

first draft ...

# **The Travelling Lady's Cookbook**

(A Grand Tour in Twenty Recipes)

by Dai Lowe

for Jing

*Travelling lady, stay a while  
Until the night is over ...*

[Leonard Cohen]

# I

## A Risotto

As the evening sun began to graze the top of the island, *catching the Sultan's turret in a noose of light*, Epifanea Tredwell stretched a lazy arm towards her wine glass, which was balanced precariously on the balcony parapet. She paused in mid-swoop, to savour the picture of the sun's rays, which gave a honeyed glint to the straw-coloured nectar. Not for long. Thirst defeated aesthetic appreciation. She brought the slender glass to her lips and half-drained it in a single gulp.

"Food," she thought. She took in the view across the bay to the far side of the sunken volcano, the sun hanging level with the hilltop fortress; taking the half-empty glass with her, she went into the small but perfectly-stocked kitchen.

Onions? Or garlic?

This risotto she usually threw together at home with ingredients always to hand in cupboard, fridge and freezer. Dried herbs and stock cubes, pancetta pieces, and frozen broad beans. But today the local market supplied fresh what her local, misnamed 'super' market sold only in packets. This thought reminded her that the newly-shelled broad beans were still on the balcony, by her lounge. She retrieved them, along with the colander of empty pods, and started to cut up the pancetta. What flavour this local ham had. How small the extra effort in cutting it into *cubetti*, slightly larger than the tiny pieces she got from a packet at home. 'Handy packs', indeed. She'd never realised how bland they could be, compared to the 'real' thing.

Garlic? Or onions?

Many Italian cooks will insist, with a passion and even a threatening cleaver, that no dish should contain both. Others, especially Italian-Americans, will use them together in almost every savoury dish. 'Going native', even though not quite in Italy, Eppy went with onions. *The more placid option*, she told herself. The small red bulb she finely chopped, then softened slightly in a healthy splash of olive oil. She turned up the heat a little and added the cubes of cured meat, warming them through and even crisping them slightly, before she turned the heat back down and added the rice.

Lovely rice.

Risotto rice. Arborio. Or was it carnaroli? The jar said only *risotto*. An expert could tell. Blindfold. Probably by smell alone from the next room. And other, less famous types. And the quality too. These grains longer than those at home. She seemed to remember that longer grains meant finer rice. Or did they? Who cares? Have a drink.

She shook the grains into the pan, measuring probably too many, by eye alone, and stirred them gently to coat each one with a thin film of the oil. After another sip from the large wine glass, she emptied the rest into the pan, the heat turned higher and prepared to add ...

*Oh shit!* The stock. Her nagging feeling had been right; she had forgotten something. She turned down the heat under the rice, turned the neighbouring ring on full and half-filled the kettle with water, rushed to the cupboard and found with great relief a box of chicken stock cubes.

The wine by now reduced and absorbed, Eppy splashed a little cool water on the rice to buy some time. The stock crumbled into the kettle water in a small pan, she quickly stirred it and added beans to boil and slightly soften, sighed with relief and poured more wine into her empty glass.

*For this relief, much thanks,* her silent toast. *Gia mas,* she said out loud in Greek, and ladled some of the stock into the pan. And remembered a small clear plastic box beside the stock cubes in the cupboard.

*I'm just wild about saffron,* she sang, *and saffron's wild about me.*

More expensive than gold; but the host said anything in the kitchen could be used. And it's far cheaper here than back home. *Must get some to take home and maybe replenish the host's supply.* This thought calmed her conscience as she opened the costly box. *Mustn't take too much.* Not just the price: too much of a good thing makes for a bitter taste.

*Like love?* She smiled and put a pinch of the vermilion stamens into the pan, adding a ladleful of stock. Some beans came with it. A larger pinch of fresh-cut oregano and a gentle stir took enough effort to warrant another leisurely drink of wine, before the slowly-swelling rice called for another dose of stock and beans. The secret of a good risotto is to add the liquid a little at a time, all the while stirring frequently but gently.

*A bit like life,* she thought, but wasn't sure the idea worked.

Missing you already

Pilau, paella, jambalaya ... most non-sticky rice dishes, you keep the stirring to a minimum; it breaks the coating and lets the starches out. But the starches in risotto rice need to be released, to make the dish rich and creamy.

She sent a picture of her wine glass on the balcony in its sunset setting. It made her answer less convincing.

Yes, me too

Cucumber, tomato and plump black olives made a quick and easy between-stirs side salad, seasoned, drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil and splashed with white wine vinegar. The lightest dressing seemed more than enough, for salad and body alike.

Bikini bottoms and loose robe if you must know

She sent a stirring selfie with wooden spoon in her free hand. She replied to his next request.

Dream on

Not even undressed salad lol

*Love this cheese grater.* Another thing she mustn't pop in her luggage when she left. It made quick rotary work of grating a lump of the excellent parmesan.

She tasted the rice. Nicely swollen, not too soft. A little salt and a generous grind of black pepper. And half the cheese and a knob of butter to melt in before turning out onto the plate and taking a photo to send home.

Heartless bitch

And me w takeout pizza missing yr cooking

OK don't show me yr tits but spare me the food porn

She smiled but didn't reply. Instead she cut a piece of the baguette, topped up the wine glass, and arranged the salad bowl and risotto with them on a tray. The sun was down now, leaving a pale glow on the far horizon; she sat happy on the candlelit balcony and ate, watching the twinkling lights of the town below and the boats out in the bay ...

## II

### *Merluza alla vasca*

As a rule, Eppy did not do beaches.

Not her sort of thing. For a start, boring. So-so. Pale skin is fine; he doesn't mind it, much; and it's healthier. The terrace of a tiny tavern in an old town square or even a bench in a pretty park were far better venues to catch up on some reading. Who needs sand getting everywhere?

And so much flesh. Even at home, where weather allowed little sun-worship and convention limited exposure, bikinis and budgie-smugglers were the norm. But here ...

The sight of low-cut tops and off-the shoulder gowns could make her a bit uncomfortable. Acres of bodies in the outdoor equivalent of underwear or less were definitely not where she wanted to be.

She liked a swim. She did own a bikini as well as a one-piece. But she tried to keep her activity to quiet spots and quiet times and was never fond of lying in the sun for extended periods when the aquatic exercise was over.

"It's not a 'body image' issue ..."

"It bloody shouldn't be, not with your physique. Women half your age would kill for ..."

"I know, I know; I look after myself and I'm rather proud ... no, *pleased*, with the results. But I do it for health, not for display purposes, and I don't like seeing lots of skin on general display. It's just the way I am."

So Mediterranean beaches brought her no pleasures. Certainly not the sea of breasts. Not even the exceedingly handsome and completely naked young man, who gave her a friendly smile as she passed. And though this was the quickest route to the market, she thought she might take the back streets to her apartment, when she'd bought a piece of firm, white fish and a handful of juicy clams.

Why don't you cook local dishes

Too obvious lol

Just for you I'll rename it -- Nasello alla Basca

Or Basco

Pedantic bastard

Great fish, hake. But most Brits don't want to know about anything that isn't cod or haddock. Plaice sometimes, but that seems out of fashion now. Overfished? Like Mediterranean hake, in fact.

Maybe he was right. It would, she thought, have been more sustainable and more local to have bought the Atlantic version in Bilbao, though that was probably caught off Cornwall. But she wasn't going anywhere near Bilbao. Not on this trip anyway.

On vacation many people like to read books relevant to their location. Not just travel books. Hardy in Dorset, Proust in Paris (if it's a very long stay and the weather is terrible) or maybe Henning Mankell, if in Sweden for a spot of serial killing.

Eppy liked to be different. But not just for the sake of it (she insisted) and not slavishly so. She might cook a paella in Provence or read Calvino in Cádiz, but she had to admit that sometimes the best quality ingredients could only be found in the home of a dish, and that some books benefitted from a genuine sense of place.

Even so, she'd abandoned her plan to read *The Leopard* and was planning her Basque hike over a glass of wine (at least *that* was a local product) and supporting her shopping list on the book that Katrina had thrust upon her before she left.

"You're having a break from home and work and domestic life — take a break from heavy reading too."

"But I like what you call 'heavy'," she protested. "It ain't heavy to me; I love long flowing sentences, poetic turns of phrase, deep, meaningful ... well, you know."

"Oh, *do* lighten up, darling. Some 'shallow shit' is very well written you know. And maybe you'd just find you enjoyed something frothy for a change — and a bit raunchy too."

Clams. Eggs. Peas (small pack, frozen).

Garlic. Onions I have, and flour.

White wine, of course. Oh and some shellfish bits to add to the stock maybe.

And parsley grows in the little shaded garden. And of course there's already olive oil. Just need a fresh lemon. Or was there a tree in the back too?

"I'm perfectly comfortable with sex, Kat. Why do people think I'm such a prude? I like a good fuck as much as anyone — now it's your turn to look shocked — yes, I'm quite cool about the word too. Feeling sexy is great; I just don't think it's a thing for public sharing."

"Don't do it in the street in case you ..."

"... frighten the horses. Exactly. But you can do it *with* the horses for all I care, in the privacy of your own stables."

They'd laughed and raised their glasses to sex, glorious sex, and Eppy had accepted the gift of *Picnics of Passion*. And brought it with her, fully intending to 'give it a go'. Though, just in case, she'd also packed Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*. She didn't like to tell Kat that this too had its explicit passages, written centuries before her 'liberated' modern pulp.

*Take hake steak: bake.*

She smiled at the wordplay in her notebook.

Another lovely kitchen, though not with much of a view. To look out of her bedroom she had to stand on her chair, and her only reward was a patch of waste ground where the local dogs conducted their unromantic sex lives.

Small, high windows facing South. *So the rooms stay cool in high Summer, I suppose.* At least the shared lounge had a view to the high hills North of the town.

*Mince your onion*, said the notes. *Forget that*, said Epifanea, and chopped it finely. She placed the broad blade of a knife on the garlic clove and smacked down on it with the heel of her hand.

"My dear, *no one* uses flour in sauces nowadays."

Chatting about recipes was one of life's great joys, but not with those few judgemental idiots, ruled by fashion and the latest celebrity chef. Yes, thicken by reducing or adding Guatemalan *filé* powder or whatever is trending in Shoreditch this week.

"Don't you know that flour just clogs up the taste buds, giving an impression of blandness?"

"Fuck you Celia," she thought but didn't say.

She had already dusted her fish with seasoned flour, and now she started frying it (skin side down, of course) in a little olive oil.

*It only takes a minute, babe*, she sang, *to fry a hake, to fry a hake ...*

And another minute to fry the other side, before lifting it and draining it and putting it in the warmed earthenware dish. Squeeze some lemon juice over the top.

She wiped the pan and added a little more oil, enough to soften the onions and garlic. Basques, like most nations, did not share the Italian aversion to using both together.

Of the offensive flour a small spoonful sprinkled, mixed into the oil, then a slow stirring while adding a splash of wine — and drinking some for quality assurance purposes. Once reduced, the mixture turned to sauce by adding the warmed fish stock, prepared earlier and waiting patient in its jug.

It didn't take long to thicken. While it was doing so, Eppy added the frozen peas, salt and pepper, and plenty of chopped parsley. The, when the peas were cooked through and the sauce a good consistency, thickened but still fluid, she poured it over the fish and scattered the handful of fresh clams over the top. Then the rustic brown dish was ready for the moderate oven.

"I don't like immoderate ovens any more than I do immoderate people", he had once said. It still wasn't very funny.

*Spare me the pictures!* he texted now, in his frustrated jealousy. *Love letters, yes; blow by blow delicious recipes, no!*

Undeterred, merciless, she sent a picture of a hard-boiled egg, its shell half removed. He replied with a rude emoji. She laughed.

The other guests probably thought her crazy. She rose so early she sometimes met them coming home from their nights out as she set off for her morning run or swim. But her timetable also meant she could make use of shared areas, like kitchens and lounges, at times when no one else was interested. So now she stood dreamy in the living room, wine glass in hand, and watched the hills glowing in the ever-changing evening light.

*Not only the dawn is rosy-fingered, Mr Homer.*

Almost in a trance, she suddenly realised that twenty minutes had gone by and the fish needed removing from the oven. With the dish placed on a tray, she could finish

the dish by scattering the chopped up egg and a bit more chopped parsley. At home she might have added a boiled potato too, but today she simply tore in half a *petit pain* (or whatever they called it here) and dropped it on the tray.

*Wine, bread, merluza alla vasca — done!*

She ate it at the desk in her bedroom. Well, someone might come back early. She accompanied it with Mozart on her headphones and Katrina's book propped up against the wall in front of her.

*Realising she was not the only pebble on the beach, Janey Gower decided to become a little bolder ...*

It was not a promising start. But the fish was delicious.



### III

#### A Gallimaufry

The small boy performed a very good impression of a jet engine, at least in terms of volume, as he piloted his fighter. Approaching the enemy, which consisted of a young female motorcyclist and a small dog, he added the sound of rapid gunfire. This caused the girl to scream and the dog to start yapping at the heels of the intrepid pilot. And this, in turn, prompted the mother to drag the protesting airman from his craft, which bounced back and forth on its heavy spring as peace and quiet returned to the park.

A mother losing patience sounds the same in any language, thought Epifanea, sighing with relief and turning her attention back to the barely-started book. In truth the cute but irritating child had provided a welcome distraction. As did the message from home.

What's a gallantry?

He tried again.

Oh shit. A gallimaufry

My phone doesn't know it either. Have you not mastered google?

Other search engines are available lol

I prefer to ask you, o font of all knowledge

Well I know it's fount not font to start with

OK my bad. At least google spares me the sarcastic put-downs

Gallimaufry. A mishmash. Just throwing a load of stuff in a pan and stir-frying. When inspiration flags.

And beer for a change. Back home they had both learned to love craft beers from small brewers with big price tags and the pleasingly bitter tang of strangely-named hops. But in the continental heat the standard, light and more subtly flavoured lagers were a crisp, clean and refreshing way to wash down a meal at the end of the day.

She gathered up her things and took her glass back to the bar.

"Thank you. You need not have bothered," said the handsome young barman, with a smile.

*Well, that's probably what he said,* thought Eppy, whose grasp of the language was less than rudimentary. From the tone of his comments and the smile he made them

through, he might well have been making an improper suggestion. But she preferred to think better of people.

At the exit from the park she stopped for a while to gaze out over the ocean. The evening sun sparkled on the rippling waves. But then she noticed the barman, who, she fancied, was interpreting her pause as some kind of invitation, leaving his post and sauntering towards her. To avoid confusion and possible hassle, she turned away from the rolling deep, crossed the promenade and walked briskly along the narrow street that led to her flat. She could look at the sea more peacefully from the rooftop.

She rubbed the fresh coriander leaves between thumb and fingers, and breathed in the scent. She chopped the leaves and stalks and put them in a bowl. The pork steak from the *carniceria*, which obviously meant butcher, looked really good. Nice and thick with just the right amount of fat. Best of all, it was from a local, acorn-fed pig. Solemnly saying, '*Gracias, señor pig*', she cut it into bite-sized cubes.

The mushroom and the small green pepper got chopped up similarly, as did the bunch of spring onions. A clove of garlic was crushed and chopped. One of the dried Chinese mushrooms she had in her bags had been soaking in warm water for the last half hour; she took it out, squeezed it and cut it into thin strips.

Chat?

Later. Just started frying

She lied.

She opened the beer and took a swig from the bottle before selecting some Chinese spices from her travelling supply. Szechuan peppers, a little five spice powder, chilli oil ...

*Now I've started frying*, she thought, pouring a little groundnut oil into the deep pan. No Chinese wok in an Andalucian B&B. No rice cookers either. *I don't suppose there are many paelleras in Kowloon either.* The rice went in a saucepan with loads of boiling salted water, just like it did at home. Less arsenic gets eaten that way, he liked to tell her.

She fried the pork over a high flame, crisping up the fatty rind. Then she lowered the heat and added the onions, pepper and garlic.

"Eye of newt and toe of frog." She cackled the line from the Scottish play as she sprinkled the spices into her cauldron in meticulously judged random quantities. After a few minutes stirring, punctuated by swigs from the beer bottle, she added the mushrooms, onions and coriander.

A sorry-looking lime lay wrinkling with age in the fruit bowl. She chopped it in half with a blow of her cleaver and squeezed the juice of one piece over the pan, which it hit with a pleasing sizzle.

*And that, said John, is that.*

She spooned half the drained rice into the large bowl, took a drink from the bottle, shovelled most of the stir-fry over the rice in the bowl and dropped the rest onto the rice in the saucepan.

I made too much

She sent a photo of the bowl.  
Then she sent a picture of the saucepan.

I'll eat your share cold for breakfast

You're disgusting, woman.

So that's a gallimuffy?

Gallimaufry. It is now.

Don't know what else to call it.

Pork and peppers?

Boring. Call me in 20

Eppy took the food to the table, put the bottle to her lips and realised it was nearly empty.

*Plenty more where that came from.*

Another bottle was retrieved from the fridge and opened. She sat to eat.

After that she'd be ready to talk to home. She was missing him, of course she was, especially the feel of his body lying beside hers in bed. She missed him almost as much as she would shortly be telling him she did.

*¡Salud!* she said to herself.

## IV

### Wild Meats

"What's that? *Qu'est-ce c'est?*"

"*Lievre, mademoiselle* ... like ... er ... rabbit, but more big?"

"Aha — hare." A quick search on her phone confirmed the translation.

"And ... ?" She pointed at what looked like a very dark piece of fillet steak.

"*Chevreuil. Venaison?*"

Venison, specifically from the roe deer, said the internet.

Oh yes. Eppy suddenly recalled a recipe she'd seen on television, quick and simple and made by a famously wine-loving celebrity chef on a UK tour. That was the plan, then.

"*Merci,*" she said, as the assistant wrapped the meat.

In a reverie, she wandered round the small market hall. A patisserie stall provided an individual pear tartelette for her dessert — and a strawberry one for an afternoon snack. One of many fruit and veg stalls provided a potato. Another sold her something that looked like a tightly-packed anaemic baby broccoli. It had, she later found, a flavour so subtle she decided never to buy it again.

Rich, red Rhône wine. Almost local. Right country, anyway. *Chateauneuf du Pape*.

Number 9 Pope Street? Nice.
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Oh I do miss your original wit ;)
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*I missed it just then*, she thought, but she smiled anyway. He made bad jokes with style and she laughed without shame, both with him and at him.

In a wine shop she found a small bottle of a liqueur from farther North, *Crème de Cassis*. Essential for her plans. As were matches. Long matches.

Sitting at a small, round table outside a corner bar in a small French town, with a *café au lait* and a croissant for breakfast: what could be better, she asked herself.

Three hours later, much to the waiter's amusement, she came back and answered her own question with a glass of chilled Chardonnay from Chablis and a *croque monsieur*, thick slices of ham and melty cheese, between slices of rustic bread, piquant with mustard and all fried in butter. Healthy, probably not; delicious, certainly.

In between these visits, she had strolled round the town, sketched the houses and the churches, and wandered along the river bank, waving back to the men on the working boats and even sitting on a rock, like the Lorelei, while reading a little of Kat's Book.

*Freedom can be frightening.*

Really?

*Leaving him and starting a new life was the best decision she ever made. Now was the right time to explore her world, her self, her sexuality. Life stretched before her,*

*spreading out like an endless panorama of possibilities, without limits, without restrictions.*

*But also without signposts, with its spiritual satnav disabled, disconnected, Liberating but also scary, exhilaratingly scary.*

Good grief! Eat, Love, Pray, Barf.

No, no, no. I will not be defeated. I will keep my mind open. As wide as I can, my dear Katrina. But for now I will content myself with watching the river flow by, accompanied by the shrill sounds of distant children at play, and the plaintive ululations of the boatmen's horns.

After a walk back over the tiny bridge and up the hill, Epifanea stripped off and took a shower. She lay down on her towel on the bed for a short nap. She smiled at her foreshortened image in the full length mirror near the foot of the bed, her unruly pubic garden looking like a rain-soaked wooded valley rising to a pink hill.

*Bloody Hell, that book's affecting me already,* she thought, and rolled onto her side, bending knees and hips for comfort, stability, and to obscure the reflected view, before any more bad prose reveries sprang to her mind. It didn't help much. She closed her eyes and tried to make her mind go blank, but somehow one vision after another appeared in her mind's eye: the reflection of her own, damp body, those overexposed men and women on that Greek beach and even the sensuously dark piece of red meat waiting in the kitchen.

And this final image led her to think of the rich red wine she would soon be drinking with it. And the liqueur she would cook it in. And this finally led her thoughts away from sex and sensuality to that mixture of white wine and Cassis named after a former mayor of Dijon, called Felix Kir.

*A bit early for an aperitif,* she thought.

"Nonsense!" she replied out loud, and headed for the kitchen.

What doing?

Had a shower. Making a Felix.

You naked?

No!

She lied. She smiled. She slipped into her spotted pyjama trousers and pulled on a t-shirt, in case he started demanding proof.

He didn't.

What's a felix?

Just joking. A Kir  
Got some cassis for the venison

Bit early for an aperitif

Nonsense

Missing you

Me too. Skype later?

Eppy sat with her drink on the terrace, beside the cast iron bistro table. She scrolled through the day's photos on her state-of-the-art phone, and made notes in an old-fashioned booklet with a primitive pencil. Not for her a meticulously written, formal diary, but neither was she happy to look back at interesting photographs, unable to recall the exact circumstances in which they were taken, or even where they were taken. Not wishing to lug a laptop or even a tablet all over Europe, she just made those notes in case they were needed when she got back home and collated everything. They would help when sharing her memories with friends and family, perhaps even in the form of an online account; memories for her own later years, or perhaps even a small, self-published travel book, that no one would ever read.

A load of recipes, perhaps. The photos she sent him of her every snack, drink or meal, might make an interesting collection one day.

*If I ever get round to it.*

Suddenly she realised she'd been on the verge of falling asleep and hadn't noticed how 'the glimmering landscape had faded on the sight', making her reading and writing very tiring to the eyes.

*How long have I been sitting here? Time to cook. Lucky it's a quick dish.*

She put on a pan of water for the knobbly, pale green monstrosity the man at the market called a *choux romanesco*. *No cabbage this*, she thought, *more like a small, dense cauliflower, gone green*. Indeed, it broke up nicely into conical florets.

She decided to dispense with potatoes and let a crusty, fresh baguette supply the carbs.

*'No! No baguettes! No — I shall have no baguettes ...'*, she sang, contradicting her lyrics by cutting a few lengths from the long rustic loaf.

And then, the cooking. A knob of butter melted and foamed in the heavy skillet, with a splash of oil to stop it burning. She placed a spatula flat on top of each piece of meat in turn and brought the heel of her hand down on them smartly a couple of times to flatten and tenderise, then patted salt and freshly-ground pepper onto their surfaces.

Into the fat they went. After only a minute or so, she flipped them over, giving the pan a shake. As they cooked on the second side, she tipped the romanesco florets into the salted water boiling in her saucepan.

She took the meat from the fat and put it to rest on her plate. Now for the spectacular part. She hoped this kitchen's smoke alarm was less sensitive than the one she'd set off in Edinburgh, just by making bacon sandwiches for his breakfast. At least in this climate she could have all the windows open without freezing her arse off.

Her right hand held a long match and she'd positioned the matchbox at the side of the cooker near her left, which she first used to pour half a glass of the blackcurrant liqueur into the bubbling mix of butter, oil and meat juices.

Immediately, she took hold of the box and struck the match. As it burst into life, she held it low over the pan. A sheet of blue-violet flame danced over the liquid, as Eppy swirled it around to mix up and let most of the alcohol burn off.

Not all. She preferred to blow it out before it ran out of fuel; she was convinced that gave the finished sauce a touch more 'bite'. He, of course, insisted he couldn't tell any difference. But tonight she could do it her way, without fear of smart-alec comments or criticisms.

She added a little beef stock and a small spoon of tomato puree, and stirred, before tasting, completing the seasoning with some finely chopped basil and a little more black pepper from the grinder. The stock and the steaks had enough salt already. All it needed now was a pleasing glaze, which she created by whisking in one more small knob of butter.

The meat was put back into the pan and doused with the sauce to heat through, while she drained the green florets and arranged them on one side of the warmed plate. On the other side, she arranged the venison medallions and poured the sauce, dramatically, if not very artistically, over them. The large glass of red wine had obviously been filled — and refilled — well in advance.

*Less than ten minutes for the whole process*, she thought proudly. As she confirmed this by checking the time on her phone. That was when she saw his impatient messages.

Which she ignored until after she had eaten.

And rested for a while.

That dish had, except for the green lumps, been too tasty not to savour, slowly.

After which, his attempts to have a flirtatious conversation were hampered by his feelings of annoyance and frustration; if he was trying to hide those feelings, he was doing a terrible job. Nonetheless, his hands, hidden below the level of the picture on her screen, seemed restless and she wondered what he might be doing with them. She had no intention of asking him.

Her hands meanwhile, equally concealed from his view, were busy making rude and disrespectful gestures. She managed to keep a straight face.

Just.

## V

### Green Eggs and Ham

The influx of East European people to the British Isles had disturbed many narrow-minded souls and inflamed a few racists, but, for a food lover like Epifanea Tredwell, it had just been a facilitator of new gastronomic experiences.

It had also prepared her for the experience of buying food in shops where every label looked like the lower lines of an optician's chart. Not that she could distinguish all the types of charcuterie, but she knew enough to be able to buy some good smoked ham.

All the threads of our life cross, intertwine and come together, sometimes in pleasantly surprising ways. Growing up with the crazy rhymes of Dr Seuss, it never occurred to her that green eggs and ham could be the name of an edible rather than a comically disgusting dish.

*I would not eat them here or there.*

*I would not eat them anywhere.*

*I would not eat green eggs and ham.*

That changed when she found herself in a cool delicatessen in the city of Nottingham, which featured a breakfast of that name.

So that jar of pesto was bought in Genoa with at least a vague notion that some of it would be meet its manifest destiny when she found the right ham, meaty, smoky and, thanks to frantic but lucid sign language, cut very thick.

*I could not, would not, on a boat.*

*I will not, will not, with a goat.*

*I will not eat them in the rain.*

*I will not eat them on a train.*

But I will eat it in a flat, I'll eat it up and that is that. I'll cook it, cook it, for myself, I will not share with no one else.

OK, leave the poetry to the good Doctor. It annoys boyfriends too.

You woke me up to tell me that?

Lazy bugger.

My favourite breakfast though  
Well second favourite 😊

Filthy bastard

I miss that a lot



Buy some ham and eggs then

You know what I mean

I repeat, filthy bastard

Did you find sourdough?

She didn't think so, but whatever it was, it wasn't as dense as most of the breads there, and it made reasonable toast.

The scrambling of eggs was for Epifanea a meditative, almost religious experience. Over a very low heat, she melted some butter in a copper-bottomed saucepan. She broke a pair of fresh eggs, their yolks a deep golden colour, and gave thanks to the chickens that ran free behind the shop, drinking their health with a large gulp of orange juice. Then she whisked briskly with a large fork, blending yolk and white into a rich, yellow soup, before adding salt, ground white pepper and a splash of single cream.

"Still single, a nice, rich cream like you?"

She tipped the mixture into the pan and began to stir steadily with a small wooden spoon. In her earphones she had chosen the final movement of Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony.

*What Love Tells Me.*

"You find love that boring?" he'd said, only half joking.

"You have no soul."

"I sold it long ago to some guy with horns, to get you in my life. I thought it was a good deal. Still do."

Ah, you couldn't expect to agree on everything, she told herself, as she stirred the egg mix and kept it from setting on the base of the pan. She tried to think of something they did agree on, some taste they shared. Then she stopped trying and told herself she still loved him to bits and it was never about shared interests, after all. And she turned all her attention to the eggs and the music. She loved it, it was beautiful, it was moving, it moved steadily and majestically but tenderly to its climax, and most of all, it lasted about twenty-five minutes, which was the perfect time to scramble a pair of eggs, leaving them firm but still moist.

Self-control was needed. The stirring needed to be regular and gentle. It didn't need to swell in intensity as the music did. But she wasn't that keen on minimalism. And it could be interrupted, albeit briefly, long enough to pop the two pre-cut slices of bread into the toaster. The ham was already cut and warming over a hob on its lowest setting.

She liked the way the egg tried to form into lumps, like mini omelettes, only to be thwarted in their coagulations by her insistent wrist action. As the mixture started to stiffen, she flicked a few small knobs of butter into it, and stirred them in as they melted.

And now for the vital ingredient that turned the eggs eponymously green, and gave a garlicky basil tang that went so well with the ham. She blended in two generous

teaspoons of the *pesto genovese*, its cheese and pine nuts but mostly its herbs turning the egg mixture into an olive drab gunge.

*That can't be the right word, she thought; so unappetising; and then, it's not green enough.*

She added some more pesto. Flavour was more important than getting the colour right, as she'd learned when she tried to make her Thai red curry brighter with extra chillies. But she also knew from experience that green eggs could handle quite a lot of the most garlicky pestos without disturbing the balance of flavours too much. It just needed less, with the anaemic yolk of a British supermarket egg, to make the dish do justice to its name.

*Plak!*

Up, noisily, popped the toast, perfectly timed to coincide with the creamy green mixture being taken from the heat. Deftly she spread the pale local butter on each slice, then spooned the eggs to the side and overlapping them. The warmed slices of smoked ham arranged neatly on top, the whole assembly was taken to the table, to join the glass of orange juice and the cafetière of java.

The perfect start to a sunny Spring day. She was in such a good mood she didn't even stir up his envy with a photograph.

She just ate.

## VI

### Sausages in Cider

That morning Epifanea Tredwell had clambered over a two metre high mound of coffee beans, squeezed herself into a darkened space between black velvet curtains as painfully bright coloured lights came on at random intervals, and contemplated a large box of blood-spattered shop window dummies' hands.

The paintings, even the ones incorporating strange objects and unpleasant substances, seemed so-so by comparison.

Art can be very tiring, conceptual art, doubly so.

The coffee and the café, drink and room, were works of art in themselves and extremely welcome. At least the chairs were comfortable, and not like the un-sit-downable, spiked, ridged and precipitous mockeries of IKEA in Gallery Three.

"Pffft!" she went, as she recognised the pattern so carefully constructed in the foam of her latte. *Fannies are so last millennium.*

She refrained from taking a photo and sending it home. His reaction was too predictable as was his reaction to tonight's supper.

"I tell all my friends my girlfriend loves sausages in cider," wasn't all that funny the first time. It might have been — when she was fifteen maybe; long, long ago that age seemed.

Sausages, she mused, are not like people. The more she travelled, the more she engaged with the folks she met around the world, the more she found that, beneath the superficial appearances of genes and culture, people were ... well, people. Whereas sausages looked pretty similar from a distance — not to mention men making the same jokes about them — wherever she went. But the contents, taste and consistency of that humble foodstuff varied so much.

As, surprisingly, does cider, a West Country drink that was beginning to catch on in Eastern Europe. Finding that liquid in the shops was what triggered the idea of making an old but very English favourite in an unfamiliar setting. As long as she could find a dryish apple-based booze and a sausage less tightly packed with meaty chunks and more like the old British 'banger' than the Continental norm, the other ingredients should be no problem.

Indeed, the onions, the carrot and even the mushrooms had been easy to find. The autumnal wild varieties of fungus were just beginning to appear, but they could wait a week or two.

'They'd be wasted in this dish anyway,' she thought, as she chopped up a couple of the familiar, farmed button variety, putting the rest in the fridge.

*Mushrooms on toast for breakfast.* Fried in butter, sprinkled with flour, a dash of mustard and enough milk to make a thick white sauce. *Yummy.* And she wouldn't have to endure the sight of him ruining his with lashings of sugary ketchup.

She was still unsure about the sausages. Was this a mistake? A Polish *serdelki* seemed the best option, as suggested by a smartphone search, reinforced, or possibly confused, by hilarious attempts at sign language between herself and the large, jolly

woman at the *delikatesy*. She had ascertained, or possibly not, that it was the least smoked, least dense, and least 'chunky' option. But was it too much like a Frankfurter? The word *Wiener* brought the phallic references back to mind, as had some of the more ribald gestures of the seller.

*Oh, how we laughed.*

At home she always favoured a basic Lincolnshire sausage for this dish. And that was something he did agree on, and not only, she felt sure, because he came from that county. The hint of sage and onion and even the rusk 'padding', really worked well in this concoction. Sometimes a sausage can be *too* meaty, *too* strongly flavoured.

*Don't start that again. And don't say things like this to him when he calls.*

If he calls.

It's a one-pot dish, perfect for the tiny stove in her shared flat. The other guest was a girl from Vietnam, who seemed even more reclusive than Eppy, and even earlier to bed. No, she didn't want to share foods, she'd made herself a salad in a plastic bowl, which seemed to be predominantly coriander leaves, with which she had retreated to her room on the stroke of six o'clock.

*Travel: broaden the mind, experience new sights and sounds, avoid human contact. Some people. Oh well.*

The onion was cut into medium chunks, the carrot sliced a little smaller and a potato peeled and similarly cut up. With the mushrooms they all lay, ready for the pot. A little oil went into the saucepan, over a medium-high heat and the onions started to sizzle as soon as they were added. The sausages, cut into bite-sized lengths, joined them soon after.

She remembered what cider could do to potatoes. More than once her efforts had been spoiled by that chewy skin forming where the fructose, the fruit sugar, in the cider had acted on the starch of the spuds. So she pre-cooked the potatoes and carrots in boiling water; so much for a 'one-pot dish'. Meanwhile, she added the mushrooms to the sausages and onions and stirred them into the fat, letting them heat through for a few seconds, before she drowned the mixture in the cider.

She turned the heat as high as the little stove would go, bringing the stew to a boil. While it reduced by about half, she recalled that cider can also be used as a drink.

*Hmm, not bad.* Not as a dry, applish (*Is that a word? Malic?*), or as strong as many a real West Country brew, but then, not as sweet, fizzy or tasteless as their commercial cousins, either.

*Listen to me. Suddenly I'm not only talking to myself, I'm becoming a booze critic too.*

Potatoes softened: check.

Liquid reduced: check.

Turn off the vegetables, drain off half the liquid, tip the pan in with the sausages: check.

Salt and pepper to taste and reduce to a simmer: check and mate.

And phone home. If it can be called home.

"Your favourite."

"Fish and chips?"

"No no no. I mean your favourite cheap laugh."

"Your favourite you mean. You're the one who loves sausages inside ..."

"Yeah, right; say no more. I wonder what it would be like to have a grown-up boyfriend."

"You'd hate it."

"That's still to be decided."

"No. You're missing me terribly."

"That's OK then. I wasn't sure until you told me. Anyway, how's your day been?"

"Nothing to report, *mon capitain*. You're the one having adventures. How's Prague?"

"I wouldn't know; I'm not in Prague, idiot."

"Well, I wish I was there, wherever you are."

"That's a coincidence."

"See, you do miss me. You wish I was there with you."

"No, I mean I wish you were in Prague, wherever I am."

"Cheeky sod!"

## VII

### A Fishy Stir-Fry

The trains in continental Europe (so much cheaper than those back home) are the main reason for standardised time and, more significantly perhaps, the availability of wonderful, fresh seafood, in small markets at a considerable distance from the coast. Epifanea always tried to get ingredients in season and minimise her 'food miles' by buying local, even if she then used them in dishes native to other lands. But as far as she was concerned, if a small market town many leagues from Barcelona, Marseilles or the Amalfi Coast boasted a fine fish stall, the prawns, squid and monkfish on that stall were all in play.

And if her host's kitchen was also graced with a Chinese wok, what could a girl do but a stir-fry? No recipe to guide her; this is inspiration and improvisation.

And hope.

Surely anyone who loves to eat and loves to cook also loves to wander round a market. Even in provincial England, where the choices are fewer and the vegetables more apologetic, the atmosphere is relaxed but exciting — well, at least scintillating. Cheery traders chat cheekily with customers or call out flirtatiously to attract passers-by. Early in the day, stalls groan under the weight of freshly-piled produce, while the evening air is filled with shouted offers to clear the unsold stock at rock-bottom prices.

At a quiet time between the two, dreamy Epifanea Tredwell sauntered slowly round the stalls. The lush green of the coriander caught her eye, and led it to the paler tones of the limes that lay beyond. Courgettes played another variation on the chromatic theme, while the almost crimson tomatoes offered a complementary contrast, leading the eye to the rich tones of a red onion, and the pungent grace notes of creamy white heads of garlic.

He once told her about an old movie called *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium*.

She told him that it was originally the caption to a *New Yorker* cartoon.

He hated being outdone.

She loved doing it.

But she'd taken the point. To get some rest, to take it easy, was important. Even to get to know some places in more depth. She'd booked two nights here; and though she'd probably wander round the same market again tomorrow, and sit on the same high stool at the same counter for one more coffee and one more pastry, it made sense to stock up for tomorrow's supper at this visit. Some olives, cucumber, chicory, an orange, baguettes ...

No; no baguettes. Or ...

'*Baguettes — I've had a few*', she sang, earning herself strange looks from a Lebanese stall holder, while she wondered if she could think of a third baguette-punning song. Nonetheless he was happy to chat with her, safely behind his table, and to sell her tiny cheese pasties called *sambusak*, and lightly spiced *kibbeh*. She loved *kibbeh*: fingers of lamb and cracked wheat paste, stuffed with more lamb, sultanas and pine nuts, fragrant with cumin and coriander seed.

Heaven.

The wine shop had a rather nice-looking white Burgundy in the cooler. It also had blocks of *foie gras*.

'Go on', she thought. 'Just this once. If he thinks a day of rest is good for me, he can't disapprove of me making it luxurious and indulgent.'

He didn't.

"Lucky man."

"Pardon?"

"You are English? your accent ..." The young vintner shrugged.

"Ah yes, *c'est vraie*. I am English. But who is ...?"

"Your shopping. The wine, the paté ... some guy is on for a treat, I think."

About to say no, she was alone, being indulgent, shopping for two days, not two people, she checked herself just in time. All over the world, men, in her experience, could take an admission of solitude as an invitation to accompany, pester or even worse.

"Ah, *oui*," she said instead. "Very lucky man. I like to think so."

"Well, I hope he appreciates it."

And, as she left the shop, she shrugged too.

*She seldom exposed her body to the eager gaze of men; never completely and only at moments of sexual fervour, allowing hands and lips access, pulling open a button or two to let a mouth envelop an aching nipple, or guiding a hand beneath her panties to cup a buttock or caress her clitoris. Even on the beach, her costumes were miniscule but somehow modest.*

*Though old-established feelings of guilt added spice to her passionate near-abandonment, she had never permitted herself to complete the adultery. And while her would-be lover both cursed and respected her restraint, he regretted still more her unwillingness to share her nakedness as freely and casually as he displayed himself to her in the privacy of his apartment.*

"Stupid girl," said Eppy out loud, laying down the book and taking up the bottle of Montrachet. "What soft-porn nonsense."

The words of John Donne drifted into her mind:

*To teach thee, I am naked first; why then  
What needst thou have more covering than a man.*

It was ever thus, in every age, in every land: poor men would try anything just for a glimpse of a bare breast.

She shrugged again. She smiled. She drank.

She cooked.

## VIII

### Smörgåsbord/Mezze/Dim Sum/Tapas/Buffer

There is, she realised, a kind of vagueness now, in both wanderings and diet. When he'd asked what's on the menu, she'd replied, "Oh, just stuff — bits, and probably bobs too."

Most countries and cultures have names for a table of nibbles, as snacks between meals or as what some nutritionists call an 'unstructured food event'. Even the British now, she mused, have moved well away from the 'three square meals a day' pattern.

Even so, it will always be unusual for someone on their own to take the time and trouble to lay out a spread like this. In an attempt to vanquish the idea that a disorganised set of disparate dishes bespoke a disordered life, she told herself she had to express the whimsical and unconventional side of her nature, her right-brain creativity, a personality that thought outside pretty much all of the boxes.

And boxes there were, and bags too; even sachets, whose interesting ready-made dressings had caught her eye.

While she hadn't been set on any one dish, she did find herself drawn to a few luxurious eats — and drinks. In fact it was yesterday's bottle of *Bâtard-Montrachet* that called out to her first and got her credit card primed for action. Having decided to waive all financial constraints for a day, it was but a small step to the small block of *foie gras*, studded with pieces of black truffle.

A large glass of said wine had accompanied the delicate, gingery freshness of the previous night's stir-fry, a simple matter of frying a smashed clove of garlic in a drop of ground nut oil, flinging in sliced red pepper, and then the squid and prawns and stirring them around under a very small splash of the wine and drizzles of soy sauce and sesame oil. Finishing with halved cherry tomatoes and spring onions sliced obliquely, had made a dish as colourful as it was tasty, served with a simple bowl of boiled fragrant rice.

Today, the preparation was to be a little more various, and maybe elaborate.

She grated the carrot and mixed in a handful of sultanas. A pinch of seasalt and it was ready to steep in *Moroccan Dressing* (probably just a *vinaigrette* with a little cumin) and stick in the refrigerator; soon afterwards, it was joined by a shallow bowl containing a star of chicory leaves, radiating outwards from a shiny cherry tomato, and each cradling a segment of tangerine, all seasoned and drizzled with a dressing of grapefruit juice and rapeseed oil. The delicate taste of the chicory meant she felt no need to blanch it in boiling water first, so it could retain its crispness and not add too bitter a note to the proceedings. So she needn't have prepared it so early, but, hey, it was one less thing to do at suppertime. The soft and pungent cheese just needed releasing from its bamboo box, the chorizo could be sliced and simmered in red wine and served warm; cucumbers, olives, and greenery for salads and garnish — all these could wait. Now she could relax a bit longer on the shady veranda, looking out over the river and catching enough of the late afternoon sun to be warmed but not burned.



And she could also, she thought, be quite relaxed about her post-shower *déshabillé*. Wisteria, or whatever those creepers were called, hid her by its profusion from the neighbours on the island, and the far bank of the river, beyond the weir, was too far for any but the most powerful binoculars.

With the book on her lap, Epifanea smiled at the overblown description of the heroine's shower, sensuous to the point of parody, and in such contrast to her own quick rinse, a sluicing away of the stickiness of a hot day's walking, rather than working up a lather — in more than one sense.

She laughed at the thought that not only was her linen gown a cut-price version of Ms Gower's silk kimono, but neither woman had bothered to pull them round her body, much less tie their sashes.

She blushed as she realised that her free hand, like that of the fictional character, had been idly caressing her own body and breasts as she read.

And she screamed when she heard the whistle and saw the boatman standing atop his barge, as it rose in the lock just beyond the end of the garden. The laughter and round of noisy applause from the rest of the crew, as she gathered the robe around her and ran into the house didn't help.

She had to travel half way down the bottle of Burgundy and savour the buttery flavour of the wine and the melting goose liver on its slice of fluffy, crusty bread, before she could laugh about it. This was helped by the knowledge that those men, possibly raising glasses to her and indulging their gross fantasies, would by now be a long way up-river to the North West.

He wasn't a lot of help. Rather than sympathetic, he regarded her experience with a mixture of levity and jealousy.

Great. Froggy bargees get an eyeful and you can't even give me a quick flash on messenger?!

I've told you before: I don't do sexting

You don't trust me

If he'd known a sulking emoji, he'd have used it. Not that he needed to, she thought.

I trust you now but who knows what might happen in future?

I trust you sober too haha

He wasn't amused now. Conversation ended abruptly and she finished the day and the wine in sombre mood.

## IX

### Goose Fat and Garlic

*In the hills of southern France  
She found the chance  
For wild romance —  
She joined the dance*

The traveller Tredwell was not acquainted with the works of the poet Nugent. She wasn't even sure that the poet Nugent existed. On the evidence of her book's epigraph, she hoped not.

At first she adored  
*Les villes de Périgord*  
But the more she explored,  
The more she felt bored

"That's at least as good. Or as bad," she thought, as she scribbled her own ditty. "Elsbeth Nugent, eat your heart out."

She worried that she was probably being unfair on the southern French region. She'd never been to Périgord and wasn't sure she could point it out on a map. She reckoned she was as close to it as she'd be getting on this trip, both geographically and gastronomically. But she had the idea it would be a rural, not to say bucolic paradise for some, if a bit lacking in stimulation for a city-loving culture-vulture like herself.

That being said, the people of Périgord (Périgordians? Périgordites?) were apparently among the longest-lived in the world. Or perhaps, she thought, with so little entertainment, it just *seems* longer.

Much of their longevity was attributed to their diet, particularly the huge quantities of goose fat and garlic it contained. And that, said Eppy, can be obtained most anywhere, not just in the controversial capital of *foie gras d'oie*. Still by the lazy river (though more wary of passing boatmen), still on her island near the town and a short train ride from the big city, she could cook an old favourite, with a dash of the *Montrachet*, and still have enough wine to accompany it.

Slow simmering was needed — for food and lovers, she thought with a wry smile. If all he missed about her was the sight of her boobs and minge, he could go without the rest for a day or two. On the other hand, if garlic *is* an aphrodisiac, this dish could lead to serious frustration. To be on the safe side she limited herself to two plump and pungent cloves.

The star of the show was large, thick, juicy *côtelet de porc*, known back home as a gradely pork chop, with half a kidney nestling in its arc. After rubbing it all over with one cut clove, she made a number of nicks with the sharp end of her knife, into which she inserted tiny slivers cut from the aromatic segments. Lightly sprinkled then it was

with salt and freshly ground black pepper, rubbed in with a coating of olive oil, through which her fingers slid over the lubricious flesh, as she told herself to stop being silly, for the action and thoughts of the garlic's alleged effects turned her thoughts in salacious but unwelcome directions.

Potatoes. Po – tay – toes. Potatoes are not remotely sexy, she told herself. Put on some dance music and peel a potato. Then chop it into small cubes and salt it.

*When I wake up to a brand new day  
It makes me happy, it makes me feel that way*

The only thing getting turned on in this kitchen is a pair of gas burners on the hob. And those on only a low heat.

*I bring the sunshine; I bring the stars at night  
You know I'll be there to make you feel alright*

Her shuffling phone having selected some Nineties house choons, she bopped her way round the kitchen, stopping in one place long enough to dig out a small and a large le Creuset skillet. Once on the heat each was treated to a generous spoonful of goose fat, which slipped and slid around as it melted. Into the large pan went the cutlet, while its smaller companion played host to the potato cubes and some thinly-sliced (and rapidly, because almost-forgot) onion. The second clove of garlic, smashed and chopped, was divided between the two pans.

*And when you're down, just listen to me boy  
You can count on me 'cause I will bring you Joy*

No vampires would be sinking their teeth into Epifanea's neck tonight. Or probably for the rest of the month.

*Gonna bring you Joy  
Gonna bring you Joy*

Five minutes later, she turned over the chop and gave the potatoes a gentle stir. As Keith Flint invited her to smack his bitch up, an invitation she politely declined, she reopened the wine and poured herself a generous glass.

*And some for you*, she said to the meat, tipping in just enough to moisten the base of the pan. The goose fat and the juices from the meat were in themselves enough to produce a *jus*, if not quite a gravy; the wine just contributed a little more flavour and lightened the texture. Moving the potatoes around one more time was a prelude to turning both rings down as low as they would go without being extinguished and covering each with a well-fitting lid.

In twenty minutes or so she would stir once more what a tiresome search of the internet had finally revealed to be *pommes sarladaise*; until now she'd only known it as a French version of its Spanish cousin, the olive-oil-based *patatas pobres*. That stirring done, a handful of pitted green olives would be added to the chops, when they were turned for one last time. And not long after that she would boil some sugar snap peas and check the sauce with the meat, adding a dash more wine if need be, while she topped up her glass in preparation for the serving and the enjoying, which would be accompanied by the more soothing sounds of a Mozart piano concerto.

But while she waited to perform these actions, she stood on the veranda looking out at the river; though now respectably clad in shorts and a tee shirt, she kept a wary eye out for vulgar boatmen while she sipped on her wine and imagined his frustration at having his messages ignored.

Another one vibrated her muted phone. Idly she looked at it.

"If you want to win me round that sort of pic is *not* the way to do it. 'I show you mine, now show me yours', is pathetic, even by your standards!"

— she thought, but did not reply. Boyfriends, like pork chops, sometimes need to simmer in their own juice.

## X Tagine

*Come with me to the Casbah.*

Epifanea had been intrigued by the high-camp, exotic imagery on the website and delighted by the modest cost of what looked more like a Moroccan *souk* than an apartment, even in North Africa. Where it wasn't.

But the owner's roots evidently were, and Eppy was delighted to find her new home from home was even more opulent than it looked on the website. The kitchen was an especial treat, the room and its provisions being shared with Ahmed's otherwise separate living quarters.

From deep within her psyche the imp of the perverse was shouting, *Make mince and tatties! Fish and chips! Anything but Moroccan!* Until Ahmed's wife told her she could make use of any of the equipment *and* any of the ingredients, and she was met with the sight of a range of earthenware tagines, jars of preserved fruits and vegetables and all manner of spices, including the mix called *ras al hanout*. The imp was banished for a season and a slow-cooked tagine was planned.

Oh so were speaking again?

Might be.

But you gotta see this place

Wow. You in Tangier?

no course not

Thought you'd run off with Pepe Lemoko

Chance'd be a fine thing

Nah you're stuck with me

If I want 2b. Might not want a moody  
cow as a gf

Moody?! Who was sulking and  
sending dickpics?

Let's not go there again. Food porn  
will have to do

That's more like it. Look at this then

A one-man tagine?

One-person!  
They got all sizes here. Ahmed and Renaté

So what's in the mix tonight? Swedish meatballs and banana? Lutefisk and apple?

Haha they're going out.  
Chicken and lemon for 1

Wish I was there

So do I ... almost

\*Checks flight times\*

Won't be here long enough, buster

A man can dream

I've noticed. Gotta go shops now

Love you

Yeah. I know. Hugs ♥♥♥

No bazaars were in the offing, no, nor souks or casbahs either. A cornucopian hypermarket supplied her needs, a chicken thigh, a potato, onion and carrot, and a small pot of plain yoghurt. And the cutest pot plant as a gift for her hosts. She sat at a bar by the river for a spot of lager and people watching. And musing on her life and loves.

He wasn't so bad, better than most of her lukewarm relationships. Quite considerate and open-minded — for a guy, anyway. The quote, *As well him as any other*, sprang to her mind, but from where she couldn't recall. And she felt sure she could trust him, and that he trusted her. No doubt his friends made reference to the cat being away, like some of hers had suggested she should have a lover in every port. But somehow she just knew that nothing like that was going to happen.

No, for all his faults, he was a keeper. When she got home there'd be serious thought given to long-term plans of home and even family. But not before they'd spent a few wild days — and especially nights — making up — more than making up — for his disappointments over not receiving any 'feelthy peectures',

Katrina had said the book might give her some new ideas, though whether that was meant to be for when she got home to him, or for testing out on passing gigolos, she

was far from sure. But Katrina must have had a very dull sex life, or at least a dim view of theirs, if she thought this tiresomely-written shagfest might introduce her to anything she hadn't already known about — and, in most cases, tried.

*Oh well, takes the mind off food*, she told herself. And a slow-cooking tagine gives a woman a couple of hours to wade through a couple more chapters and half a dozen more fucks. Eppy wondered where these characters found the energy.

From wandering through quaint dockside streets and round a sizeable art gallery she was sufficiently fatigued; thus the extra effort of cutting up carrot, onion and potato could be classed exhausting enough to merit that large, relaxing glass of 'classic' lager.

A thin drizzle of oil to coat the base of the tagine. Thickset slices of soon-to-be-caramelised carrot sat slippery on top, over a gentle heat. The rest built up in layers of bitesize chunks, topped with the boned chicken thigh and a finecut clove of the inevitable garlic. Crushed over the top was half a chicken stock cube and sprinkled with it a generous spoonful of the spice mix known as *best in shop*. *Ras el hanout* is as indeterminate as pre-blended 'curry powder', but it saves messing about assembling a mix from cardamom, chilli, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, and other things which didn't all begin with 'c', such as rose petals and ash berries. Such messing about seemed too much like hard work at home; in a foreign kitchen where one was a guest, albeit paying, it seemed impolite too. Though in the case of Ahmed and Renaté, unlikely they'd be without any of those ingredients or mind her using them.

In fact the smell of the mix, its texture and the hand-written and dated label suggested it was Ahmed's own blend, specifically for poultry. She later found this to be the case, a combination of which he was very proud and, as she'd discovered before her hosts returned home, justly so.

His coriander was home grown too, in the tiny shared patch of garden behind the flats. She snipped off and chopped a few leaves and stalks and scattered them over the top, along with some sea salt and a generous grind of black pepper. No more than a tablespoon of water needed to be splashed over the top, washing down some of the spices and helping them to permeate, the circulating steam under the conical lid needing no more to propagate a rich sauce out of all the natural juices.

The heat reduced almost as far as it would go, everything could sit there for an hour or so, before she took a break from the literary delights of *Picnics of Passion* to add a quartered baby lemon, evidently also preserved by Ahmed's fair hands (so many friends advised her to preserve her own back home, but bothered could she never be), and a spoonful of honey to balance the sourness.

*A bit like life and relationships*, she thought, smiling.

*Jeez! I gotta break this metaphor addiction.*

Just as Noël Coward once commented on how potent cheap music can be, Ms Tredwell now started to cultivate similar opinions about corny erotica. Maybe it had something to do with today's texting and (almost) making up, with reveries regarding a passionate reunion, but she found herself wishing that tonight she was in a totally

self-contained apartment and not a shared space to which her guests would return at some unspecified time, with probably-too-thin walls.

This led to wondering what it might be like if the walls were on the thin side and her *hosts* were the noisy lovers?

But then all such thoughts were dispelled as she read a passage in her book in which Janey and — who was it this time? — ah, yes, Craig — indulged their desires in a position that would have brought on fits of laughter, if it hadn't first brought back painful memories of the time she had tried it with him — or was that someone else? How embarrassing, on so many levels. All she recalled clearly was the discomfort and the cost of repairing that table.

She threw the book aside and went to the kitchen to dish up the tagine, top it with a BSD (or British Standard Dollop) of plain yogurt and, of course, take a photo to send back home.

If his reply showing a sorry-looking portion of fish and chips in a polystyrene tray was supposed to elicit pity, it failed completely. Well, almost completely.



## XI

### Goulash

Gladsome was our Epifanea at having booked two nights in Ahmed's North African fantasy apartment. Her hosts had turned out to be as charming as their accommodation had appeared online, and with them she could sit long into the night, sipping wine and talking about life. And mainly about food.

Ahmed's wife, Renaté hailed from Budapest, so naturally conversation turned to the dishes of Hungary. Eppy was able to impress with her knowledge of a few of those that were not just goulash.

That she had eaten *kárpáti borszata* and tried her hand at making *sólet*, the Magyar version of cassoulet, albeit in a simplified form, impressed her hostess immensely.

"In Spain," she said, "they make *fabada*, which also has in the bloody pudding, I think."

Eppy laughed.

"*Morcillo* — black pudding, we call it. Yes, I've had that too. But I like the paprika in *sólet*. The nearest British cuisine gets is tinned baked beans with what they claim are pork sausages."

Epifanea even knew that a true *gulyás* was a soup and not the chunky stew most Brits assumed (and she most often made, with goodsize cubes of meat and spud, and more lumps than liquid). But even as a soup, served with large hunks of crusty bread, it was one of her main course mainstays.

And of course Renaté kept a good supply of the finest Hungarian paprika, dark, fruity, aromatic and somehow a notch or seven richer than even the best delis sold back home.

"We girls should cook big *gulyás* together tomorrow!" she had said in the early hours of the morning.

"Does Ahmed cook?" Eppy asked the next day, as she and Renaté chopped onions and potatoes, the man in question being busy slaughtering zombies on a distant planet to make it fit for human habitation.

"Oh yes. We both have our specials. Couscous, tagine, *foul medames*, Mediterranean salads, anything with an eggplant."

For some reason, Renaté seemed to find her final comment hilarious and nearly choked on her wine with giggling. Epifanea smiled with her, more out of politeness than understanding.

"So you have boyfriend in UK? Why he don't come with you?"

"Mainly because of his job. But I wanted to travel alone anyway."

"Why? You don't love him? You sound loving when he phone."

"Yes, of course," she replied, surprised by Renaté's assessment but saying nothing to contradict it. "In fact we're thinking about starting a family and ..."

"You mean make babies?"

"Er, yes, I suppose I do mean 'make babies'." Eppy laughed. "And once we've made one I know travels like this will be out of the question for quite a while."

"What is the question?" asked a confused Hungarian.

"Sorry? Oh I see. No. 'Out of the question' means it will not be possible. To travel so freely and easily with a baby in tow — I mean 'with us'. What about you and Ahmed?"

"Oh yes. We make already. Is still in oven, haha. Four months. Nearly half cook already."

"Congratulations!" said Eppy, giving her hostess a spontaneous hug, a risky manoeuvre when said hostess was chopping a green pepper with a fierce, sharp blade.

"*Ovatos!* Careful! Are you OK?"

"Oh God, sorry. Yes, no harm done." Eppy checked theatrically her garments and skin for holes. Both women laughed, causing Ahmed to turn suddenly and get blown to pieces by an alien stormtrooper or something. What he said was, Eppy assumed, an Arabic swearword. She didn't ask; he went back to his game.

Renaté put garlic and bacon pieces into the Dutch oven with a little olive oil, and turned up the gas a little.

"This called *Székely gulyás*," she said. Some say from town of Szeged, some say invented for writer Székely. Restaurant have things left at end of day — meats, *gulyás*, er ... *savanyú kápossta*?"

"Sauerkraut," said Eppy as Renaté pointed to a jar of pickled cabbage. "Yes, we use the German word."

"OK, sauerkraut. So he say, 'put them all in pot'. You like sauerkraut?"

"Oh yes, I love it. Not in large quantities on its own, but I love it in Polish *bigos*. This seems similar."

"Yes. And different also." Again the Hungarian seemed inordinately amused. "So, you will marry boyfriend for make family?"

"I don't think so. I think he's more traditional than I am, though."

"You don't want him *put a ring on it*?"

Renaté did an amusing version of Beyoncé's dance.

"Haha, no, I'm not a prize pig to be tagged. And I've lost count of the friends who found the 'security' of that ring was just an illusion. We'll use wills and other legal documents to protect our interests, just in case."

She smiled and added, "And anyway, I know people who can find him and kill him if he cheats or leaves."

"You are serious?!"

It was Epifanea's turn to laugh and to confuse.

"No, no, no! Only joking. Did I worry you? Anyway, the onions are in; now the meat?"

Not yet. Green peppers — is right name? Yes; peppers for one minute to get softer. *Then* the meat. They say original restaurant had three types. This just young beef."

"Veal. Looks delicious."

"Yes. Just cook away pink colour, then add paprika."

"Oh, that smells so good. Much better than I have back home."

"You will take some when you go. It is insisted. But now I add some tomato, cut up. Some tradition cooks say no tomato; came from Mexico only four hundred year since. Very new ingredient.

Renaté's random laughter was becoming infectious, perhaps helped by the wine, dark red and plentiful.

"*Egri Bikavér*," read Eppy.

"Blood of bulls," said Renaté; "from Eger in North of Hungary."

"Yes, I remember that name. My father said Bull's Blood was a popular wine in the Eighties. It's bloody good in fact."

In honour of her guest's expressed appreciation, the hostess topped up her glass. She also poured cold water into the pot, to cover its contents.

"Once is boiled we turn down to low and cook for hour, hour and half. We drink and talk and drink and prepare *csipetke* paste. And drink." And laugh.

So drink and talk and drink they did. Renaté seemed fascinated by, if not obsessed with her guest's love life.

"So you travel all on own. Many lovers in different cities?"

"No, no, no! Would you do that to Ahmed?"

"Of course no! Sorry. But would not travel without, either. You never tempt? Your body not miss jiggy-jiggy?"

"*Jiggy-jiggy*?!" Epifanea had to cover her mouth to avoid spraying the table with Bull's Blood. "Well — a bit, maybe. Naturally. But mainly I'm glad of a break, even if my body isn't."

"Not so good at home?" Renaté's smirk suggested she meant 'in bed'.

"*Very* good at home! Maybe too good."

She was about to say that maybe the good sex clouded her judgement in other areas, but she neither wanted to have to explain the phrase, nor go into detail.

But fortunately this was not a topic that could be sustained for ninety minutes, so, after Eppy had half-grudgingly admitted that in all her zig-zag whimsical travels round Europe, yes, a few handsome and even naked young guys had caught her eye (and after she'd explained that idiom), but that none of these had even slightly tempted her or caused more than the slightest tingling in her loins (a favourite phrase of his that she now avoided using altogether), they spoke mainly about all the food she had cooked and eaten, and slightly about the other sights she had seen on the way.

Not that the topic of love and sex was put totally aside. Renaté's new-found concern for the Englishwoman's love and sex life flavoured much of their conversation in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, and came to the surface once again when holiday reading matter was discussed.

"You are reading sexy book, I think? Picture on front ..."

"Oh, God, no! I mean yes, I *am* reading, and, yes, it is *meant* to be sexy, but it's *so* bad. Badly written, stupid story — terrible."

She tried to explain why, if it was so bad, she was reading this instead of something more intellectually stimulating. Renaté was very impressed that Eppy had even heard of her compatriot, László Krasznahorkai, but totally baffled as to why any Hungarian would actually read his turgid, meaningless waffle, much less someone with so many good books written in her own language to choose from. But she wasn't as curious about the roots of such lunacy as she was to know what kind of things went on between the covers of *Picnics of Passion*.

Ms Tredwell obliged with an exaggerated and comic account. She quoted and misquoted some of the tortuous and torturous descriptions of both feelings and actions.

"To be honest, it's not very explicit — not many sexy details —yet. But I think as it goes on it might get a lot worse."

"Or better!" said her hostess, once again with that knowing smirk. "And it not make you want ...?"

"Jiggy-jiggy?"

They both laughed so much that Ahmed turned the sound up on his game.

Eppy protested that the writing was so bad it countered any stimulating effect of the subject matter. Nonetheless, she admitted to herself alone that even badly-described sex had some kind of effect on the more primitive parts of the brain.

Renaté glanced at her watch and announced that the time had come for her to show Epifanea her *csipetke* — with a sense of profound relief, Eppy remembered that *csipetke* referred not to anything excessively personal, but the tiny dumplings that were to accompany the goulash. The Hungarian provided a running commentary.

"I break egg in bowl. Then I beat. I add little water and salt. Then I add ... er, *liszt*? Yes, flour, not composer. I make stiff shape — like *fasz*!"

Her laughter and the obscene gesture she made with the phallic piece of dough left Eppy with no need to use her translation app.

"Now we leave it on own for while — like you!" and once again she laughed heartily at her own comment.

Eppy smiled.

"While that rest," Renaté continued, covering the bowl with a tea towel, "we add — sauerkraut, yes? We add to *gulyás*. Stir in, let warm up."

"Like you," said Eppy by way of riposte. She realised she wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but as it seemed to bring yet more laughter from the chef, it hardly mattered.

"Yes, I very warm. And 'hot'. Ahmed think so anyway. But he play stupid war, we set nice table."

And so they did. And once it was set, Renate stirred into the soup a large spoonful of *tejföl*, which was obviously soured cream, leaving a delicately decorative swirl atop the pan. She had set a pan of water on the stove, which was now at a rolling boil, so she gave Eppy the great honour of pinching small pieces from the dough and dropping them into the water.

"Fast as you can. This is what *csipetke* means," she said, as she demonstrated the pinching action.

Once the noodles were swollen, cooked and drained, they were placed on the table and joined by the goulash and green salad, so the warrior reluctantly came back on leave from the battlefield to join the grateful womenfolk back home. After many a solitary meal, Eppy was moved by the conviviality of this one, probably in part due to the effect of liberal helpings of rich, red Egri wine. She was touched by the deep affection, free from excessive sentimentality, shown by her hosts, obviously as comfortable with each other's foibles as happy with their good qualities, and she found herself much more amused than discomfited by Renaté's occasional suggestive looks and knowing smiles.

When she messaged home from her bed that she missed him, she meant it.

## XII

### *Mole Poblano*

Sor Asunta's announcement had thrown the convent of Santa Rosa into a panic. The Archbishop was on his way to pay an episcopal visit. The *Abadesa's* strict instruction to make everything ready at lightning speed was felt most keenly in the refectory. *A feast worthy of His Grace* would be no small commandment to fulfil, and Mother Superior reminding them of what Our Lord could achieve with a few small loaves and fishes served only to remind them that what bread they did have was far from fresh.

Nonetheless, Sor Juana prayed fervently for inspiration, and inspiration came unto her. Christ made use (with divine aid, it must be said) of what He had available, so Juana started with an inventory. More than loaves and fishes to be sure, but feeding one Archbishop was a bigger challenge than five thousand Galilean *campesinos*.

One turkey (old and scrawny), some tortillas (stale), onions and garlic, chilli peppers (naturally), other herbs and spices from Sor Inmaculada's garden, and those vital ingredients from their New World home, maize flour, tomatoes and chocolate.

Epifanea Tredwell cooked with delight dishes created on the fly. From Chicken Marengo, born (some say) on the battlefield, to chicken wings cooked to feed late night callers in Buffalo; and the Mexican national dish was one of her favourites. The sheer number of ingredients in her recipe book had limited it to dinner parties, whenever she could find guests who didn't suddenly remember a prior engagement at the words *turkey in chocolate sauce*. Even he had been reluctant to try it, until she convinced him that the chilli would overpower any other flavour; this was far from true but she knew his machismo would balk at the idea that he might seem scared of Scovilles.

But once she worked out that the necessary spices were always in her larder and could easily be combined in small quantities, it became a mainstay of her repertoire, even for the solitary diner. Added to this the increasingly common supply of breasts, legs or chunks meant that a turkey now was not just for Christmas. So she could reproduce the original recipe (or at least the one given in her *Round the World* recipe book) with ease. Now that more books in Europe featured such exotic fare, she had seen other versions, using different spice mixes and even the inclusion of things like banana or plantain, something she always meant to try one day.

For now, on her travels, she simply carried a sachet of spices — fennel seeds, allspice, cloves, sesame seeds and chilli flakes — and waited to find that kitchen with the mortar and pestle or, for lazier days, a very small blender.

Which is why now, so far from anywhere remotely *Latino*, she was about to take the parting advice of Ahmed and Renaté and *get some spice in your life*. Though she was well aware that chilli was not what Renaté had in mind.

The tender turkey escalope from the local market would not need boiling anywhere near as long as Sor Juana's had in the 1880s; half an hour's simmering would be plenty to cook it and produce a meaty stock. In place of the pounded stale tortilla, half a slice of toast would go into the blender and give body to the sauce. Whizzing it with a clove of garlic, half an onion, a small peeled tomato, some blanched almonds, half a snack-pack of raisins and a generous spoonful of her spice mix, produced a thick, pungent paste.

Corn tortillas had proved elusive, as had flour ones in fact; she had no intention of making her own, so some boiled long-grain rice would suffice. A small tub of ready-made guacamole and a pot of the ubiquitous soured cream would be the side dishes.

Which left only the chocolate. To the Aztecs a bitter, savoury flavouring, a luxury import from the mountains, having spiritual associations with human sacrifice, it took the Spanish to turn it into a sweetened confectionary item, imbued with an equally religious significance for many consumers. It was a small square from the bar of an unsweetened, 100% cocoa version that Epifanea Tredwell carried in her culinary travel kit which now evoked that earlier usage; dissolved in the hot stock once the turkey pieces had been set aside to drain, it gave the sauce its character, underpinning all those other spices, bulbs and seeds.

The kitchen had no corn oil, nor lard, so she settled for sunflower oil in which to fry the paste. The scent of the frying spices assailed her nostrils and made her cough and sneeze but she stirred it around until the softening aroma showed that the spices had been 'cooked off', then added, a little at a time, the chocolatey stock, stirring it until she had a thick, rich gravy.

A little salt and pepper and a chopped sprig of parsley, and it was ready to have the turkey returned to its warm and velvety embrace. At home she'd often sprinkle some almond flakes and sesame seeds, lightly toasted in a dry pan, on the top. Here, after a long day of historic sightseeing, she couldn't be bothered. Sufficient unto the day was the draining of the rice, putting it into a bowl and tipping the turkey and the sauce onto it. The soured cream and the mashed avocado sat at the side in their plastic tubs.

*Presentation is everything*, she told herself.

According to one of its many creation myths, chop suey was invented when the Chinese Ambassador to the USA was asked by the then president if he would prepare some authentic Chinese food for him and the first lady. Being no cook but reluctant to lose face, he threw an assortment of items into a wok and stir-fried them with noodles, as he had seen done many times since childhood. When the delighted (or at least diplomatic) president asked the name of the dish, the reply in Chinese meant *just a bit of everything*, but sounded to American ears like *chop suey*.

Similarly, and equally doubtfully, it is claimed that when the Archbishop of Puebla asked an exhausted Sor Juana how she came up with her delicious offering, she replied using the Nahuatl word for a mishmash, saying, "I made a *moli*". A legend and a national dish were born.

Eppy washed hers down with lots of cold beer — making a mental note to use a little less chilli in future mixes — and prepared to Skype home in cheerful mood.

"Hello handsome. How are things in Glockamorra?"

"You what?"



### XIII

#### Kimchi Bokum

In Spring, the poet tells us, a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love. Said fancy does not take kindly to being tricked into thoughts of pickled cabbage.

How would I know?

You could google it

If I gave a fuck I guess I could

OK OK don't worry about it

I won't. No worries

Just wondered if you knew

The question that had shifted the conversation away from his sexual frustration and sordid references to masturbation was, *when do you reckon people first pickled cabbage?*

As Tristram Shandy's father so famously asked, "Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?"

But it seemed a natural thing to ask, and not just as a diversionary tactic. After travelling through Central and Eastern Europe, where sauerkraut, with its many names, was ubiquitous, it came as some surprise, even in the global village of today, to find an Asian store on the shores of the Adriatic Sea, which inevitably stocked the spicy Korean equivalent, *mat kimchi*.

So Epifanea's thoughts had naturally turned to the history of food preservation in general and to the pickling of vegetables in particular. People write of the growth of civilisations in terms of the wheel, weapons, architecture, but surely the storage of foods and the ability to make them available outside their season and beyond their natural use-by date must have been the major factor in allowing previously wandering communities to settle down in the first place. Hunt and gather, by all means, but how y'all gonna store your shit?

But how did some woman (and she had no doubt it was a woman), all those millennia ago, first discover the preservative powers of vinegar?

In fact who the heck first made and kept vinegar at all? Who found that a batch of fermented drink had gone sour, and thought of doing anything other than pouring it away, far from the noses of the tribe?

"Eurghh! This is foul! I know: let's put those tasty roots and leaves in it for a few weeks and see what happens," did not seem a logical or likely scenario.

But, as with, "Look at these grass seeds. Why don't we crush them to a powder and mix them with water and stuff and then heat it all up? We could call it 'bread', maybe?" she was aware that a lot of stages were missing from the narrative.

She also knew that Koreans loved their *kimchi* even more than Alsatians loved sauerkraut. A Korean astronaut on the International Space Station said it was the thing she longed most to get back for, ahead of boyfriend and family.

*Maybe she had a bf like mine.*

Her thoughts shifting from archæological gastronomy to personal diet, she wondered if there was any foodstuff so crucial to her own happiness. Nothing sprang to mind; not even chocolate was that important. Floating in a tin can, in space or on the mighty rolling ocean, it might be the restricted nature of the diet, the lack of variety, that got to her, but there was no one ingredient, certainly nothing as all-pervasive or indispensable as *kimchi* was in the Korean diet. Nothing that would be calamitously conspicuous by its absence.

These rambling meditations occupied her mind for a languid hour or so, as she sipped her beer and nibbled on snacks, looking out over the Gulf of Trieste. They took her mind gratefully away from his texts and her reading about *Le Bistrot de l'Amour*, a restaurant where surprisingly little cooking or eating seemed to take place. She just hoped the heroine's latest paramour wiped the kitchen surfaces down thoroughly, after their love making session had apparently made good use of all of them.

No need for any extra chilli pepper; one bite of the kimchi in the jar confirmed that her travelling spice store was superfluous tonight, though no fire extinguishers would be called for either. Perfectly piquant. She repeated the phrase a few times, lips pursed in plosive pleasure. Pork, partly thawed and trimmed of fat, she cut into strips; these she placed in a bowl with soy sauce, a little mustard, a dash of fragrant Alsatian wine and a healthy splash of sesame oil (the small bottle a slight extravagance and the large unused portion, she hoped, a nice gift for her hosts). Thaw and marinade at the same time.

In the absence of Korean *udon*, and making sticky rice being too much trouble, the small pack of Chinese, spinachy-green wheat noodles would be perfectly acceptable. So: garlic, onion, kimchi, coriander and marinading pork. A while to go until suppertime, so a stroll by the river is called for.

Or would be.

The weather, so far so kind, suddenly soggy. OK, stay in, and let's read about sex, bay-bee.

Taste.

Taste was the key, for both food and frolics in fiction.

Tasty and tasteful; spicy, not coarse.

*Picnics of Passion* seemed to swing from bland to blistering, never quite finding what to Eppy was the right, sexy, tone. Nonetheless coy descriptions and references to 'members' and 'down below' served to make her impatient for the crude accounts of hard-pumping action, however badly written. Perhaps that was the idea. The

anticipation of, the impatience for, more explicit narrative, got her juices flowing far more effectively than the tawdry text itself.

Literally so. Having tutted and sighed over one frankly delineated sex act after another, asking herself who on earth could find this sort of thing arousing, she was chastened on her next visit to the lavatory to be confronted with the abundantly moistened state of her own underwear. And when her hand instinctively went to check, as if it could be any other way, that her vulva was equally sodden, she was somehow still surprised at how pleasurable she found her own touch.

*Well, it just goes to show,* she thought with a smile.

*Oh well, why not?*

The slow, rhythmic motion of her fingers on her well-oiled clitoris brought an immediate pleasure that proved how successfully her 'sordid' reading matter had, after all, acted as foreplay. If only his was as effective, she mused, but dismissed this as unfair.

The sudden, rhythmic chiming of her phone's ringtone completely destroyed the mood, and half an hour of evasive chat later, she wanted nothing more than to cook up some spicy food, followed by a shower and an early night.

*Maybe I'll feel more like it later.*

She didn't. She slept.

## XIV Gaeng Panang Pla

*Colours of the world!  
Spice up your life!*

No, no, no; not a Spice Girls earworm!

### น้ำพริกแกงพะแนง

Eppy couldn't read the Thai script, any more than she could the Cyrillic under it, so thank heaven for stickers which covered the other necessary bases. The sachet of paste was just what she wanted. Panang curries had a touch more sweetness and less spice than other red curries, and peanuts gave them a fullness that placed them high among her favourite Thai sauces.

So she sat by the lake, hoping that concentrating on ingredients needed might drive the songs unwanted from her mind, and also stop her from asking herself why, why, why she hadn't shared.

*Ah, damn it.*

Why hadn't she simply joked frankly and freely about last night's *onanismus interruptus* with him, 'come clean about not coming clean'? Why had she parried his suggestive comments by insisting her breathlessness was simply due to running across the apartment to the phone?

Onions, garlic, a pepper.

It's not as if it was a taboo subject or even a source of embarrassment between them. They watched each other from time to time, and he had made a number of almost witty references to them 'keeping their hands to themselves' while they were apart.

Finding a small tin of coconut milk had been the original inspiration. She'd manage without *naam pla* – fish sauce – a pinch of salt and a splash of light soy would do for that — and a squeeze of lime of course; don't need it all for gin and tonics.

Before she left home, they agreed they probably – he certainly – would amuse themselves from time to time.

"My dear, your only co-respondent will be [toss-spot.com](http://toss-spot.com)."

He assumed she'd be less active — that is, until he saw the reading matter her friend had pressed on her. And although she was still confident he'd be way ahead of her, she was quite happy to admit it would be likely — with or without the assistance of steamy 'literature'. She'd even said, with a completely straight face, that it was more likely to be anticipation of their passionate reunion sex that drove her to self-satisfaction, rather than any of Janey Gower's amorous adventures.

Rice she had, and beer, supplied in the apartment with a printed price list in various languages, and an honesty box by the fridge. Though at home she might add a kaffir lime leaf or an inch of lemon grass, not to mention a few pea aubergines and a chili

pepper, all the essential flavourings were no doubt present and correct in the paste itself.

So she sat on the terrace with her list nestling between the pages of the offending volume (if offending was the right word), contemplating the views of the 52-metre tower on the island church, the cuboid slab of calories beside her coffee cup, and the question of why she couldn't just tell him he'd interrupted her self-gratification.

Oh well, she thought, as she detached a forkful of the *kremšnita* from the block and transported it dreamily to her mouth; maybe it was just that she feared the likely awkwardness, him trying to cajole her into resuming, and on camera too. Sometimes a woman just wants to fly solo. And the mood had been well and truly broken. Nonetheless she'd decided to postpone, until she was safely in the privacy of her apartment, reading any more about the group sex that Samantha and Janey were about to launch themselves into with the young Swedish couple and for all she knew, a few more passers-by.

Cakes on vacation contain no calories, she assured herself, as she took another forkful of the Chantilly- and custard-topped pastry. Nonetheless she could tell that she wouldn't be eating her curry too early in the evening.

Epifanea sat by the lake and listened to the water lapping under the terrace. She took a few photos of the view and a selfie with the last piece of 'Schnitte' on its way to her cream-flecked lips. Idly she weighed up the possibility of coming clean (if that wasn't an unfortunate turn of phrase) when she communicated with him that night. Blissfully, she wasn't even conscious that *Spice Up Your Life* had ceased to loop in her brain.

The apartment was pretty basic, but clean and tidy. All the normal facilities were present and the bed wasn't as uncomfortable as it first appeared. There were no views of the picturesque locale, which was a pity, though not surprising at the price. Most importantly for a travelling gourmet like Eppy, the kitchen was compact and functional, and even boasted a rice cooker. This was less surprising than it might have been when she noted that the owner's name was more Chinese than Slovenian. She hadn't met Mr Shen directly, the key being obtained from the paper shop below, but the presence of woks, *chans* and cleavers confirmed her suspicions, and told her she would be fine with one small wok on the two ring stove.

All this for a novel way of preparing the fish for which the lake was so famed. When she'd first googled the area and found many images of anglers beamingly cradling carp the size of small submarines, she'd been concerned. She certainly wasn't intending to buy a whole monster weighing thirty kilos just to make one serving of fish curry, however typical of the location it (the monster, not the dish) might be. Nor was she about to invite a streetful of strangers to Mr Shen's sleeps-three apartment to share it, even if she could find a pot big enough and a sufficient supply of coconut milk. But all was well. As she'd suspected all along, the supermarket on the edge of town had a superb fish counter, and her phone's translation app soon located conveniently-sized portions of what she wanted.

And made him burst into coffee-spraying laughter at the label, for which the linguistic technology was all but redundant.

Krap fileti?!  
Love it

Thought it might amuse

So we both have a krap supper to  
look forward to

That's your choice, mate.  
You're not a bad cook when you put  
your mind to it

Unlike the meat curries she most often made at home, with a fishy version the flesh went in last. Chicken or pork would be added as soon as the curry paste had been mixed into the coconut milk in the warming wok. For *pla* she added the chopped garlic, onion and green pepper first, and ensured the rice was ready too, as the whole thing would take only about ten minutes.

That limesqueeze, soysplash and saltsprinkle would do the umami job of fish sauce. That it was a fish curry anyway meant the imposters would not bring dissatisfaction to the table; and European basil and coriander would stand in nicely for their Asian cousins too.

With seafood, she reminded herself, she would usually use Thai 'holy basil'. So she made the sign of the cross over the mixture and intoned *introibo ad altare Dei*. "Little things ..." would doubtless be his response, and she could hardly demur.

As the stew simmered and the flavours infused, she checked again on the rice in the steamer. Another compromise, the basic long grain for the fragrant jasmine, but, as he would say in his refined way, 'add enough chili and who gives a shit?'

All else being in readiness, she turned up the heat beneath the curry and added the fish fillets, cut into the usual bite-size pieces. After five minutes in the fragrant mixture she declared them cooked to perfection. She placed the rice in a bowl, spooned the velvety concoction over the top and ate it with sensuous pleasure, washing it down with a light local lager. Spicy food anticipating spicy reading. She laughed at the realisation that she was now looking forward to her next poorly-crafted picnic of passion, the chapter that promised group gropings, if not a mass orgy, and the heroine's first experience of lesbian sex.

But this was bedtime reading. A pleasure deferred is a pleasure heightened, as one of Janey's earlier sexual mentors helpfully informed her. First, a late evening stroll by the lake, breathing the fresh air, looking at the moonlight on the water and smiling at

the couples walking and talking lightly, hand in hand, served to heighten the romantic mood and lessen the feeling that the events to unfold were somehow all rather sordid.

Well, if not sordid, a bit naff. Sordid in itself wasn't all bad.

Back in the apartment, she stripped, she showered, she sat back in the bed and began to read. And as Janey Gower started to lose her clothes and some more of her remaining inhibitions with the enticing Swedish bartender and his masseur girlfriend, the phone rang.

"Oh, hello, Mum."

She laid the book aside with a sigh.

"Yes, that's right — It's beautiful here — A Thai curry I made with some of the lake carp — Delicious — Ha ha, well, you know me: when in Rome, do as the Vietnamese do — Oh, nothing; having an early night, reading — Er, Thomas Hardy — That *is* light holiday reading, to me — Escapism? I'm sitting by a lake in amazing scenery, with great food and no one to hassle me; what do I need to escape from? — Oh, he's fine, I think — Yes, we both miss each other, we text or skype most nights — No, not at all tempted; really Mother! — No, I don't think so; anyway he knows I'd find out if he had and cut his goolies off — No, I can do that on my own, thank you — Look, if you just give him a chance, you'd find he really is a nice guy — as men go. Better than the men that already went, at least — no, I don't think I could 'do better' — and no, I don't mean that how it sounds; I mean he's a damn good catch for anyone. Or he will be, with a bit more training — Don't worry about it, I know it's because you care, but I'm not a little girl anymore, OK? — Yeah, good night, Mum. Miss you too — Yeah, won't be long now. Kiss, kiss."

*Well, that's killed that mood. Quick text home ...*

Turning off phone, turning off light Going to sleep, my love, good night
---

*And good night, children, everywhere.*

## XV

### Jambalaya

*"Ain't nothin' spicier than Cajun cookin' honey!"*

There were precious few picnics in among the plentiful passion, Epifanea thought. Food was far from absent and even got involved messily in the action at times, but she wondered if the title was really justified by the plot.

But that Janey Gower had first encountered her latest playmates at a street stall run by an improbable Southern Belle in an even less likely Derbyshire village was inspiration enough for the evening's food. As indeed their post-po'boy shenanigans would hopefully motivate her later.

She'd never been to New Orleans but Ms Tredwell knew how to make Cajun food as well as Ms Gower was learning to *laisser les bon temps rouler*. She also knew that the andouille sausages and tasso that went into a good jambalaya could be replaced with East European *kielbasa* and smoked ham, better than with any standard UK *charcuterie*. She gave thanks for a local market that could sell her small portions of each (enough ham to spare for a sandwich in a packed lunch for tomorrow's long train ride), as well as a small chicken fillet and a couple of prawns.

This was a slightly slimmed-down jambalaya. The full deal could involve clams or even oysters, and be served at large gatherings with a separate creole sauce, which she did in three strengths — medium, hot and napalm — depending on the tolerance of each guest. Tonight she would make it pretty hot, pretty moist and pretty simple, though there would of necessity be enough to supply a quick breakfast, which she could enjoy cold without the accompaniment of his sarcastic gagging and expressions of disgust.

When she got in from the shops, she sat by the window, looking out towards the mountains, and picked up *Picnics*. It's all in the blend, the intrusive author had commented on the chemistry between the foursome, now beginning to remove each other's clothing in a slow, sensuous ballet, though that was all the book told her, leaving her imagination free to fill in the details. This may have been a mistake, as the phrase conjured up for Eppy a farcical scene involving tutus and bulging tights.

Was it the writing or her own cynicism — or perhaps, she had to consider, her own inhibitions — that prevented her suspending her disbelief and subduing her smiles?

Or her obsession with food? Was that a substitute, a sublimation for suppressed desires? Yea or nay, the idea of the perfect blend certainly made her think how important that also was in Louisiana cuisine. The herb and spice blend: thyme, oregano, bayleaf, cayenne, black and white pepper; and the holy trinity, as Cajuns call the mix of green pepper, celery and onions that form the basis of almost every dish. She'd even been able to convince a greengrocer to sell her a single stick of celery, something she couldn't do in her local supermarket. There'd be no need to make a vat of celery soup this time.



Before all the participants were naked and all their various bits and pieces had been described to her in the purplest prose, Eppy, though slightly stirred, was also distracted by these thoughts of culinary preparation. So a saucer of spices and a bowl of veg were soon sitting by the hob, the chicken and charcuterie were chopped and a clove of garlic crushed. Oh, and the prawns peeled and the easy-cook rice rinsed.

*I shall arise and go now and walk down by the stream.  
And a can of lager with me I will take and sit  
and watch the sun go down, and dream.*

The thought of spicy food and even spicier reading caused Epifanea to wax lyrical. It amused more than embarrassed her now to think that she was looking forward to reading crap writing, rather than missing the euphonies of a Woolf, Wolfe or even Wolff, not to mention anticipating the effect it would have on her. Maybe the phrase 'to *use* pornography' wasn't so inaccurate; then again did she simply 'use' food to assuage hunger? Maybe the terminology was itself used to deprecate, and, she said to herself, her masturbation laughed at deprecation.

Her walk, thanks to all these anticipations which now slid towards impatience, was a short one. She was soon back at home with a pan of stock heating on one ring, while the copper-bottomed pan contained cubes of ham and slices of sausage sizzling in a little lard.

Once these were crisped up enough, she turned the heat to medium and added a crushed clove of garlic and the members of the trinity, to soften. Then, giving the base of the pan a good scrape, she turned the heat up once more and added the chicken, letting that cook for three more minutes, while stirring and scraping away.

Half a tin of chopped tomatoes in juice went in and the heat was reduced a little, letting the chicken cook through and occasionally stirring, scraping to infuse the flavours that caramelised on the metal. Then the stock was stirred in, topped up with some more of the tomatoes and brought to the boil. She tasted the sauce, gasped, took a swig of lager and added a couple of chopped spring onions. She gave the mix a good stir before and after adding the prawns and the rice, placed the tight-fitting lid over the pan and turned the gas down low. The recipe she used said to put the lot in a moderate oven for twenty minutes but she didn't even bother to do that at home. A low heat and a couple of stirs did the trick every time, and easier to check when the rice hit that perfect *al dente* state.

After twenty minutes and a little more Passion, Janey Gower was ready for more than just a massage and Epifanea Tredwell was beginning to envy her — but the jambalaya was ready to turn out onto a plate as a spicy appetiser. A smaller portion than usual perhaps. She could always have a little more before she finally turned in, but she didn't want to feel bloated, not when she hit the sack tonight.

*This*, she said to herself *is hot stuff!* Thank heaven for crusty bread and cold lager.

*At first still shy and somewhat embarrassed by the watching couple, she had turned her gaze away, directing it to the full breasts with their proud nipples, the slim waist and smooth pubis of the Swede. But this meant confronting the fact that she was enjoying — and oh, how she was enjoying it — the attention of another woman. Closing her eyes removed the hard-to-process visions but focused all her attention on the actions of her assailant's hands, causing the waves of pleasure rippling through her whole body to intensify.*

*And suddenly the thought of Samantha and Johann watching her became even more exciting than the novelty of those Sapphic embraces.*

'Sapphic embraces'?! Bloody hell. Oh well...

*So she opened her eyes once more, to return their gaze. Though his hand was round Sam's shoulder, cupping one of her girlish breasts, his attention was entirely fixed on the activity on the chaise longue. As was Samantha's, though her left hand was tantalizing his engorged member, fingers flickering up and down it like butterfly wings, causing it to twitch and, combined with the stimulation of the tableau vivant, make his breath laboured and uneven, punctuated as it was with low moans, to which her own increasing ululations added an ever-louder descant ...*

Ululations?

The language mattered not, the images were everything, the effect tantalizing. Was it her own fingers or his fingers or even Ulrike's fingers that now caressed now flicked now rubbed her soaking clitoris? Was it the idea of enacting such a scene, of him watching an expert masseuse, a beautiful woman, bring her closer and closer to the height of pleasure? She hardly knew and cared not a jot. She could read no more of the overwritten prose, could no longer hold the book in fact, but the narrative had done its job.

Fantasy, supplied or conjured up, was no longer needed. Images blurred and mingled together and became an abstract sequence of colours behind her closed eyes. Her whole body tingled and ached, her back arched and relaxed as her buttocks and thighs twitched uncontrollably. After what seemed both like ages and no time at all, the feelings rushed together, centring on her loins, then spread out again into her whole being like a torrent, as her vagina pulsed and she gasped and squealed. Pressing tightly on her clitoris, she prolonged the feeling for as long as she could, letting it gradually subside. She sank three fingers into herself and let them slide sensuously in and out a few times, before withdrawing them, wiping them on the sheet and letting herself relax in the warm afterglow for a long while.

As she headed for the shower, thinking she'd have to put that bedsheet through the washer and tumble dryer before she left, her phone warbled its messenger alert. Without much thought, she turned it off, and threw it back onto the bed.

## XVI

### Breakfast of Champignons

As summer draws to an end all over Europe the coming of Autumn the shortening of the days and the season of mists heralds the beginning of the mushroom season. Varieties abound on groaning market stalls and intrepid travellers begin their post-orgasmic days with a wild fungus omelette.

Well, at least one did.

And back in the UK, even the supermarket, shed-grown, closed-cap, flavour-challenged button is viewed with trepidation by some.

You hung up on me  
What were you up to?

Wanking

LOL  
No, what really?

Really wanking

Wow. Book that good?

Nonono. Thinking of you

Tell me more. Skype

After brekky. Just warming pan

For?

Wild mushroom omelette

Shit. Be careful

Haha market bought not foraged!

Still, don't poison yourself

Not before you tell me more about  
the wanking anyway

I'll try not to. It's a bloody nasty way to go  
I prefer my morts petit

You what?

Tell you later.  
Small black fungi need frying

Butter foaming in the pan, Epifanea threw in the morels, mixed with a coarsely chopped porcini. *Porcino, if there's just the one? Whatever.*

She tossed the mixture in the pan a couple of times, added a splash of lemon juice, a light sprinkling of dried mixed herbs and black pepper, before sliding them out onto a plate, keeping back as much of the fat as she could.

With the heat on high, she poured in the pair of eggs she'd previously beaten together, salted and peppered. Flicking down the lever that dropped two slices of sourdough into the toaster with one hand, she emptied the eggs into the pan with the other. Then she took up the spatula and started gathering the mixture to the centre, allowing the runny top layer to spread and cook at the periphery. While there was still a thin stratum of runny egg on top, she tipped the mushrooms onto one half and expertly folded the other over it.

Letting this cook (on a slightly lower heat) gave her time to pour a little orange juice into a tall flute and top it up from the quarter bottle of sparkling wine she'd bought herself as a treat. A treat she'd intended to save for her last evening away, a farewell to the mainland or an anticipation of homecoming, but after the previous night, she felt she deserved an extra helping of self-pampering.

*What better way to start a day?*

She flipped the omelette over as the toast popped up, as if begging to be buttered. She'd been delighted to find a heart-shaped pastry cutter in the drawer; she was now

able to send him a most romantic photograph of an omelette in rich yellow, flanked by two hearts of golden toast oozing butter.

And then to tip most unromantically the outer segments of each slice on top before tucking in.

"*Le petit mort* — it's what French people call an orgasm."

"Really? Always said they were weird."

It was good seeing him again. She felt a lot more relaxed talking to him now.

"That omelette was yummy!"

"Looked it — apart from the fungus. And what's that? Buck's fizz?"

"Buck's fizz, mimosa, whatever. S'not real champers. Local sparkling brew. And carton juice. Not bad. We'll have the real thing when I get back. How's you?"

"Not so bad. You had a good night then?"

"Tee hee, yes, it was lovely."

"Thinking of me, were you?"

"Absolutely. What else?"

"Well, I thought maybe you were getting off on Swedish masseuses and voyeurism."

"Bloody hell, how did ... ?"

"Come on; you didn't think I'd be able to resist finding a copy of *Dinners of Desire*, did you?"

"*Picnics of Passion!*"

"Oh yeah. I actually have that one too, to be honest."

"Is that for real? Don't tell me you have *Lunches of Lust* as well."

He laughed. A lot. She thought he'd doubled up with laughter, until he straightened up to show the three books he'd just picked up from the coffee table.

"Bloody hell. I was making that up."

"That's what you thought. There's a whole series. There isn't a *Buffets of Bonking*, you'll be glad to hear."

"Thank fuck for that. So, what do you think of them?"

"I'd be lying if I said they hadn't had an effect, but even I think the writing's crap."

"True. I didn't think it was even affecting me, but I did find my gusset was getting soggy."

"Too much information alert."

"Oh dear, getting prudish are we? Women not allowed locker-room bants?"

"No, only joking. Personally though I prefer visual stimulation. And yeah, I sort of feel getting your gusset soggy should be my job, not something I wish to subcontract to Sidonie Gabrielle."

"If that is her real name."

"Yeah, probably some bloke called Sid Gabriel. So — what we gonna do now?"

He looked at her suggestively from the screen.

"Well, I'm going to wash the breakfast things and get my stuff together. I have a coach to catch and then a ferry."

He looked disappointed but said nothing.

"Come on. I'll be there in a few days, and believe me I'll be ready for some red hot loving."

"Should I book a blonde masseuse?"

"Bog off! You're all the masseur I need, and chef, and stud, all rolled into one. I might just lock us in the flat and hide the key for a few days. That 'picnic' was just an appetiser."

"Now you're talking. OK, go get that ferry, send pics of sea, sun, sights and food. I'll wait for the real stuff when you're back and live in person."

"You're learning. Bye."

"Yeah, right. Cheers — *Fuck me!*"

Eppy had whipped open her bathrobe a second before she ended the session.

"Will do, sweetie," she said. "Will do indeed."

## XVII

### Friendly Kakapo

"I'm deconstructing."

"I told you not to eat the mushrooms!"

"Haha, no I'm having a three course Last Supper."

"But you've four nights to go, he said, not without impatience."

"That's the point. Three capitals, three courses; a meal in instalments. Then a symbolic farewell."

"You are completely and utterly bonkers, you do know that?"

"Of course — that's why you love me."

"I don't suppose they'll be typical dishes of Scandinavia?"

"Not really, but they are rehearsals for what I'm going to cook for you on Tuesday."

"But you're back on Saturday."

"I know. When you're taking me out for a light supper on the way from the airport. After that you don't think I'm letting you out of the bedroom for a day or two, do you?"

"Well if you insist. So no meatballs till Tuesday."

"I had something more like a tornado in mind."

"So what's the starter?"

The starter was to be her own invention, and the first problem with that was finding a ripe avocado. He had wittily said he wondered if she'd be able to 'af-fjord' one, which made her think a gag would be a better sex aid than the ropes Jamie Gower was last seen experimenting with. Maybe this was a step too far for Epifanea's tastes or maybe that one overwhelming orgasm had cleared her mind, blown away accumulating cobwebs. For whatever reason, the dire prose and banal attempts to represent feelings and sensations now overrode any hope of stimulation.

Well, she'd achieved the avocado anyway, a nice black-skinned Hass just softening and now nestling in her rucksack, as she strolled through the park. Heavens, even Vigeland's statuesque but chunky nudes had more sensuous passion than Ms Gabrielle's turgid writing. She took a few carefully framed snaps to send him later.

Epifanea Tredwell was always drawn to water. She took the tram back to the National Theatre and strolled leisurely to the pier, to sit alone with frites and beer, and watch the ferries come and go.

She placed her bag on the table, regarded her exorbitantly priced avocado and grapefruit. She'd have preferred a pomelo but dreaded to think what one would have cost. Still she'd enjoyed wondering around the vast Market Hall and picked up a few snacks, as an avocado, however attractively presented, would hardly satisfy. She'd



checked that olive oil and black peppercorns were available in her host's kitchen, and even spotted some blanched almonds.

In front of the copper clock tower a couple holding hands stared into one another's eyes. She sent him a charming photo of time and love, and captioned it, *Aah, memories*. He was busy at work but found time to call her a romantic cynic.

Or was she a cynical romantic? He knew she wasn't overly serious.

She's getting on the ferry  
So sweet

She'll be back?

I think so, yeah  
If she's any sense

"What is a kakapo?"

Eppy's host for the night, Bodhild, was intrigued.

"It's a flightless parrot from New Zealand. Very endangered — wiped out by rats and stuff on the mainland, once humans brought them in. Very cute, like a green feathery teddy bear."

Eppy found pictures online and showed them to Bodhild, who was also both moved and amused.

"And now you *eat* one! Cruel!"

They both laughed. Eppy explained that she'd once found a 'friendly dog' in an American children's cookbook, an arrangement of poached pear half head, prune ears, and raisin eyes and nose. This in turn inspired her to create her own amusing concoction.

"First I cut the avocado in half and take out the stone. Then carefully remove the skin. I'll sprinkle a little lemon juice on it to stop it going brown."

She laid the pear-shaped halves in two shallow bowls. Near the narrow end of each, she made a small lengthwise slit.

"Beak!" she said, pushing a blanched almond into place; "and eyes."

She added two black peppercorns either side of the nuts.

"Oh, how cute," said Bodhild. "It has wings?"

"Of course; and feet — that's where the grapefruit comes in."

Eppy took two segments of the fruit, removed the outer membrane, and cut two half-moons to make the wings, trimming a little off the sides of the avocado halves so they'd lie flat against them. A similar trim gave a flat base, against which she placed two smaller citrus feet.

"At home I use a firmer fruit called a pomelo, if I can get it. For the wings anyway — it's a bit greener too — and maybe tangerines or satsumas to provide nice orange feet. But all we need now is the dressing."

She squeezed juice out of the remaining grapefruit and put it in an old yoghurt pot with a little sugar and salt, and as much olive oil as there was juice. She put the lid on and shook it violently, much to her host's amusement, before pouring a little over each parrot.

"A grind of black pepper over the top, and there they are — my friendly kakapos. Would you care to join me?"

"Really? I would love it! You are sure?"

"Of course. I was only practicing to make it for my boyfriend next week. If you were not here, I would eat them both. But they would be too much, to be honest. One is just right."

"He is a lucky man," said Bodhild, as Epifanea took photos of her handiwork.

"I like to think so. And maybe I'm not so unfortunate, myself"

"And then I will make something main course for us," said Bodhild, giving her guest a spontaneous hug.

Eppy smiled and returned her new friend's embrace. She couldn't help thinking what this would lead to in the world of Janey Gower. She was happy that all it would lead to in her world was a friendly supper and a late but solitary night.

**XVIII**  
**Tournedos Rossini**

Who's Ruth?

Who's Rossini?

Composer

Oh, that Rossini. I know him  
What's he got to do with the weather?

Tournedos are cuts of fillet steak  
You know that  
Windup artist

We celebrated his 50th birthday with them

Don't remember that  
Surely he's older than that

Yeah but no but born on Feb 29  
Oh no, it was before you

Who with?

Who's Ruth?  
What's she doing there?

Jealous?

Is that the idea?  
Pathetic

Ruth from work. You know  
And I'm being a bad host

Good practice for your single life

Oi. She's here with Richard  
Her boyf

Oh, Ruth as in Ruth is stranger than Richard

Yeah  
Now they're wondering why I just looked  
over at them and laughed  
Thanks for dropping me in it

Serves you right

Still going to raise a glass to me with your  
meat and wine?

Might do

Well think of me with sympathy  
I'm feeding a pair of bloody vegans!

Eppy laughed as she turned off the phone but still felt unsettled. She turned her attention to the food she'd just brought back from the supermarket. As she'd wandered round the islands and the waterfront, looked in museums and art galleries and even shelled out far too much for fillet steak and paté, her mood had been buoyant, a perfect blend of memories of her travels, enjoyment of the moment and anticipation of her return home to hearth (well, radiators) and loving arms. Living in the moment is all very well, but hopes and memories can enrich that experience too.

*Nothing without our memories, pointless without our dreams.*

And now, what she still felt was an intended trick to make her jealous or suspicious had taken the edge off the day, even if the price he was now having to pay brought its own dash of *Schadenfreude* by way of comic relief.

She rarely felt the need to tenderise her meats, especially good-quality fillet, but for some reason now she was glad to find a heavy-duty steak hammer hanging on the kitchen wall. Even though she resisted the passing desire to beat the innocent piece of ox to a pulp, the few blows she did administer (pulling her punches so as not to spread it out too far) did serve to alleviate her aggression.

*That's what I'm stuck with, I suppose. Only goes to show he needs reassurance too. A bit boorish but a good heart. What more can one expect? He has had to manage without me for a good while now. Home soon, and then we'll see how it goes.*

Preparation is everything in some dishes. Prep right, and the actual cooking can be a breeze.

She laughed, as this reminded her that he had referred to this poor person's version of the classic dish as a 'stiff breeze Respighi'.

*Not as uncultured as he likes to pretend.*

She had parboiled her thick-cut chips and got a portion of frozen peas ready to boil at the last minute.

*I wonder if I should do the real thing when I'm back? Foie gras and truffles? Too extravagant? Too controversial? We shall see about that too.*

For now, she trimmed the steak and a fresh-cut slice of bread into the heartshape she'd planned all along, as far back as when she'd booked the last few apartments with their culinary facilities in mind; she wasn't going to respond spitefully to his little games, even if ruder shapes were occurring to her. Anyway, the offcuts from both bread and steak were going to be flung onto the plate once the obligatory photograph had been taken and sent back to England. You can be romantic without being wasteful, she told herself, as she selected a symphony by Dvořák on her phone.

*I may be cooking Rossini, but I don't have to listen to him too.*

She ran a quick inventory in her head: *bread, steak, paté, mushrooms, stock, potatoes, peas — also butter, brandy, seasonings, truffle oil, shallot, matches. OK, let's go.*

She began by making *duxelles*. Chopping a couple of mushrooms and half the shallot very finely, she sweated them off over a low heat in some butter, before adding a splash of the red wine she'd already started to drink, and some dried thyme. When it was cooked and the liquid almost evaporated, she stirred in a helping of the aromatic truffle oil (well aware that its artificial flavour owed nothing to any acquaintance with a real truffle). She set the mix on one side in a small bowl and wiped the frying pan.

Into that pan she now put a little more butter and oil, to fry the bread to a golden hue and in another one started heating a slightly deeper pool of oil and butter for the sautéed potatoes. The kettle was boiling too, ready for the peas. The deciding factor was the steak.

She liked a good cut of meat pretty rare, though ideally a little charred on the outside too. Not as rare as he liked his; she was no longer embarrassed in steak restaurants (if only because they were too expensive for regular visits) by his instruction to 'pull off its horns, wipe its arse, and put it on the plate'. So, as soon as she'd put the potatoes in their pan, she heated the small cast iron skillet to almost smoking. She added the steak, rubbed already with oil, fresh-ground black pepper and coarse salt; after less than a minute, she turned it (and its offcuts) over and the heat down. The *coeur de crouste* was ready by this time, so that went onto the plate as the peas were dropped into their scalding bath. One last flip for the steak, before placing

it atop its golden base to recover from its ordeal by fire and relax its fibres, while she shook and turned the potatoes and prepared the sauce.

The rest of the chopped shallot went into the steak pan, with another knob of butter (*maybe I'll just kill him with kindness and cholesterol*). After a few moments softening, she got her extra-long matches ready, poured in a half glass of brandy and, after letting it warm up, applied a naked flame, causing a sheet of pretty fire to rise and subside.

And activate the smoke alarm.

*Thank heaven it's not a mains-connected one! Janey Gower might welcome the attentions of the Stockholm fire brigade, but I don't want anything interrupting this damn meal.*

A few moments' frantic wafting of a tea tray stopped the awful screeching, which hadn't apparently lasted long enough to cause worried neighbours to hammer on her door. She was glad she already had the windows open at least.

A dash of fine Burgundy wine (*oh well, 'if it's not good enough to drink, it's not good enough to cook with', as they say*) went into the sauce with some thyme and the usual seasoning suspects. While it reduced over a medium heat, she gave her attention to the final details.

She plastered a layer of paté onto the steak and then topped that with some of the *duxelles*, keeping the cordate cross-section as best she could. The fried potatoes were removed from their pan with a slotted spoon and drained of excess fat on kitchen paper, and the peas drained in a small conical sieve.

A knob of butter melting on the peas, a few aesthetically arranged *frites*, and a neat drizzle of sauce made for a perfect photograph to send home and make him jealous in his turn (*maybe a hunky fireman would have been a bonus after all*).

Then all the spare bits of bread, meat, mushroom and quite a few more chips were piled on top, and the plate went to table with a large glass of *Gevrey Chambertin* for company.

"I don't know if you really deserve stuff like this, buster," she said to his image on her phone, as she thought of him and his nut roast with his nutty guests, "but you're getting it anyway, when I get back."

"Because," she added after a mouthful of succulent steak, "it's fucking brilliant and I loves it."

## XIX

### Sticky rice and mango

I feel sick

Epifanea laughed. Typical of him to get nauseous watching a video, while she was fine filming it at 60 kilometres an hour and upside down.

I feel sexy  
Better than picnics of passion any day

Funfairs of fucking haha

Too white knuckle for me

More like soggy gusset for me

You're weird  
But I love you

You're boring but I love you

Open minded, he was, to a satisfactory degree at least. And she could hardly deny that she wasn't all that adventurous in certain areas herself, as *Picnics* was proving. But adrenaline junkie, he certainly was not. Were he here in the pleasure gardens, at least he'd hold her bag for her while she went on every ride she could afford, and pretend not to know her as she screamed the place down. And though he'd said he would accompany her on skiing holidays if she wanted, the thought of him sitting in the bar doing loads of moody *au lieu de ski*, would take the edge off plummeting down hillsides.

So what's the dessert?

Mango and sticky rice, my style

Oh nice.  
Now I am looking forward to you  
coming home  
But that's all you're eating?

No I found a cool place to have a  
smørrebrød first

That's easy for you to say  
How do you get the fancy Os?

Hold the o down and options come up

Oh yeah forgot  
So what's smobrod

Open sandwiches  
Herring, ham, stuff

Anyway. Best till last  
On the demon next!

Crazy woman  
Have fun  
Love you

But Eppy had reached the head of the queue and was heading for the roller coaster like an excited child that's been told 'one more ride then we stop'.

And shop.

She knew she'd have to compromise. At home in the right season, she'd find a ripe mango and wrestle with it to get the stupidly-designed stone out and present it sliced in an aesthetic fan shape. Here, she'd settle for a small plastic tub of mango cubes.

She had also assumed she'd have to improvise a steamer for the *khao nieaw*, or sticky Thai rice she'd carried with her, along with the small tin of coconut milk, for nearly a week, but the kitchen boasted a tall pot with a removable cage, for sweetcorn or asparagus, and she was sure a small steamer bag with a lot of holes punched in it could sit within, just clear of the boiling water.



She'd got up early, in her apartment near the harbour. The area itself was quaint but far too touristy for her tastes, but in the hundred or two metres walk from there to her flat, the crowds thinned out rapidly and the restaurants and bars became more 'real'. And by dawn's early light, it was indeed as picturesque as it wasn't at peak tourist-trapping times.

The main reason for this early bird, however, was to catch an even more popular attraction at her peaceful best. Her friends had told her that the Little Mermaid was almost invisible for the teeming hordes, with their cameras and phones, that surrounded it from once the day got going, until sundown. After a stroll along the waterfront, past the National Theatre and the Port Authority Building, she found just one other tourist, a Chinese woman, sitting on a rock and taking a selfie with the tragic heroine. She wondered if her auroral companion knew the non-Disneyfied and downright gruesome original story behind the statue, but didn't say any more than *hi* and *beautiful*. The Chinese girl echoed these sentiments but Epifanea, not being at her best in the early morning, didn't feel like a longer conversation.

The naysayers had also warned her that the statue itself was disappointingly small, distant and unimpressive. It seemed like a mantra. So many times had she heard it, that she was expecting a miniature mermaid, less than a metre high, and fifty metres out into the water. So it was pleasantly surprising that the statue was the size of a small human being (after all, her name did provide a clue in the word 'little'), and only a few metres away from the rocks along the shore. But even though Eppy, lacking a selfie stick of her own, elicited the help of the Chinese woman to take a picture of herself just in front of the work, the fact that the sculptor had captured so well the melancholy air of a tragic heroine made her glad to get away to wander round the lakes and parks and back towards the town.

She found a hotel called Babette, with seating out on the pavement, which seemed a good place for a feast, or at least a pastry (when in Denmark ...), opposite a supermarket which would no doubt be open by the time she finished her coffee.

And so it was that she returned to her apartment ready for a short nap, with cartons of orange and pineapple juice and other provisions.

For another of the contributions of Epifanea Tredwell to the repertoire of world cuisine was a special take on *khao nieaw mamuang*. Thai sticky rice needs to be soaked for a few hours, preferably overnight, before steaming. For the sweet dish with mango, it is then drenched in sweetened, heated coconut milk before serving with the fruit arranged around or beside it.

Eppy's innovation, as she liked to call it and he liked to eat it, was to pre-soak the rice in fruit juices rather than water. Extensive experiments had led her to a fifty-fifty mix of orange and pineapple. This not only gave the rice a fruitier flavour, but also a pleasing orange appearance. For larger gatherings, she had even prepared half the rice the traditional way and used a bowl to mould a yin-yang pattern of white and orange in the centre of the serving dish.

*Sod that this time*, she said to herself. On her own in a strange kitchen, this was just about practicing the basics and enjoying the taste. She put the rice in a bowl, added the juices, drank a glass of the pineapple and got ready to go out for a light lunch and a long wander. And some thrilling rides.

*I suppose I should be thinking of taking a few gifts back for family and friends — even something for him*, though it would serve him right, she thought, if she took his oft-repeated insistence that "all I want is you" seriously. In a haze of post-exhilaration euphoria and post-modern irony, she bought a few tasteless souvenirs — Little Mermaid keyrings and snowglobes for friends and a Carlsberg keyring for him, because he considered himself far too sophisticated a drinker for mainstream lagers.

Back in the Inner City, resting from her afternoon of overstimulation, she found bookshops and cafés and one rather nice shop which combined the two functions, where she sat and drank coffee and looked through magazines (even though she understood no Danish, she had no desire to be seen to be reading *Picnics of Passion* in a sophisticated city bookstore).

*Still plenty of time to kill*, she thought. *So who should I be killing?*

*Ah, you may not be here, but your old jokes I have always with me.*

A boat trip was in order; once round the islands on the Saucy *Svenskød*, before the promised open sandwiches in a quaint and no doubt touristy traditional eatery she'd spotted earlier. Towns always look different from the water, and the commentary shed new light on the canals and the buildings of Christianshavn, the opera house, the naval ships, the distant Oresund Bridge and her melancholy old friend, the Little Mermaid, now with her attendant throng of admirers, many bodies deep, that more than justified her early start all those hours ago.

And so it was that some time later, satisfied by but not too full of chewy breads and fishy toppings, she returned to her flat to finish the day's home cooking, the three part extravaganza that she would soon be recreating for her beloved.

She drained the rice and tied it up in a piece of muslin, before putting it in the steaming vessel over simmering water for twenty minutes or so. While that cooked, she heated up half her coconut milk with some sugar, a little orange juice for colour, and a goodly pinch of salt, and cut up the chunks of ripe fruit, arranging them on a small plate as prettily as she could.

When the steaming time was nearly up, she stirred a little sugar and absolutely no salt into the rest of her coconut milk and put it over a low heat to blend. Then she untied her bag and dropped the pale orange rice into a bowl. She poured the first coconut concoction over it and stirred it in. While that cooled she started sending back home some less vertiginous photos of her day, enjoying his responses, both cheeky and envious.

Finally, she arranged the rice, swollen and oozing its sweetened juice, alongside the mangoes on the plate, and poured the sauce over the top. She sent one last picture of this, before she settled down to eat and read and rest.

Of course, you'll be getting it on a  
banana leaf

Oo er missus

I wouldn't have it any other way

## XX

### *Departing is Such Black Risotto*

This last supper had long been intended. A small sachet of squid ink had accompanied Epifanea since leaving home, though, as she had hoped, the better fish markets on the Continent sold them complete with ink sacs. The sachet could go home tomorrow, *virgo intacta*. She chose a small, plump squid from the dockside stall and impressed the seller with her insistence she would prepare it herself. Once, years ago, someone had mentioned that cleaning out a squid was like emptying a used condom of some vintage variety. Ever since that time, this distasteful image was one she could not keep out of her mind when preparing the slippery cephalopods, but she wasn't going to let that be a deterrent.

Garlic was in the kitchen of her apartment overlooking the harbour, and tomato puree, parsley from the window box and butter, she was allowed to use for a small consideration. So a small onion, a pot of fish stock and a bag of risotto rice, the remainder of which she could donate to the host or future guests, was all she required to complete the evening.

Well, that and *petit pain* and a nice *tarte au citron* from the *boulangerie*. And a rather good bottle of Entre-Deux-Mers, which she could donate to the cooking — and to herself. Tomorrow's flight was not so early that she couldn't afford to overindulge tonight.

With food and wine in her bag, she sat outside the *bistrot* and watched the locals at play. She sent a short video home, though she knew he'd be at work and unavailable for extended communication. Longer chats could wait until the evening.

Petanque Who's winning?
----------------------------

She smiled as his reply identified the game correctly. Not just *boules*, as most Brits would say, but the version with 'planted feet'.

For such a simple sport, she found it rather hypnotic. The friendly arguments, the teasing laughter at flunked shots, the general *bonhomie*, behind which lurked an intense desire to win. As one shot sent an opponent's ball flying smartly from the field of play, she even applauded, earning a deep bow and an elegantly blown kiss from the victorious player.

She raised her glass of red to him in salute and turned her attention back to her *baguette au fromage*.

She was ending her peregrinations in a small town, as she had no more desire for sightseeing and only a little for shopping, for esoteric souvenirs and gifts for family and friends. A quiet day and exceeding lazy was what the doctor ordered. She would cook, eat, sit on her balcony, finish that awful book and have one last stroll before turning in for her last European mainland night.

And Skype with him, of course. But not for long. Lengthy last long distance conversations could turn edgy with impatience and tomorrow's reunion should not be spoiled. She knew he'd feel the same, but plans did have to be finalised and fond goodnights exchanged.

But first the squid.

Eppy opened the doors onto the balcony, standing there in a reverie as she took in the scene and the sea air. Two young men walking a pair of *bichons* saw her, waved and saluted her with hands on hearts and walked on, laughing cheerily. With a shake of her head and a sigh of contentment, she turned back into the bijou kitchen area, where the squid lay on a nylon chopping board, ready for dissection.

She removed the head and tentacles and peeled the fine, speckled outer skin from the body. With a grimace she inserted a couple of fingers and pulled out the slender quill and the ink sac. Then she filled the body with water and squeezed most of the remaining gloop out with it into the sink.

After disposing of the skin and innards, she cut the body in two lengthwise to finish cleaning the flesh, which she then chopped up along with the head parts (removing and discarding the beak of course), and placed in a dish.

She chopped the onion and smacked a knife blade down on a clove of garlic. She chopped some of the parsley and put the stock with water in a pan over a medium heat.

That bean and pancetta risotto on a Mediterranean island seemed so long ago now. Epifanea Tredwell's procedure for this Venetian black version required a slightly different sequence of events.

In this case, the rice was started separately — and not yet. In a small but deep frying pan the garlic and onion were first softened in a little butter and olive oil, joined soon after by the chopped up squid. In a cup she mixed the ink squeezed from its sac with a little warm water and added this to the pan, stirring to colour the vegetables until the liquid was just about evaporated.

She added half a glass of the wine and a spoon of puree, increasing the heat and stirring until the wine was reduced by about half. Once this was achieved the heat was reduced and the pan covered. Over the next ten minutes or so, she would tidy up, set the table, slice the bread and prepare a side salad with a light vinaigrette dressing, stopping now and then to stir the contents of the pan and check the squid was cooking nicely staying moist. When it looked like it might be drying out, she added a little water to the pan and a glass of wine to herself.

And now the rice. In another skillet Eppy melted some butter, added a little oil to prevent burning, and added a half a coffee mug of finest *arborio*. She stirred it into the butter and cooked it until the grains became translucent and gave off a fragrant odour, at which point she drowned them in another half glass of dry white. Once this had all but evaporated, she started to add the stock, a ladle at a time, stirring gently to break up the grains and release the starch into the increasingly creamy *mélange*.

After ten patient minutes of this, she judged it time for the components of her dish to come together. She spooned the black mixture into the rice and stirred it tenderly, watching the darkness slowly overwhelm the creamy, white grains, until the whole pan was 'dark as Erebus'. She tasted a little, spitting out the still-too-crunchy rice, and added salt and pepper along with the chopped parsley and a last ladle of stock.

A few more minutes of stirring and she could 'plate up'. She filled a small bowl with the finished risotto and upended that neatly onto a large, white plate. After sprinkling a little more parsley on top of the black dome, she took a photograph to send home, captioned, *as black as my own dark soul, lol!* and settled down to enjoy.

Dark soul indeed. An enjoyable repast and a whole bottle of wine left her in a playful and teasing mood, so he too was only too pleased that their last long-distance communication be kept brief, with expressions of fond anticipation and hopes for but the slightest of hangovers and the smoothest of journeys on the morrow.

Even her last evening stroll was short and erratic. and she had no desire, not that concentration would have been possible anyway, to share in any more of Janey Gower's *Picnics of Passion*. A good nights' sleep and a light early breakfast in the café with its view of fishing boats and the squat towers guarding the harbour would be a pleasingly peaceful postlude to a life-enhancing few weeks of novel sights, gastronomic delights, sleazy reading and introspective deliberation. On the whole, Epifanea thought the whole experience a success. She had a fair idea of her life and where she wanted it to be heading. Who knew if it would go as expected? Just now, she didn't really care, and the room was gently spinning her to sleep.

In the cool light of dawn, the North Sea slapped against the harbour wall. She almost wished she was returning by ferry. She liked the thought of standing on the deck alone, her silk scarf suspended behind her on the breeze as she waved farewell to the Continent and anticipated her homecoming.

But she had an aeroplane ticket.

And she had no silk scarf.

But for all the airport hassle and the queuing and the waiting, she knew she'd be home with less haste and less nausea and he'd be waiting there to meet her with her name in large letters on an unnecessary piece of card clutched in one hand and maybe a bunch of roses in the other. And he'd drive her home and they'd have a pizza at Piccolo's as their very own picnic of passion, followed by a supper of sex and a lifetime of ... what? Time would tell. She felt sure she'd enjoy finding out.

END

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*I'm just a station on your way...*

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