

## Who is Sylvia?

Warming up in preparation for entertaining 300 dinner guests, I sat alone at a gleaming, black Steinway grand piano in the dining hall of the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Fresno. Through the hall's open double doors, a woman of about 45 or 50 entered. She wore battered tennis shoes, soiled clothes, and gray hair jutted out on either side of a stocking cap she was wearing in warm weather. She wove her way toward me through the 30 large tables covered with white tablecloths under fine China settings.

Passing the empty podium, she stopped at the piano. Without preface, she asked, "Would it be all right if I eat with you?"

*I thought she'd stand out like a sore thumb among the guests, some of the most influential citizens in the city. They were Christians, but would they feel with her in the same room, let alone at the same table? How would they treat her? I was embarrassed, partly because I wasn't sure what I would have said if I were in charge. And why is she asking me? I'm only a guest.*

I looked up and saw Sylvia coming from the kitchen into the dining room. With a glistening black pageboy haircut and clothes of the latest fashion, she glided across the floor with the poise and demeanor of a queen. Relieved to be free of the burden, I told the lady, "Ask her. She's in charge."

The woman said nothing but turned and headed across the hall. Sylvia had spotted the woman, and she continued in her direction. When they met in the center of the hall, I could see the lady talking. I could not hear Sylvia's replies, but her expression never changed.

I held my breath and waited, looking for some sign in Sylvia's expression about how she would handle the intrusion of an uninvited street person into a semi-formal, high-class, sit-down dinner.

When the lady stopped talking, Sylvia never paused. In one grand motion, she smiled, put her arms around the woman's shoulder, and escorted her to a seat.