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A Catered Affair

**A Short (Slightly-Irreverent) Comedy
For Three Women**

by J.C. Svec

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A Catered Affair

by J.C. Svec

Cast of Characters

HULDAH; *an event planner/caterer in Jerusalem during a slump in business*

TRYPHENA; *her young assistant*

MARA; *a mysterious client*

A CATERED AFFAIR
by J.C. Svec

SCENE: At the time a man named Jesus walked the earth. The interior of a simple dwelling in Jerusalem. An animal cloth covers a table. Material swatch books, scrolls and wood bound tablets are strewn atop the table.

AT RISE: A woman, HULDAH, enters and storms to the table. She rummages through the mess. Frustrated she cannot locate whatever it is for which she is looking and drops herself onto the stool behind the desk.

HULDAH

(Yells) Tryphena. Tryphena.

(A young girl, TRYPHENA, scurries into the room. She keeps her head bowed in obvious fear of HULDAH.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(Condescending) Tryphena.

TRYPHENA

(Meek) Yes ma'am.

HULDAH

Where is it?

TRYPHENA

(Confused) Where is what, ma'am?

(HULDAH waits a second before rising. She stares at TRYPHENA for several moments before continuing.)

HULDAH

What do you think, Tryphena?

(TRYPHENA hesitates before rushing to the table. She anxiously rummages through the same materials, organizing as she searches.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(Shouts) Tryphena!

(TRYPHENA freezes.)

TRYPHENA

Yes, ma'am?

HULDAH

What are you doing?

(TRYPHENA looks frantically between HULDAH, the table and the rest of the room.)

TRYPHENA

(Hysterical) I'm not sure ma'am.

(Silence. TRYPHENA waits for an answer.)

TRYPHENA, *Continued*

Looking for something?

HULDAH

(Nods) Good. Do you know what you're looking for?

Silence.

TRYPHENA

(Upset) No, ma'am.

(HULDAH stretches her arms, palms up, before TRYPHENA.)

HULDAH

My morning morsel.

(TRYPHENA remains still.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(Retrains) My early snack.

(TRYPHENA turns to leave. She speaks over her shoulder to HULDAH.)

TRYPHENA

(Careful) Ma'am, isn't it a bit early for meal time?

HULDAH

It's become quite customary these days for professionals, such as myself, to vary eating times based on occupation. So, there's no need for reproach, is that clear?

TRYPHENA

(Ashamed) Yes, ma'am.

HULDAH

And besides, it isn't as if I'm drinking at this time of the day. If that was the case then, I agree, such a sign of degradation would give you cause for concern. *(Silence)* Now, go.

(TRYPHENA nods nervously and scurries from the room.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(To herself) When you're hungry, you're hungry.

(HULDAH sits and pushes around the articles atop the desk.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(Calls out) Tryphena, where's today's agenda?

(TRYPHENA rushes back into the room. She carries a large slice of bread and a wooden, greasy spoon.)

TRYPHENA

(Lost) Ma'am?

HULDAH

The agenda. Today's agenda. Where is it?

TRYPHENA

(Hesitates) There isn't one.

(HULDAH drops her head onto the desk. Silence.)

TRYPHENA, *Continued*

Will I be getting paid this week, ma'am?

(HULDAH looks up from the table.)

HULDAH

How many times have I told you... it's about the craft and not about the money. Having pride in your work. Weren't you listening?

TRYPHENA

Yes, ma'am. I remember you saying that on numerous occasions.

HULDAH

Then...

TRYPHENA

Will I be getting paid this week, ma'am?

(HULDAH sighs a deep, long sigh.)

HULDAH

Don't you always get paid?

(Silence.)

TRYPHENA

No, ma'am.

HULDAH

Excuse me?

TRYPHENA

I didn't get paid last week. Or the week before.

(HULDAH sits up at the table.)

TRYPHENA, *Continued*

I didn't get paid the second week of last month, nor—

(HULDAH approaches TRYPHENA. She manages to change the subject.)

HULDAH

What are you putting on my bread?

TRYPHENA

(Defensive) Melted butter.

HULDAH

Oh. Fine.

(A confused TRYPHENA stares at the spoon and butter.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Go.

(TRYPHENA hurries out of the room.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(Calls out) Olives. Bring me some olives. And I've changed my mind about the butter. No butter, oil. Oil on my bread. And a glass of wine. (To herself) Try to give someone a chance to advance their position these days. Just try. You get bit in the—

(A young woman, MARA, enters the room. She is provocatively dressed and is adorned with excessive jewelry. Her hair is big and her make-up is heavy. HULDAH stands to greet her.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Good morning. Welcome to the House of Figs with locations in Hebron, Shiloh and, needless to say, Jerusalem.

(HULDAH invites MARA into the room.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

My name is Huldah—

(TRYPHENA enters and interrupts the introduction.)

TRYPHENA

Your meal ma'am.

HULDAH

This is my assistant, Tryphena.

(TRYPHENA, hands full with HULDAH'S meal, responds awkwardly to the moment. She settles on a polite curtsy.)

TRYPHENA

(To HULDAH) What should I do with...?

HULDAH motions to the table. She whispers between clenched teeth.

HULDAH

(To TRYPHENA) Just put it on the table. *(Towards MARA)* Tryphena, we have a customer. Please...

MARA

Mara.

HULDAH

Mara... please have a seat.

(HULDAH motions to TRYPHENA for a seat. TRYPHENA carries a second stool to the table for MARA.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(To MARA) Please, make yourself comfortable.

(HULDAH holds up the plate of food.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(To TRYPHENA) If you please.

TRYPHENA

But I thought you wanted—

HULDAH

(Laughs nervously; to MARA) Excuse us for one minute.

(HULDAH drags TRYPHENA away from the table.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

What is the matter with you? That over there is a customer.

TRYPHENA

But your—

(HULDAH takes a bite of the bread, quickly chews and swallows.)

HULDAH

Want to get paid this week?

(TRYPHENA nods in relief.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Then take this out of here, and come right back in here with something to take notes.

(HULDAH turns to MARA and presents the plate of food. The two women pose with the plate.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Can we get you something?

MARA

No, it's a little early in the day for me.

(TRYPHENA looks at HULDAH.)

HULDAH

(To TRYPHENA) Go.

(TRYPHENA exits. HULDAH moves to her seat behind the table.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(To MARA) Now, what service can we perform for you today?

MARA

(Uncomfortable) Service?

HULDAH

Yes, service. I assume you've come to arrange an event of some type.

(MARA shakes her head in confusion. TRYPHENA enters and joins HULDAH at the table; a charcoal stick in hand, she readies a scroll of paper.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

(Deliberate with gestures) You're... here... to make... arrangements... for...

(MARA finally catches on. She pulls a slip of paper from her cleavage. She manipulates the paper, trying to read what's written with no success. MARA hands it to HULDAH. She has no better luck with the note. MARA motions to her chest.)

MARA

(Giggles) It smeared.

HULDAH

Yes, that's bound to happen in this climate. Why don't you just tell us about what you want. I'm sure the details will come back to you.

(HULDAH motions to TRYPHENA who readies herself to write.)

MARA

Oh, okay.

(MARA settles on the stool. HULDAH and TRYPHENA wait for her to speak. And wait. And wait.)

HULDAH

Sweetheart.

MARA

(Smiles) Yes?

HULDAH

The reason you're here.

MARA

(Giggles) I was waiting for you to ask me questions. I'm not used to starting a conversation.
(Pause) Actually, I don't do much talking at all... if you know what I mean.

(MARA'S implication disturbs HULDAH and TRYPHENA.)

HULDAH

Questions. All right, that's one way we could handle this. Let's see, now... Are we celebrating a birth?

MARA

(Indignant) No.

HULDAH

A union?

MARA

(Thinks) No.

HULDAH

The passing of a loved one?

MARA

No.

(HULDAH's patience is beginning to wear thin as she has no success.)

HULDAH

A rite? A reunion? *(Frustrated)* The birth of a stable animal?

(MARA laughs at what she thinks was a joke.)

MARA

Nooo.

(HULDAH strains for another suggestion.)

HULDAH

(Excited) A catered affair?

MARA

(Enthused) Yes.

(HULDAH and MARA rejoice for a moment at their success.)

HULDAH

(To TRYPHENA) A catered affair. There we go. *(To MARA)* That wasn't too difficult, was it?

(MARA shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Now, will this be a sixth hour celebration?

MARA

A what?

HULDAH

The day's first meal.

MARA

(Thinks) I think that might be a little too early in the day.

HULDAH

Then a main meal?

MARA

Probably too late in the day. You know, I'm not really sure.

HULDAH

You're not sure of the time for your own event?

MARA

See, that's the thing. It's not really my event.

HULDAH

Once again.

MARA

I'm here for my boy— a friend of mine.

HULDAH

A friend. Um-hmm. Does this friend have a name?

MARA

Of course he does. Don't be silly.

(Silence.)

HULDAH

(To TRYPHENA) And again we seem to be getting nowhere.

MARA

Is there a problem?

HULDAH

His name, please. You said it was his party.

MARA

I don't think I can say.

HULDAH

We're going to need a name for our records.

(MARA hesitates as TRYPHENA and HULDAH try to encourage an answer.)

MARA

Still, I'd better not.

(TRYPHENA place her hand on the shoulder of a frustrated HULDAH. TRYPHENA bends down and whispers into HULDAH'S ear.)

HULDAH

You're right. *(To MARA)* My dear, times are lean. The whole region is in a variety of slumps... economic, spiritual... you name it, it's slumping. If you're concerned with us turning down the job because of any...

TRYPHENA

Relationships with any unsavory, questionable or nefarious—

HULDAH

(To TRYPHENA) Enough. I'm sure she understands.

MARA

No, I don't.

HULDAH

We can't afford to turn away your business.

MARA

Oh, perfect then.

HULDAH

Outstanding. His name then.

MARA

I thought we were past that?

HULDAH

So did I.

(HULDAH and MARA stare at each other.)

TRYPHENA

Mara. The House of Figs, in an effort to understand the unstated but understood demands of our clientele asks for no payment up front, but, instead, we bill our customers afterwards, expecting payment, in full, upon receipt of bill.

MARA

Wow, that's really very trusting and generous.

(HULDAH looks up to admire TRYPHENA'S business acumen.)

HULDAH

That's the House of Figs. Trusting and generous.

TRYPHENA

Now, where, and to whom, shall we messenger the bill?

Mariamne of Nazareth. MARA

Marianne of Nazareth. HULDAH

Not Marianne, Mariamne. MARA

That's what I said. Marianne. HULDAH

Mariamne. Mary-am-nee. MARA

(HULDAH stares at MARA.)

MARA, *Continued*
There's a little inn outside of town. Ask for Gabriel and he'll give you directions.

HULDAH
(Slightly annoyed) Let's continue, shall we?

MARA
Sounds good.

HULDAH
(To TRYPHENA) Where were we?

(TRYPHENA checks her scroll.)

TRYPHENA
First meal too early. Main meal too late.

HULDAH
Right. How about something in between... a supper time.

MARA
Oh, I like the sound of that. Very 'out there' thinking.

HULDAH
Yes, we're out there. Very mystical.

MARA
Mystical. That sounds marvelous. A mystical supper.

HULDAH

(Humors) Terrific. Write that down, Tryphena. One mystical supper for our newest client.

MARA

Not for me... remember.

HULDAH

Of course, the... friend who shall remain nameless. Does... someone have a particular venue in mind?

MARA

(Nods) It needs to be right here in Jerusalem.

HULDAH

Good. We have excellent relationships with several local inn keepers in the area. The first thing we'll do—

MARA

No. It can't be in a public place.

HULDAH

(Excited) A surprise party. What fun. Why didn't you say so earlier?

MARA

Oh, there'll be a few surprises all right.

HULDAH

What's that?

MARA

It's not a surprise party.

HULDAH

(Disappointed) Oh.

MARA

It's more like a... farewell dinner, I suspect.

HULDAH

You suspect.

MARA

It needs to be for just him and his immediate friends.

(TRYPHENA again whispers into HULDAH'S ear.)

HULDAH

Apparently we have a little, out of the way place up on Mount Zion.

(TRYPHENA again, quietly, shares her information.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

An upstairs room. Nothing fancy but I'm sure it will meet your needs. Especially if the affair is to be an intimate one.

MARA

Sounds fine.

HULDAH

We'll check the availability once you give us the date.

MARA

Two days.

HULDAH

Two days from...

MARA

Today.

HULDAH

In two days. Nothing like last minute planning.

(TRYPHENA leans and whispers.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

It'll cost extra on such a short notice.

MARA

What will?

(TRYPHENA leans and whispers.)

HULDAH

Everything.

MARA

Okay. Oh, wait.

HULDAH

Now what?

MARA

How will anyone know where to go?

HULDAH

You really are new at this, aren't you?

MARA

It needs to be kept a secret, remember.

HULDAH

(Sarcastic) How's this? Since a sign would be out in public, messengers wouldn't be keeping it a secret, and it's obviously too late for any formal announcement, why don't we just have a signal that you, or your friend, or whomever you trust, can convey to all the attendees?

(Silence.)

MARA

That's a wonderful idea. I love it. What should it be? The signal that is.

HULDAH

(Fed up) How about a little old man walking around the front of the building. He can carry a jug of water and give them a secret signal to direct them where to go.

MARA

That's perfect. I like it... except for secret signal. That might be overdoing it a tad.

HULDAH

We wouldn't want to overdo it, would we?

MARA

Absolutely not. This is fun, what's next?

(HULDAH takes a deep breath.)

HULDAH

How many guests will be in attending?

(MARA counts her fingers.)

MARA

Let's see. Thomas, James, Bartholomew... the two sets of brothers... him... him... twelve.

HULDAH

You're sure.

(MARA closes her eyes and counts in the air.)

MARA

(Nods) Twelve.

HULDAH

Including your...

MARA

The guest of honor. Thirteen. Oh, you're good. Thirteen. Final answer.

HULDAH

(*To TRYPHENA*) Thirteen.

TRYPHENA

(*Writes*) Got it.

(*MARA refers to her feet.*)

HULDAH

Ah, you'll need accommodations for the washing of the feet. Not a problem. Tryphena, please make a note to arrange for a slave for the ceremonial washing of the feet.

MARA

No, no, no.

HULDAH

No, no, no?

MARA

No, no, no. No slave.

HULDAH

You can't expect the guests to wash their own feet?

MARA

No, never.

HULDAH

Good. You had me worried.

MARA

My— (*Catches herself*) The host wishes to do it himself.

HULDAH

(*First to TRYPHENA*) Who is this guy? (*To MARA*) Who is this guy?

(*TRYPHENA and HULDAH gaze quizzically at MARA.*)

MARA

It's okay, really. I'll sign a ... what would you call it?

A waiver? HULDAH

That's it. MARA

No, that won't be necessary. HULDAH

(TRYPHENA whispers into HULDAH'S ear.)

HULDAH, *Continued*
Well, maybe later.

And he'll need a special... cup. MARA

A special vessel? A goblet? HULDAH

Without handles. MARA

A chalice? HULDAH

That's it. MARA

(MARA'S response once again initiates concerned stares from TRYPHENA and HULDAH.)

Just one? HULDAH

Yes, but a special one. Big enough to pass around. MARA

That's not the most sanitary practice, you realize. HULDAH

(MARA ponders the comment.)

I'll sign a waiver. MARA

Fine. HULDAH

MARA

(Flippant) He wants what he wants when he wants it. What can I say?

(MARA pulls her skirt up an inch or two and winks at TRYPHENA and HULDAH. The two women squirm uncomfortably.)

HULDAH

Let's decide on the meal.

(MARA repositions herself.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Let's start with the main course. A nice leg of lamb is always... a... popular...

(MARA vigorously shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

And now you're shaking your head, why?

MARA

No lamb.

HULDAH

Oh, okay. No lamb. We could do a nice twelve ounce rib eye—

(MARA shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Ten ounce?

(MARA responds with a slowed but still emphatic gesture.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Let me guess. No beef?

(MARA shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Medallions of veal?

(MARA shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Calf's liver?

(MARA shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Why don't you help me out here, dear?

MARA

Mmmm. How should I phrase this?

(HULDAH relaxes waiting for MARA to word her request. After a long wait, MARA finally speaks.)

MARA, *Continued*

Nothing that fire, frost or water has destroyed.

HULDAH

Frost?

(HULDAH questions MARA's awareness of their environment.)

MARA

(Meek) I'm pretty sure that's what he said.

HULDAH

He, being...

(MARA nods her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Right. He who shall remain nameless.

(MARA winks in response.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

Now, where would that leave us?

TRYPHENA

Fish.

HULDAH

(To MARA) Fish.

MARA

Hmmm, fish.

HULDAH

Fish.

TRYPHENA

Boiled fish.

MARA

Huh. Can we make it a little more... I don't know...

TRYPHENA

Exciting? Tasty?

HULDAH

Edible?

MARA

Yes.

HULDAH

There's a variety of spices and herbs we can use.

MARA

Nothing bitter.

HULDAH

Noted. As a side dish we can prepare a wonderful vegetable medley of garlic flavored beans, corn and stewed onions and leak.

(MARA pauses before she shakes her head.)

HULDAH, *Continued*

There's that shake of the head again.

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