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The Gourmet

Muriel Barbery

Translated from the French by Alison Anderson

Chapter 1

Flavour

Rue de Grenelle, the Bedroom

When I took possession of the table, it was as supreme monarch. We were kings, the suns of those few hours of banqueting, who would determine their futures and describe their horizons – tragically limited or mouth-wateringly distant and radiant – as chefs. I would stride into the room the way a consul entered the arena, and I would give the order for the feast to begin. Those who have never tasted the intoxicating nectar of power cannot imagine the sudden explosion of adrenalin that radiates throughout the body, releasing a harmony of movement, erasing all fatigue, along with any reality that does not bend to the orders of your pleasure; the ecstasy of unbridled power, when one need no longer struggle but merely enjoy the spoils of battle, and savour without cease the headiness that comes from inspiring fear.

That is who we were, and how we reigned as lords and masters over the finest establishments in France, filled with the excellence of the dishes, with our own glory and with our unquenchable desire – like a hunting dog's first, excited flair – to pronounce upon that excellence.

I am the greatest food critic in the world. It is I who have taken this minor art and raised it to a rank of utmost prestige. Everyone knows my name, from Paris to Rio, Moscow to Brazzaville, Saigon to Melbourne and Acapulco. I have made and unmade reputations, and at sumptuous banquets I have been the knowing and merciless maître d'œuvre, expediting to the four corners of the globe the salt or honey of my pen, in newspapers and broadcasts and various forums, to which I have repeatedly been invited to discourse upon that which previously had been reserved for a few select specialist journals or intermittent weekly columns. I have, for all eternity, pinned to my list of discoveries some of the most prestigious butterflies among practising chefs. The glory and the demise of Partais, or the fall of Sangerre, or the increasingly incandescent success of Marquet can be attributed to me alone. For all eternity, indeed, I have made them what they are; for all eternity. I have held eternity under the skin of my words, and tomorrow I shall die. I shall die in forty-eight hours – unless I have been dying for sixty-eight years and it is only

today that I have deigned to notice. Whatever the case may be, the sentence was handed down yesterday by my friend the physician Chabrot: 'Old boy, you've got forty-eight hours.' How ironic! After decades of nosh, deluges of wine and alcohol of every sort, after a life spent in butter, cream, rich sauces and oil in constant, knowingly orchestrated and meticulously cajoled excess, my trustiest right-hand men, Sir Liver and his associate Stomach, are doing marvellously well and it is my heart that is giving out. I am dying of heart failure. What a bitter pill to swallow! So often have I reproached others for a lack of heart in their cuisine, in their art, that never for a moment did I think that I might be the one lacking therein, this heart now betraying me so brutally, with scarcely concealed disdain, so quickly has the blade been sharpened . . .

I am going to die, but that is of no importance. Since yesterday, since Chabrot, only one thing matters. I am going to die and there is a flavour that has been teasing my taste buds and my heart and I simply cannot recall it. I know that this particular flavour is the first and ultimate truth of my entire life, and that it holds the key to a heart that I have since silenced. I know that it is a flavour from childhood or adolescence, an original, marvelous dish that predates my vocation as a critic, before I had any desire or pretension to expound on my pleasure in eating. A forgotten flavour, lodged in my deepest self, and which has surfaced in the twilight of my life as

the only truth ever told—or realised. I search, and cannot find.