

Kitchen Match (edited)

At the University, my friend Francis Piercy Green and I were opposites. I'd be off in a corner of the library with my face in a book on mythology. He'd be gadding about the Student Union holding forth about this or that, usually ending up trying to take someone's money at the pool table. I was an introverted loner, but he was gregarious, outspoken and provocative. People either liked him, as I did, or loathed him.

During Spring Break he'd often stop by our old-fashioned farmhouse around dinnertime and be invited to join us. As an only child, he enjoyed being treated like one of the family. My five younger siblings and I would be attacking with gusto my mother's own recipe for spaghetti and meatballs. But Francis, a slender fellow with a finicky stomach, would decline when my dad would say, "Come on, Francis, how about another plateful?" My mother, Gladys, took a dim view of anyone who didn't clamor for more of the cooking she was famous for. So, Francis had gotten off on the wrong foot with her.

Nonetheless, the rest of us enjoyed his outrageous stories, so I told him, "Please feel free to stop by any afternoon. Gladys feels fine in the p.m., and besides she loves to feed people." There was an important caveat though, so I laid it out for him. "She stays up past midnight reading, gets up late in the morning and is rather grouchy for a while. So, a visit to our house before noon is out of the question."

If Francis had a fatal flaw, it was his determined insistence on doing things *his* way, discretion be damned. The ancient Greeks called such stubborn willfulness; *hubris*. This was a failing which always caused the gods to dispatch Nemesis to cut the headstrong offender down to size. But my friend had no interest in stories that seemed to him hopelessly out-of-date. So, it was inevitable, I suppose, that around 11 a.m. one fine April morning a familiar face appeared in the glass of our front porch door. Gladys, just risen from bed, hadn't yet gotten around to putting in her partial plate.

I warned my mother, "oh-oh, here comes Francis Piercy," and the sound of his middle name reminded me of Perseus. This was a fine Greek hero, who like Francis went where angels, or even Greek gods, feared to tread. Perseus had to

slay the Gorgon, Medusa, in her den and return with her head, which had snakes for hair. The catch was that anyone she looked at turned to stone.

Only by looking at the monster's reflection in his polished shield was the hero able to decapitate her. Of course, I mentioned none of this to Gladys. She had more important interests than my "silly fairy tales"; her bag was astrology.

Without knocking, the intrepid Francis Piercey Green strode through the front porch and into the kitchen. "Hi, Francis P., have a seat," I greeted him, motioning to a chair. Gladys ignored him and he remained standing, seeming to sense a challenge in the air.

My mother was in her faded housecoat and slippers, hair uncombed and snarled. Standing before a saucepan on the stove, with her usual cup of strong coffee nearby on the kitchen table, she took a deep drag on a Philip Morris. Since she didn't like talking much at this hour, I said, "Francis, let's go sit on the porch." But he was not to be diverted.

After launching into a stream of small talk that I knew would irritate her, he finally got around to his point. "You know, Mrs. S, you're boiling that egg all wrong." Gladys, the legendary cook, turned her proud face, still a little bleary-eyed from sleep, and looked the self-styled expert up and down.

"You see," he went on, "you've got to have a timer so the egg boils for exactly two minutes." He was warming to his subject now. With furtive gestures I tried to warn him that Aetna was about to erupt, but he was too engrossed in his lecture to notice.

I knew Gladys didn't suffer fools gladly, but even so, it took me by surprise when she made a sudden move from the stove toward Francis. Holding the egg up to his nose, she fixed him with a baleful glare and hissed, "See this? You can take this egg and shove it!" Time seemed to stop as an eerie silence filled the kitchen. A petrified Francis Piercey for the first time in his life was speechless. The next thing I knew the porch door was swinging on its hinges, and he had made his escape.

Thinking about the event later, I was reminded of my grade school days. I had pilfered a box of wooden Lucifers from the kitchen to secretly play with behind the woodshed.

On summer evenings I'd scratch one of them and watch it explode into flame against the darkening sky – a perfect metaphor for one of Gladys' flare-ups when an abrasive personality like my friend's rubbed her the wrong way.

It's sixty-some years later now. My beloved mother has passed, and so has my old buddy, Francis. Spring is just around the corner again when children will be decorating Easter eggs or hunting for them. And for me, as always, the season evokes memories of that storied egg of yesteryear. It brings back the image of the would-be Perseus who met his match when he entered the Gorgon's lair.