Pstephani, on the other hand--

Humphrey (turning to Pstephani)

Are you also in love with my husband?

Pstephani

Do you think I could subscribe to a concept as naïve and socially constructed as love? Please.

Thalia

It's not that-- it's the fact that you fired her.

Humphrey

I didn't fire her! I let her go, because her writing style was unsuited for a food and culture magazine, seeing as she believes culture is an ominous squid, wrapped around our lives.

Pstephani

That job was my life, you slovenly silthead! Who else could enumerate the social constructions of asparagus in our national diatribe?

Humphrey

I helped you find jobs at several literary publications, which you turned down!

Pstephani

It is so derivative to point out cultural inertia to an audience of amateur postmodernists. I had a niche in my dissection of the culinary revisionisms. You are a crusher of dreams, Humphrey Oberon.

Howitzer

This is getting super complicated.

Humphrey

Super comp-- SOUP! By all the angels of the lithosphere, the soup!
(exits in a rush)

Silence. Anastasia takes out her phone and starts texting, then puts it away.

Cleander

So, clearly we have a few concerns on our minds.

Howitzer

But this is a good start. All out in the open. This is healthy.

Anastasia

Is it, though? From where I'm sitting, it seems like several friendships have just been roasted, and though we may not want to kill each other, I think seeing each other again after this is just as unlikely.

Howitzer

No, listen-- we've crested. We needed a bit of craziness, but now we can move forward, and if you are all mature adults, I'm sure you will be able to talk these issues out, and reconcile.

Humphrey re-enters.

Humphrey

I hope you're all happy. The clotted cream has melted and mixed in with the soup, leaving it a terrifying malaise with no distinct character, and just a vague air of sour peanut. If the world imploded at this moment, it would be too good for the human race.

Cleander

It'll probably still taste great. Please, Humphrey, no need to--

Humphrey

All I wanted was for everyone to have a good evening, defined by a perfect menu, and smart dinner conversation. Is that too much to ask?

Thalia

Okay, that's enough.

Humphrey

Excuse me?

Thalia

You don't care about *our* evening, Humphrey! You just want to practice your peanut soup for the next issue of your magazine, because you think our friendship makes us your guinea pigs. Frankly, you have no right to be angry just because we're not dancing to your crazy tune.

Humphrey (takes a seat)

You-- you-- well-- you may be partially right. I'm sorry for blowing my lid.

Thalia

I think we're all a bit stressed tonight.

Anastasia

What excuse do you all have? Have you been abandoned by the loves of your lives as well?

Humphrey

Anastasia, please. The pain is real for all of us.

Howitzer

Oh, I just remembered something.

Humphrey
A pressing engagement?

Howitzer
No-- something from my clairvoyant episode.

Cleander
What is it?

Howitzer
You should answer the door.

Humphrey
Why would we--

A knock at the door. Or the doorbell rings. Either way, really.

Howitzer
That's why.

Cleander opens the door, and Giuseppe stumbles in.

Anastasia
Giuseppe!

Giuseppe
Anastasia!

Anastasia
Why have you come here? You swore never to pierce your eyes with my complexion.

Giuseppe
Alas, gentle rosebud, my eyes bleed from the lack of thee. The sweet syllables of thy name still ring like green ocean waves, sloshing against the sandstone of my resolution. Anastasia, oh Anastasia!

Anastasia
Were it not for the impassioned artifices of the gods, our union would endure, but the ebony bridge across the cliffs was shattered by the fell swoop of destiny. Woe upon us, dear Giuseppe. We are you and me, nothing more. I have wronged you, and paid the price with a broken heart and cleft soul.

Howitzer (aside to...Cleander)
This is *great*.

Giuseppe
I scorn thy sentences. Thou robst me merely of things financial! What is an unmortgaged house without thy whispers? A debt of coins and bills is nothing like a debt of the soul-- I have given speech in the anvil of Vulcan, hot and impassioned, but now I fear these steel consequences.

Anastasia

Speak not so. Words may spill and spill, but they do not condense around my cardinal shards. No waters shall surge to quench the ravaging inferno. Doom speaks volumes.

Giuseppe

We burn beneath the blaze, but we remain strong. Fear not the endured tragedy, but clasp my fingers with thine.

Anastasia

Though I have caused you deepest pains?

Giuseppe

No pain is deeper than my own folly.

They kiss.

Howitzer

It's heartwarming moments like these that made me join the police force.

Thalia

Is heartwarming really the best adjective for this situation?

Humphrey

This whole thing has been absurd, and it's time to reassert some composure on the evening. I'm going to serve dinner. The soup isn't perfect, and the peanut chutney venison is probably dried out, but we have wine, and we will enjoy ourselves nevertheless. Mr. Howitzer, would you care to join us?

Howitzer

I couldn't possibly do anything so rude. Very kind, but I've taken up enough of your time.

Cleander

You've certainly added some flavor to the evening, but you are welcome.

Howitzer

This protein Odwalla really filled me up. Could I trouble you with the use of your restroom? I don't mean to raise unnecessary alarms, but the cramps I'm feeling indicate a mixed weekend at the box office, if you know what I mean.

Cleander

Well, I'm never using Rotten Tomatoes again.

Humphrey

Down that hall, second door on your right.

Howitzer

Thanks, chaps.

Howitzer exits down the hall.

Cleander

Are you doing okay, Pstephani? You're very quiet.

Pstephani (dabbing at her eyes)

I'm-- I'm fine.

Cleander

You're crying!

Pstephani

I'm sorry! It's just-- romantic reunions-- they make me all sentimental.

Thalia

Aren't they socially constructed?

Pstephani

Close your mouth you heartless varlet!

Humphrey

Now, now, calmly. We've been all a bit high strung, but let's wind down. Everything is going to be okay. [A knock at the door.] Who's this?

Humphrey opens the door and pizza deliverer Sebastian comes in with a pizza box.

Sebastian

Pizza delivery?

Humphrey

I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong address.

Sebastian

Excuse me? Bro, I'm a professional! This is *totally* the right address.

Humphrey

I'm hosting a dinner party, sir. Why would I do something as vulgar as order pizza at such a time?

Thalia

Maybe someone else ordered it?

Humphrey

That would be a grave insult to me, and my dinner party. None of my guests would do such a thing.

Anastasia

Um...

Humphrey

No!

Anastasia

You are not allowed to be angry, you fop! I have told you many times that I am allergic to peanuts, and yet you still make this meal-- where everything has peanuts!

Humphrey

There were figs earlier! That should have insulated you!

Anastasia

Do you know how allergies work?

Humphrey

Please, of course I do. If you provide enough initial fiber to an allergy-leper, you avoid all potential risk.

Anastasia

Did you call me an allergy-leper?

Humphrey

Okay, maybe I'm not a biology major-- fine. But you can't order pizza behind my back. You have to talk to me!

Anastasia

I've been talking to you about it all evening! You just refuse to listen.

Sebastian

Cleander? Is that you?

Cleander

What?

Sebastian

No way. It's totally is!

Humphrey

Do you two know each other?

Cleander

Seb—Sebastian?

Sebastian

After all these years-- this must be fate. This is our destiny.

Humphrey

Someone explain.

Cleander

It's-- it's a long story, Humphrey.

Humphrey

A long story? How does this-- individual warrant a long story?

Sebastian
Wait...are you two-- involved, or something?

Cleander
We're married.

Sebastian
Married? To-- to him? How could you, Cleander?

Humphrey
All right, who are you?

Sebastian
Sebastian Pfeffer.

Humphrey
And how do you know Cleander?

Cleander
We met at the Geochemist Conference in Tampa, 2007. Sebastian's a geochemist too.

Sebastian
Well, I was, at least, until I discovered my true passion: the perfect pizza. Far more fulfilling than studying the earth.

Cleander
Um-- really?

Sebastian
Well, no-- I got a little too tipsy at the last office Christmas party-- made out with my boss, and it turns out I was really misreading some signals. Apparently I was engaged in sexual misconduct, which was not a greater resume booster. So I discovered my passion for pizza delivery by accident.

Humphrey
I don't understand why you to know each other. Are you... friends?

Sebastian
Oh, we're not friends, Hubert.

Humphrey
Humphrey. I hate it when people call me Hubert.

Sebastian
Cleander and I are lovers. Star crossed, but forever destined to be together-- lovers.

Humphrey
What?

Cleander
It's not like that, Humphrey.

Humphrey
You met at a conference in 2007? We were dating at that point, Cleander! Not engaged, but dating!
You were cheating on me with this-- this truculent dunce?

Sebastian
Whoa, whoa-- truculent?

Cleander
Okay, yes, it was during the early stages of our dating-- we had only seen each other a few times in a romantic setting-- we hadn't even-- done it yet.

Humphrey
Made love, you mean?

Cleander
I wasn't sure how I felt about you, especially because of your debonaire vibe and your confidence. I thought you considered us just a brief interlude before something greater, and--

Sebastian
Cleander, you don't have to justify any of this to him. I'm here now. I'll protect you from your jealous tyrant.

Cleander
What?

Sebastian (tossing aside the box of pizza, making Anastasia briefly reach out in dismay)
I'll fight for you, Cleander-- I'll be your murmillo.

Thalia
That's racist.

Sebastian
Not mulatto, you troglodytic wench! A murmillo is a type of gladiator. Cleander understands me.

Thalia
Okay, this is too much. I'm not going to let you be Cleander's Lancelot.

Cleander
Does that makes me Guinevere?

Humphrey
Then I would be King Arthur. I guess I can live with that.

Thalia (drawing a sword from the couch)
I shall fight you, Sebastian of Pfeffer, for the undying love of Cleander.

Cleander
You guys--

Sebastian (pulling out a sword out of the umbrella stand)
Very well-- I shall quell you, hussy! My passion cannot be muffled by mere steel. You shall fall.

Thalia
Speak not so, you coxcomb-- you shall be vanquished. Prepare!

Everyone backs away.

Cleander
Stop! I'm happily married! Fighting isn't going to change that!

Thalia
It is too late for words, my gem-- I will protect you.

Thalia and Sebastian fight. Everyone else watches.

Thalia
Surrender, you violent coward, yield to me!

Sebastian
Never, you villain!

He strikes, but Thalia dodges, and stabs Sebastian in the stomach. He falls to the ground.

Thalia
I apologize, but thusly we deal with wicked ones.

Sebastian
I was a fool to stand against your love-- forgive me my transgressions-- and bring my body back to my family.

Sebastian dies.

Anastasia
Well this is unfortunate.

Pstephani
I know! What are we going to do with the body?

Humphrey
Are you serious? That's your biggest concern right now? Cleander, how could you have been unfaithful with this corpse? I am hurt-- practically stabbed to the heart!

Anastasia
Way too soon, Humphrey.

Cleander

I wasn't sure if I loved you at the time, Humphrey. I just didn't know. But I know now. I'm sorry Thalia. Despite that impressive display, I remain enamored of the same man.

Thalia

I understand. I shall dispose of the body.

Thalia starts dragging the body to the door.

Anastasia

Should I wipe the bloodstains out of the ottoman?

Thalia (grunting from exertion)

That-- would be-- most appreciated.

Giuseppe

Is anyone else concerned that someone just got murdered? Or is it just me?

Humphrey (not listening)

Where are you taking him?

Thalia

I'll head home, and drop his body into the ocean on the way. It's really not much of a detour.

Humphrey

Are you sure it's no trouble?

Thalia

Not at all. Good night, everyone.

Thalia leaves through the door with Sebastian's body.

Pstephani

Not exactly what I was expecting from dinner.

Anastasia

Agreed. I never knew Thalia was such an accomplished duelist.

Giuseppe

You all took that far better than I've been taking it.

Pstephani

What? Were we supposed to call the police? Don't be absurd, Giuseppe. Thalia is our friend. Friends don't betray each other.

Cleander

Speaking of police--

Howitzer re-enters, groaning a bit.

Howitzer
How long has that Odwalla been sitting in your pantry?

Humphrey
I'm not entirely sure.

Howitzer
Well, it might have been that Venezuelan chili I ate for lunch-- boy, that's an internal scrambler. Woo. Sorry, are you all standing around here? Where is Thalia Pull?

Cleander
She-- uh-- had to step out for a bit.

Howitzer
Ah, makes sense. Well, I will show myself out. I've held up your dinner long enough.

Humphrey
Oh, you don't need to rush out. One more drink—something proper this time?

Howitzer
No, no, by no means. My stomach is about as stable as a third world government. I must apologize for my shockingly poor clairvoyance tonight. I have never yet been wrong. For the first time-- I am doubting my ability.

Humphrey
I'm very sorry to hear that.

Anastasia
Are you saying you would be more comfortable if one of us died in mysterious circumstances?

Howitzer
No! No-- well, yes.

Cleander
Ouch.

Howitzer
Nothing personal, but it's been fairly traumatic. Is that pizza?

Anastasia
Anchovies, olives, and bell peppers.

Howitzer
What? Who puts bell peppers on a pizza?

Anastasia
That's a perfectly normal topping!

Howitzer

Ah well, I suppose it doesn't matter. My stomach would handle it by turning into Charybdis from the Odyssey.

Cleander

A solid reference.

Howitzer

Thank you. On that high note, I wish you all a good evening!

Howitzer leaves through the door. A long silence follows. People do things, but don't talk. Awkward.

Giuseppe

Well, we should go too.

Humphrey

To have hot steaming make up sex?

Giuseppe

Good one-- except more like reviewing gambling debts and preparing for a declaration of bankruptcy.

Humphrey

Oh.

Giuseppe

The sex will come after.

Anastasia

Or halfway through, depending.

Giuseppe

This is true.

Humphrey

Your honesty is refreshing, even if this abandonment stings. Good luck, both of you.

Anastasia and Giuseppe leave.

Pstephani

I suppose it's just me left.

Cleander

Stay-- I guess it'll be more of a quiet dinner.

Pstephani

No thank you. I am shockingly tired-- perhaps the lateness of the hour is a factor.

Humphrey

It's 8:49.

Pstephani

Be that as it may, I'll leave you two to enjoy a quiet supper. Thank you for a remarkably counterintuitive evening.

Humphrey

Thank you?

Pstephani

You're welcome. And for the record-- I'm officially done being offended about getting fired. Best of luck, Humphrey.

Humphrey

That's very-- very good of you. Good night.

Pstephani leaves.

Cleander

And they're all gone.

Humphrey

A disaster. This dinner party was a disaster.

Cleander

Oh, I don't think so.

Humphrey

The groundnut stew has been wasted, and the venison has probably dried into an inflexible jerky. Truly, a disaster.

Cleander

Sometimes things don't go the way you plan them. You tried, and did your best, but sometimes circumstances are not in your favor. Sometimes clairvoyant detectives invade your home.

Humphrey

Sometimes my husband's former lovers turned pizza delivery boys show up and demand mortal combat.

Cleander

He was a nice person, in his own way.

Humphrey

Really. He threatened to kill me and was fired for sexual misconduct.

Cleander

But he taught me something very valuable.

Humphrey

And what's that?

Cleander

That I felt nothing for him. That I loved you.

Humphrey kisses him.

Humphrey

You're sweet. Come on, let's do the dishes.

They exit through the kitchen.