Dinner with the Cannibal

By Witi Ihimaera

Of course, I should have realised at dinner that he would be a man of special tastes. His mordant wit and intellect proclaimed him bon vivant. I suppose I was bedazzled by it all: the chandelier, the red roses like stigmata. Too flattered by the invitation to notice that the table was laid only for hors d’oeuvres.

It was understood of course, that I was privileged to be there with him in dinner jacket and black bowtie. The fact that he drank claret should have made me realise that he liked his meat rare, yet even so, I was taken aback when all of a sudden he reached across the table to snap off both my legs as if I was a crisp, brown Māori breadman, saying “you won’t need these, will you?”

The snap and wrench of bone from socket sounded louder than I expected but the agony was slight - I’ve always had a high pain threshold. What alarmed me more was that my silk trousers were forever ruined. “After all,” he said, “a landless man may just as well be limbless. And just in case,” he added, breaking both my arms, “this will prevent any further throwing of wet, black t-shirts at her majesty.”

What could I do? I watched him suck the marrow of my bones and tear the meat that once had made me mobile. I was pleased his manners were impeccable. Not one sweet morsel of me dropped from his lips. I loved the way he cracked my toes and fingers open with his teeth to work the fine gristle for its flavour.

He was a gourmet of impeccable sophistication. “That was much better than Aboriginal or Red Indian,” he said, “and I have never liked the taste of Hindu or Pakistani. Too much curry in their diet taints the flesh. You are a repast quite delicious, almost like Samoan, less fatty than Tongan.” So saying, he proceeded to the main course.

This was my stomach, heart and ribs. Not exactly in that order for I could not see what he ate first as he leant forward with silver knife and fork to slice the cavity of my breast open like a crisp, golden chicken. My thoughts were entertained, in fact, by the memory of Noel Coward’s witticism about Salote at the Queen’s coronation in 1953. Mr Coward was wise never to visit Tonga.\*

“Ahh, there it is,” he said, impaling my heart with his fork and lifting it from its protective cage. I wept to see its pulsing beauty but thought this is only to be expected really from people who eat and drink the body and blood of Christ every Sunday. “Best to rid yourself of this old chap,” he added. “Your Māori yearnings are excessive, you’ll agree.”

I wondered if he was right. After all, why yearn for a language and culture already taken? Why fight it? Where does Māoritanga fit in this world of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? Yet I did protest and fight as he cut through the middle of my heart and seeing that rich blood flow red as a river wondered if it was time to escape this dinner.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said as he began dessert. Dishing the sweetmeats of my body onto a crystal plate: my liver, kidneys and tongue and last of all my eyes, smothering them with strawberries and rich cream. By then, without eyes, I could not see the relish of his enjoyment. Cruelly, he left my brain intact to wonder why I had ever accepted his invitation to dine, 150 years ago.

* A story, which has gained currency over the years, is that when, at one of the parties given in buildings overlooking the processional route, someone asked Sir Noel Coward the identity of the small man opposite Queen Salote, the maestro replied: "He is her lunch".