

## Invitation to Feast

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Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for bread, would give a stone?

The Gospel of Matthew 7:9, NRSVUE

When Hannah finally found God, he was sitting outside his pub in Chelsea, whistling “Hello” by Lionel Ritchie and peeling onions.

“There you are,” Hannah said, chaffing the January cold off her hands. “The thing you gave me isn’t working and I need you to fix it. Can you fix it—er, please?”

God sniffed. He reached under the shoulder loop of his “Kiss the Cook” apron to scratch his collar bone. Then God smiled at Hannah.

“Hello to you, too, my dear,” he said, before grabbing an onion and splitting it in half with a knife.

Hannah exhaled sharply, wringing her hands. Reflexively, she rubbed the little stone she held between her fingertips, feeling its oily surface.

“Right, sorry, God,” Hannah said, then she closed her eyes. “Er—Heavenly father, hallowed be thine—”

Hannah heard God snort and then a piece of onion pelted against her forehead. She opened her eyes to see God smiling at her again, the little crow’s feet by his eyes crinkling. It was a nice smile.

“‘Hello’ is fine,” he said, turning back to his cooking. He had set up a little plank balanced between a bar stool and the pub window’s ledge, making a counter. Nearby, a cast iron pan sat on top of small propane stove.

“Now, what were you saying?” God said, tossing a pat of butter into the pan.

Hannah marveled as a baguette manifested in God’s hands. He tore off a chunk and offered it to her. She licked her lips, but ignored her growling stomach, shaking her head.

“Oh, no thank you. I don’t eat food anymore, actually. That’s why I came to talk to you.”

“Oh?” God asked, swirling the pan over the flame, the butter sliding and fizzling this way and that.

Hannah held up her hands and opened them, revealing her prized treasure.

God squinted down at it and nodded with polite interest.

“That is a very nice rock,” he said.

Hannah recoiled, bringing it back to her chest.

“No! Not a rock. It’s a philosopher’s stone. My stone. Don’t you remember? You made it for me when I asked for it.”

Before God could respond, a man walked between Hannah and God carrying a steaming plate. Hannah caught the scent of fried cheese and corn meal and clenched her jaw to keep herself from drooling.

God and the man fist bumped before the man and his arepas disappeared into the pub.

When he had gone, Hannah brought her stone back out.

“I need some help with this,” she continued. “It’s—something’s not working.”

“What’s not working?” God asked, taking the pan in hand and swirling it over the heat. “It’s not making the elixir of life?”

“Oh, no, it is. It’s just... it’s not what I expected. It doesn’t taste very good and there are some side effects.”

“What kind of side effects?”

“Oh, well, I thought it would make me happy. But I’m not happy. I’m actually more unhappy than I used to be. I’m always worried I’ll lose my stone. So, if you could just fix me so I’m not always worried about the stone, then I think I’ll be all set. I mean, the whole reason I asked for this in the first place was so I wouldn’t have to keep bothering you. So if you—if you could just—”

It was the smell of onion and garlic that stopped Hannah's mouth.

Hannah's eyes left her stone and she watched God.

Steam rose from the cast iron pan and God swayed as he gently stirred the aromatics in the butter, the propane flames licking up the pan's iron sides.

Hannah shook her head, rousing herself in time to hear God respond.

"I can look at the stone again if you want, Hannah, but you seem hungry. Why not come inside for a bite? We're having a party soon."

As if on cue, another person, a woman wearing Doc Martens and a flannel dress, strolled into the pub. She carried a crockpot that smelled like good things: chicken, rice, scotch bonnet peppers, allspice.

Hannah reflexively swallowed. Her stomach groaned painfully. She hadn't eaten much, it was true. But she didn't need to eat. That's why she had the stone, that's why she'd asked for it. She didn't need anything or anyone except the stone.

She was hungry, though.

Hannah raised the stone to her mouth and licked the surface. It tasted like kerosene and river water.

Hannah froze, her tongue still on the stone tasting the thin layer of fluid on the surface.

She looked up. God was staring at her.

"Girl, what are you doing?" God asked, picking his wooden spoon off the ground.

Hannah tucked her tongue into her mouth and cleared her throat.

"Remember the stone makes—"

God shook his head, walked over, and took her by the elbow. He half led, half pulled her to sit on an overturned milk crate by his stove.

"I know what the stone does, Hannah. I made it, remember? You sit down and put that nasty thing away."

"B-but," Hannah stuttered.

Again, the smells of God's cooking quieted Hannah's mouth. He got to work in his pan. In with the garlic and onion went some chili flakes and a healthy splash of white wine. Then some diced tomato, anchovy, and capers.

A mini orchestra of pops and sizzles filled the air. The cooking sounds were then joined by the distant hum of laughter and 80s R&B from the pub's interior. It sounded like the party was indeed starting inside.

Hannah looked into the pub's window, the layer of condensation not quite able to hide the colors of the room: warm reds, oranges, and rich greens. She could see people inside, passing plates of curried green banana and pork shumai. A group of teenagers in school uniforms dipped French fries into bowls of red stoovflees. On the far side of the room, two white-haired men toasted with sweet mochi and mugs of mulled wine by a roaring fire.

Reflexively, Hannah shivered and hugged her arms around her middle.

"Hannah."

At the sound of her name, Hannah turned back away from the room. She realized a little late that this time she had actually started to drool and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

God was leaning down, the little crows feet by his eyes winking into smiles. He held something out to her.

Hannah took the bowl, puttanesca over baguette.

She took a bite.

"Oh... my..."

Hannah savored the light, savory sauce. The sweet tangy tomatoes and capers and spicy garlic and chili beautiful. It was so good she wanted to cry.

In fact, she did cry a little.

"This," she sniffed, smiling. "This is better than that rock."

God nodded enthusiastically.

"You ready to go inside?" he asked.

Hannah paused mid-bite.

"You mean, go to the party?"

Hannah looked at the bowl in her hands.

"If I say yes, does that mean I have to give up my rock?"

God laughed. It was a good laugh, a full laugh.

"If you go into the party, you won't care about the rock. Why would you? Did you see those arepas?"

God pinched the fingers of his right hand and brought them to his mouth, making a little French chef kiss.

Hannah took a last bite of the puttanesca sauce and then got to her feet.

"OK."