

Decades

by Todd Maupin

Wednesday. This was to be the night that the Decadent Sisters assembled each week for dinner. Weekly was not completely accurate, because naturally, they dined together every ten days. And even though they were not in Spain, their meal was late, at 10pm.

Each sister's adult life had taken her on a separate path so these dinners were one of the few activities that could still bring them all together. As children, they sang together, but because all were tenors, there was no one to sing the melody. Perhaps, it would be more precise but less progressive to call them contraltos, but the point remains that they had become distinct women and were no longer attune.

Every ten days, when they dined together, the next sister in the rotation would host. Tonight's dinner was Fifty's turn. She was the third eldest of the eight Decadent Sisters. Unlike some of her sisters, Fifty was always excited to host and cook. She wore an apron, was a dutiful housewife and mother, and lived for her family. While the sisters never complained about the meal, they griped about her neighborhood, given that her house was nearly identical to all of the others for miles around. Even the gigantic gas guzzling vehicles in the driveways were all massive carbon footprint copies.

Fifty had just put the casserole in the oven when she saw the Jaguar park outside. Eighty had arrived first. She always did. "Time is money" was Eighty's mantra. None of the other sisters ever knew what she was in such a hurry to do afterwards. Probably, she wanted to buy more hair spray, stocks or cocaine. Whenever she hosted, they had sushi and cocktails. Her house was sleek and barren like a museum.

Eighty was about to ring the doorbell, when Fifty anticipated her and opened the door. This left Eighty's finger suspended awkwardly in midair like E.T. or the creation of Adam.

"Sis," Eighty greeted Fifty. She was spared full attention to the awkward drawing back of her hand by the entitled and pouty shouting coming from over Fifty's shoulder.

"Teens..." Fifty shrugged, stifled a groan, and smiled at her sister. "Hi Eighty. Come on in. What's the word from the bird?" Eighty followed her inside.

Forty arrived next and let herself in. Fifty and Eighty cringed a little when they saw her. Forty could be exhausting. Sure, she told riveting stories, but was always on the warpath about something, battling with her neighbors, and excited about some new deal she had found. And she could be so territorial.

"I need a drink," Forty announced. She already had bottles in both hands and was primed to pour. Fifty produced the glasses from the serviceable but kitschly generic kitchen cabinets.

Forty's momentum had quelled slightly after a gulping sip. She looked at her sisters. "What's buzzin', ducky shincrackers?"

"They goodness we are not at Twenty's house. She never has alcohol for us, but it's bogus, we know she hides it somewhere," Eighty said, lining up for her drink.

Fifty nodded, "We have seen her sneaking drinks at our houses. Whatever razzes her berries. It's no big tickle. She is not fooling anyone with her mousey demeanor."

Forty agreed knowingly. "The mouse that roared is more like it. She is not some drip or cold fish. Twenty expends so much energy

jazzing up her house and wardrobe. Such grandstanding, holy mackerel! She is as in cahoots with the hooch as we are. We should confront her. No more appeasement. If we all just speak..."

"Easy," Fifty cautioned, looking out the kitchen window. "She is here. Ninety too."

The sisters peered together out the window. In fact, Twenty was standing outside, seemingly waiting for Ninety to finish a conversation on her giant and cumbersome mobile phone so they could come inside together.

Forty switched on the oven light and looked inside quizzically. "What are we having? I am wacky for a balanced meal. I have been eating bupkis lately."

Fifty looked confused. "Are you dieting? You're the ginchiest just the way you are!"

"No, just rationing." Forty did not explain further and the sisters did not really wish to know. She could be as irrational as she wished. "Anyhow, I am glad that we are not at Seventy's house tonight. I am so sick of fondue. Haven't we melted enough of our precious metals to support the government? Do we need to melt our cheese too? Honestly!"

"Raw is better. It's rad," Eighty suggested, her eyes scanning the room and the others' glasses as she tried to determine if it would be socially acceptable to have more wine so soon.

Finally, there was a knock at the front door. Shave and a haircut, the signature knock was one of Twenty's favorite two bits. Fifty rolled her eyes at her sisters before leaving the kitchen to go let them in.

“Have you heard from Thirty?” Eighty asked. “She seemed down about something the last time I talked to her. Really goth and heavy.”

“Great. Depression again,” Forty lamented. “Well, that's just swell. At least, this might stop her from running us through the wringer about wasting food.”

Fifty re-emerged with Twenty and Ninety in tow. Ninety finally ended her phone conversation with bestie by saying in not so hushed tones, “I'll call you later after this buzzkill,” and then smiled sarcastically at her sisters. Twenty and Fifty were just finishing up the typical exchange.

“I know you always say I can let myself in, but I believe in knocking. I am not some flapper,” Twenty stated firmly.

Ninety had just stashed away her phone in her baggy pants pockets and was in the midst of adjusting her flannel shirt when Eighty handed her a drink. “Thanks and whatever,” she mumbled.

Eighty attempted a cheers. “Later days and better lays.” Ninety did not reciprocate and left her hanging. As if!

“No giggle water for me,” Twenty said proudly, while the sisters looked at her knowingly and quizzically.

“What have you been up to, Ninety?” Forty asked. She liked to keep things moving. Progress was important. Fifty's reassuring and coaxing nod indicated her agreement.

Ninety's voice was so soft and unintelligible that none of her sisters heard her. Forty came at her like an air raid siren. “WHAT DID YOU SAY, NINETY?!”

“RAVES! Raves.” Ninety shouted back before calming down with a shrug and sipped her drink while looking at her Doc Martens. The sisters recognized this mood. Might as well talk to the hand. Not!

“Don't diss her, Forty. How long before you finish grad school and get a job, Ninety?” Eighty asked, adjusting her pocket square and smoothing out her pants suit. “Before you accept some McJob, we might have an opening at the brokerage.”

“Don't bash her ears like some ankle biter. She does not need to work,” Fifty chimed in. “She will be made in the shade when she gets married and starts a family.”

Ninety did not know to whom to respond. “Noobs. You are all so judgy and need to chillax,” she finally muttered.

A familiar and pungent scent preceded the arrival of Sixty. She hugged each sister in turn. Sixty was very huggy. She dumped out a pitcher of something and then filled it with water and then some mangy and rangy wildflowers. “Sorry, I am late,” she chirped. “I had to go to Hempstead. It was far out...” Sixty paused to consider her own words. “I mean it was really far away, but it was groovy too, and so mellow.”

“Do you mean ‘Hampstead?’” Eighty asked, pouring another drink, presumedly for herself. Hearing the word, “stock,” she was momentarily intrigued, then disappointed. Greed is good.

“Yes, bummer, what did I say? I had to check the wood stock there, you know.” Sixty explained, her wholesome face so saccharin leading her sisters to believe she was contemplating another round of hugs. They all stepped back.

“Yes, we know. Wood, trees, piece by peace.” This was a new voice from the doorway. Seventy had arrived.

Forty was relieved by the new energy in the room. "How are you, Seventy? Give us the dope, baby-doll?"

"Oh, you know, stayin' alive." She looked apologetically at Fifty. "I did not bring anything, I would have but I am embargoing Safeway, and then there was a long line of cars at the filling station..."

"Boycott. Gag me with a spoon. You are boycotting Safeway, along with lord knows who else... anyhow, boycott, not embargo," Eighty explained as she rewarded herself with more wine.

"Is that the snails thing? It seems cruel to me," Sixty looked confused, but also hungry, like she could hug a bag of Doritos. Instead, she hugged Seventy, who responded to her embrace intently, inhaling Sixty's scent with the thorough determination of someone knowingly committing a felony.

"This world has gone to pot. It's hella buggin' out," Ninety observed softly, but no one may have heard her.

"It's okay, Seventy. We are fab. We're cooking with gas. I have plenty of food for all of us. I plan ahead, stockpile, because you never know," Fifty reassured her sister but seemed doubtful of her own words. She checked the oven distractedly as a distraction.

"I have an 8-track mind, it's true," Seventy admitted. "Anyhow, I had to book it to make it over here. I will bring tofu and granola next time."

The doorbell rang. It had to be Thirty. When Twenty offered to go let her in, Fifty thanked her with a glance.

"I only took the bus part way, there was some hoo-ha, so then I walked to save money. It was a bit of a goof and I had to walk

through some Hoovervilles," Thirty justified her lateness without Twenty asking.

"Hotsy-totsy. You know your onions. We should all be that independent. The right to vote is the cat's pajamas, but is only the first step," Twenty remarked hopefully as she warmly pulled Thirty inside and closed the door behind her.

"I'm such a flopperou. Am I the last one?" Thirty asked guiltily.

"Yes, bless your heart. Even Ninety is here. Well, as here as she ever is," Twenty replied. She suddenly felt the urge to sneak a drink. She stopped short in contemplation. "When I said the cat's pajamas a moment ago, I meant the cat's meow."

Thirty stopped short in contemplation. "Okie dokie. I hope Fifty is not in a tizzy over it. C'mon then," Thirty then tugged Twenty along behind her.

They joined the others in the kitchen. Sixty embraced Thirty and capitalized on the moment to hug everyone else again. Forty and Fifty noticed Twenty's vibrant red dress for the first time, and they were aghast. "Did anyone in the neighborhood see you standing in the driveway?" They spoke in unison, rendering it difficult to discern who spoke.

"What's wrong with it? Mabel told me I was the bee's knees. I like to be a little showy when I go out, rather than blend in with the scenery," Twenty responded in defense, with a pointed critique at Ninety's expense. Luckily, Ninety was not paying attention.

"I mean, it's great for cutting a rug, but even with your moxie, the color will have the boogeymen busting your chops," Forty tried to explain.

"You're foxy, Twenty. Don't listen to these fuzz. There is nothing wrong with red," Sixty chimed in, taking the moment to hug Twenty again, and looked accusingly at Forty and Fifty. "What's your bag anyway? Unless we are talking about the Ivanovs who live in the red house on my street. Everything is a competition for them. Buy a car, they buy a nicer one. Landscaping, they will outdo it. I swear if I built a spaceship, they would suddenly have a better one."

"It's righteous for capitalism. We totally have to keep the economy moving along," Eighty added, looking to Thirty for solidarity.

And she received it. "Absolutely. One day it could all turn to dust, and then what would we do?" Thirty was known for her cautionary tales. "Look at what happened to the film industry. At the speed of sound, everything changed. Harold Lloyd, Chaplin, Keaton... all talked out of a job. Just like that, the classics were gone with the wind."

"Frankly, my dear, it's Chinatown," Seventy stated moodily.

"I like subtitles. They remind me of the good old days," Twenty beamed.

"Dialogue does sometimes interfere," Sixty agreed, sort of. "All of this talking gets in the way of the sound of music. Remember when Ninety's roommate was watching Pulp Fiction? I was so confused." They had all been baffled. Even Ninety was clueless.

"Just no more war, please. We all need a chill pill, can you dig it? No more invading other countries," Seventy added, extraneously.

"You bet your bippy! And no more assassinations, either," Sixty agreed, relatively as irrelevantly.

"Yes, everyone has a 'tude lately. No need to be snitty, live and let die, or let them live long enough to resign of their own accord, crook or not," Seventy affirmed.

Comfortable contented silence wafted over the Decadent Sisters, now completely assembled. For several minutes, they basked in the lethargic enjoyment of each other's company with no need for words to fill the silence. Eventually, Seventy complimented Fifty on her garish kitchen counters.

Eighty shrugged. "I never understood counterculture."

The oven timer announced that dinner was ready. Even though it was her house and the clamor originated from would be her oven once all of the installment payments had been made, Sixty initially tensed. She quickly realized the cause of the blaring before diving to the floor. She was still living down the embarrassment of having a bomb shelter. None of her sisters had noticed the moment of internal conflict.

"Nifty. It's time!" Fifty bleated to her sisters. "Let's goose it to the dining room now. Is everyone hungry?"

"Right on! You bet your bell bottom dollar!" Seventy exclaimed.

Ninety's expression barely changed. She maintained the same bored "here we are now, entertain us" frowning stare she typically carried on her face.

The sisters assembled at the dining room table. Fifty served them a scoop of casserole. One by one, Plop. Onto the largest panel of the plates that were apportioned like TV dinner trays. There was also a basket of Wonder sliced white bread. A tub of margarine was also within reach. A vat of green beans - fresh from multiple cans - sat

nearby. The steam wafting from the vat hinted overwhelmingly at the shortening used in the beans' preparation.

Eighty scrutinized the lump of casserole and poked at it with her fork. "Where's the beef?" She always asked this and her sisters always stared at her blankly, just like when she talked about cool beans when there were no beans in sight.

As the wine flowed and the plates slowly emptied, a typically jovial Decadent sisters dinner ensued. Granted, their lives did not vary much from ten days prior. And yet, there was never a lack of updates, news and gossips to be shared. Forty shared the latest letter from her husband, deployed overseas. Fifty's husband had been spending more and more time at the Lodge, and was always there during these dinners. Seventy's husband instead preferred his own personal lodge, a rickety shack he had built on a wooded acre of land. Sixty was not married but was a huge fan and the proudest groupie of her boyfriend's band. Twenty and Thirty's husbands worked at the same factory, but were in different labor unions. As far as the other sisters knew, Eighty and Ninety were unattached. Eighty did not have time for men in her life. Ninety had all sorts of time but had no interest in men whose hair was longer and grungier than hers.

"It's funny. We are sisters, same parents, same upbringing, but we turned out so differently," Fifty stated, looking around proudly at her sisters, who smiled back at her in harmony.

"Yes, we have each had to overcome unique situations in our lives, but we have persevered and triumphed in our own ways," Forty concurred.

"We may be too predictable, and it might even seem a little cliché to say it, but nothing can stop us if we remain true to ourselves and what we know we can achieve. The culmination of all of our

experiences taken together has made us all the complete women who are propelling society forward," Ninety pronounced solemnly. Yes, Ninety! All of the sisters were shocked, but not by the sheer wisdom of her statement, just that she had voluntarily spoken distinctly and intelligibly.

Fifty reached over to proudly squeeze Ninety's flanneled arm. She noticed that Eighty was gazing up at the skylight, its cracked glass in the ceiling. "I thought Roger was going to fix that," Eighty said.

"Not anymore. I think we may just get rid of it altogether," Fifty replied resolutely.

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