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The Emperor's Children

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Published by Picador

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MARCH

CHAPTER ONE

Our Chef Is Very Famous in London

Darlings! Welcome! And you must be Danielle?" Sleek and small, her wide eyes rendered enormous by kohl, Lucy Leverett, in spite of her resemblance to a baby seal, rasped impressively. Her dangling fan earrings clanked at her neck as she leaned in to kiss each of them, Danielle too, and although she held her cigarette, in its mother-of-pearl holder, at arm's length, its smoke wafted between them and brought tears to Danielle's eyes.

Danielle didn't wipe them, for fear of disturbing her makeup. Having spent half an hour putting on her face in front of the grainy mirror of Moira and John's bathroom, ogling her imperfections and applying vigorous remedial spackle—beneath which her weary, olive-shaped eyes were pouched by bluish bags, the curves of her nostrils oddly red, and her high forehead peeling—she had no intention of revealing to strangers the disintegration beneath her paint.

"Come in, darlings, come in." Lucy moved behind them and herded the trio toward the party. The Leveretts' living room was painted a deep purple—aubergine, in local parlance—and its windows were draped with velvet. From the ceiling hung a brutal wrought iron chandelier, like something salvaged from a medieval castle. Three men loitered by the bay window, talking to one another while staring out at the street, their glasses of red wine luminous in the reflected evening light. A long, plump, pillowed sofa stretched the length of one wall, and upon it four women were disposed like odalisques in a harem. Two occupied opposite ends of the divan, their legs tucked under, their extended arms caressing the cushions, while between them one rested her head upon another's lap, and smiling, eyes closed, whispered to the ceiling while her friend stroked her abundant hair. The whole effect was, for Danielle, faintly

cloudy, as if she had walked into someone else's dream. She kept feeling this, in Sydney, so far from home: she couldn't quite say it wasn't real, but it certainly wasn't her reality.

"Rog? Rog, more wine!" Lucy called to the innards of the house, then turned again to her guests, a proprietorial arm on Danielle's bicep. "Red or white? He's probably even got pink, if you're after it. Can't bear it myself—so California." She grinned, and from her crows' feet, Danielle knew she was forty, or almost.

Two men bearing bottles emerged from the candlelit gloom of the dining room, both slender, both at first glance slightly fey. Danielle took the imposing one in front, in a pressed lavender shirt and with, above hooded eyes, a high, smooth Nabokovian brow, to be her host. She extended a hand. "I'm Danielle." His fingers were elegant, and his palm, when it pressed hers, was cool.

"Are you now?" he said.

The other man, at least a decade older, slightly snaggletoothed and goateed, spoke from behind his shoulder. "I'm Roger," he said. "Good to see you. Don't mind Ludo, he's playing hard to get."

"Ludovic Seeley," Lucy offered. "Danielle—"

"Minkoff."

"Moira and John's friend. From New York."

"New York," Ludovic Seeley repeated. "I'm moving there next month."

"Red or white?" asked Roger, whose open shirt revealed a tanned breast dotted with sparse gray hairs and divided by a narrow gold chain.

"Red, please."

"Good choice," said Seeley, almost in a whisper. He was—she could feel it rather than see it, because his hooded eyes did not so much as flicker—looking her up and down. She hoped that her makeup was properly mixed in, that no clump of powder had gathered dustily upon her chin or cheek.

The moment of recognition was, for Danielle, instantaneous. Here, of all places, in this peculiar and irrelevant enclave, she had spotted a familiar. She wondered if he, too, experienced it: the knowledge that this mattered. Ludovic Seeley: she did not know who he was, and yet she felt she knew him, or had been waiting for him. It was not merely his physical presence, the long, feline slope of him, a quality at once loose and

controlled, as if he played with the illusion of looseness. Nor was it the timbre of his voice, deep and yet not particularly resonant, its Australian inflection so slight as to be almost British. It was, she decided, something in his face: he knew. Although what he knew she could not have said. There were the eyes, a surprising deep and gold-flecked gray, their lines slightly downturned in an expression both mournful and amused, and the particular small furrow that cut into his right cheek when he smiled even slightly. His ears, pinned close to his head, lent him a tidy aspect; his dark hair, so closely shaven as to allow the blue of his scalp to shine through, emphasized both his irony and his restraint. His skin was pale, almost as pale as Danielle's own, and his nose a fine, sharp stretch of cartilage. His face, so distinctive, struck her as that of a nineteenth-century portrait, a Sargent perhaps, an embodiment of sardonic wisdom and society, of aristocratic refinement. And yet in the fall of his shirt, the line of his torso, the graceful but not unmanly movement of his slender fingers (and yes, discreetly, but definitely there, he had hair on the backs of his hands—she held to it, as a point of attraction: men ought not to be hairless), he was distinctly of the present. What he knew, perhaps, was what he wanted.

"Come on, darling." Lucy took her by the elbow. "Let's introduce you to the rest of the gang."

This, dinner at the Leveretts', was Danielle's last evening in Sydney before heading home. In the morning, she would board the plane and sleep, sleep her way back to yesterday, or by tomorrow, to today, in New York. She'd been away a week, researching a possible television program, with the help of her friend Moira. It wouldn't be filmed for months, if it were filmed at all, a program about the relationship between the Aborigines and their government, the formal apologies and amends of recent years. The idea was to explore the possibility of reparations to African Americans—a high-profile professor was publishing a book about it—through the Australian prism. It wasn't clear even to Danielle whether this could fly. Could an American audience care less about the Aborigines? Were the situations even comparable? The week had been filled with meetings and bluster, the zealous singing exchanges of her business, the pretense of certainty where in fact there was none at all. Moira firmly

believed it could be done, that it *should* be done; but Danielle was not convinced.

Sydney was a long way from home. For a week, in her pleasant waft of alienation, Danielle had indulged the fantasy of another possible life—Moira, after all, had left New York for Sydney only two years before—and with it, another future. She rarely considered a life elsewhere; the way, she supposed, with faint incredulity, most people never considered a life in New York. From her bedroom in her friends' lacy tin-roofed row house at the end of a shady street in Balmain, Danielle could see the water. Not the great sweep of the harbor, with its arcing bridge, nor the ruffled seagull's wings of the opera house, but a placid stretch of blue beyond the park below, rippled by the wake of occasional ferries and winking in the early evening sunlight.

Early autumn in Sydney, it was still bitter at home. Small, brightly colored birds clustered in the jacaranda trees, trilling their joyous disharmonies. In earliest morning, she had glimpsed, against a dawn-dappled shrub in the backyard, an enormous dew-soaked spiderweb, its intricacies sparkling, and poised, at its edge, an enormous furry spider. Nature was in the city, here. It was another world. She had imagined watching her 747 soar away without her, a new life beginning.

But not really. She was a New Yorker. There was, for Danielle Minkoff, only New York. Her work was there, her friends were there—even her remote acquaintances from college at Brown ten years ago were there—and she had made her home in the cacophonous, cozy comfort of the Village. From her studio in its bleached-brick high-rise at Sixth Avenue and Twelfth Street, she surveyed lower Manhattan like a captain at the prow of her ship. Beleaguered and poor though she sometimes felt, or craving an interruption in the sea of asphalt and iron, a silence in the tide of chatter, she couldn't imagine giving it up. Sometimes she joked to her mother—raised, as she herself had been, in Columbus, Ohio, and now a resident of Florida—that they'd have to carry her out feet first. There was no place like New York. And Australia, in comparison, was, well, Oz.

This last supper in Sydney was a purely social event. Where the Leveretts lived seemed like an area in which one or two ungentrified Aboriginal people might still linger, gray-haired and bleary, outside the pub at the end of the road: people who, pint in hand, hadn't accepted the

government's apology and moved on. Or perhaps not, perhaps Danielle was merely imagining the area, its residents, as they had once been: for a second glance at the BMWs and Audis lining the curb suggested that the new Sydney (like the new New York) had already, and eagerly, edged its way in.

Moira was friendly with Lucy Leverett, who owned a small but influential gallery down at The Rocks that specialized in Aboriginal art. Her husband, Roger, was a novelist. As John parked the car outside the Levereetts' large Victorian row house, Moira had explained, "Lucy's great. She's done a lot on the art scene here. And if you want to meet Aboriginal artists, to talk to them for the film, she's your woman."

"And he?"

"Well"—John had pulled a rueful moue—"his novels are no bloody good—"

"But we like him," Moira finished firmly.

"I'll give him this much, he's got great taste in wine."

"Roger's lovely," Moira insisted. "And it's true about his books, but he's very powerful here in Sydney. He could really help you, if you needed him."

"Roger Leverett?" Danielle thought a moment. "I've never heard of him."

"Not surprised."

"As in 'our chef is very famous in London.' "

"Come again?"

"There's a nasty-looking little Chinese restaurant in the East Village with a handwritten sign in the window—a dirty window, too—that says 'our chef is very famous in London.' But not in New York, or anywhere else outside of London."

"And probably not in London either, eh?" John had said, as they approached the Levereetts' front door.

"Roger Leverett *is* very famous in Sydney, sweetheart, whatever you say."

At supper—prawns and quails' eggs with squid-ink noodles, followed by emu, which closely resembled steak and which she had to force herself to eat—Danielle sat between Roger and a beautiful Asian boy—Ito? Iko?—

who was the boyfriend of an older architect named Gary at the other end of the table. Ludovic Seeley sat next to Moira, his arm languidly and familiarly draped over the back of her chair, and he leaned in to speak to her as though confiding secrets. Danielle glanced over every so often, unable to stop herself, but did not once, until the passion fruit sorbet was before them, find him looking her way. When he did, his spectacular eyes seemed again amused, and they did not waver. It was she who lowered her gaze, shifting in her chair and feigning sudden interest in Ito/Iko's recent trip to Tahiti.

The evening now seemed to her an elaborate theater, the sole purpose of which was meeting Ludovic Seeley. That anyone could care for Lucy or Roger or Gary or Ito/Iko in the way Danielle cared for her friends in New York seemed almost implausible: these people, to her, were actors. Only Ludovic was, in his intimate whisperings and unbroken glances, very real. Whatever that meant. Reality, or rather, facing it, was Danielle's great credo; although if she were wholly honest, here and now, she believed a little in magic, too.

Roger, beside her, was jovial and solicitous. Mostly, Danielle felt her host was a narcissist, delighted by the sound of his own voice and the humor of his own jokes, and by the pipe he fiddled with and sucked upon between courses. He was generous with the red wine, more so to her and himself than to those farther afield, and he grew more positively loquacious with each glass.

"Been to McLaren Vale? Not this time? When do you leave? Ah, well then. Next time, promise me you'll get to South Australia, do the wine route. And there's great scuba diving off the coast. Been scuba diving? No, well, I can see you might be intimidated. I used to do a lot of diving in my day, but you can get yourself in some very nasty situations, very nasty indeed. About twenty years ago—I wasn't much older than you are now—how old are you? Thirty? Well, you don't look it, my girl. Such fine skin. It must be those fine Jewish genes—you are Jewish, aren't you? Yes, well, anyway, the Reef. I was up diving with some mates, this is before Lucy, she'd never let me do it now. I was living up near Brisbane, finishing my second novel—*Revelation Road,* you probably don't know it? No, well, I'm not vain about these things. It was a great success at the time. And anyway, this trip out to the Reef was the reward, you know, for a job well done, the editor was jumping up and down in Sydney he

was so mad about the manuscript, but I said, screw it, George, I'm entitled to celebrate before I come back, because once you're in this world you're in it, aren't you? So where was I? The Reef, yes. It was my first time out there, by helicopter, of course—first time in a copter, if you can believe it—and we were four blokes . . ."

Roger's blithe torrent grew murkier to Danielle with each sip of claret, and she pasted her smile—quite genuine; she was enjoying herself, and lord knew it wasn't effortful—in permanence upon her face. She smiled while slurping the inky noodles, while dissecting the antennaed prawns. She felt as though she smiled even while chewing the rather tough emu fillet, plucking the dense slices from their bed of bloodied polenta. She smiled while glancing at Ludovic Seeley, who did not glance back, and smiled at Moira, at Lucy, at John in turn. When Roger went to fetch the dessert—"I do the wine, my dear, and the clearing up. The fetching and carrying. And I make the meanest risotto you'll ever taste, but not tonight, not tonight"—Danielle turned to Ito/Iko and learned that he was twenty-two, an apprentice in a fashion house, that he'd known Gary eight months, and that they'd recently had the most fabulous holiday in Tahiti, "very Gauguin, and so sexy. I mean, the people on that island are *so* sexy, it's to die."

"Is that where Captain Cook got killed, in the end?" Danielle asked, feeling very culturally *au fait* to be dropping the founder's name.

"Oh no, doll, that was Hawaii. Very different vibe altogether. Totally different." Ito/Iko flashed a broad smile and fluffed at his hair, which was, she decided, slightly tinted with blue, and glistening in the candlelight. "You haven't been here very long, have you? Because *everyone* knows it was Hawaii. I mean, I know it was Hawaii, and I dropped out of school at sixteen."

After the meal, the party resettled in the living room, where Ito/Iko curled under Gary's arm like a chick beneath a hen's wing. Danielle gratefully abandoned her wineglass at the table, and sat sipping water as movement and general conversation buzzed around her in a pleasant fog. She felt a thrill of alarm—of life—when Ludovic Seeley took the armchair to her right.

"What takes you to New York?" she asked.

He leaned in, as she'd seen him do with Moira: intimacy, or the impression of it, was clearly his mode. But he did not touch her. His shirt cuff glowed against the plum velvet of the chair arm. "Revolution," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm going to foment revolution."

She blinked, sipped, attempted silently to invite elucidation. She didn't want to seem to him unsubtle, unironic, American.

"Seriously? Seriously, I'm going to edit a magazine."

"What magazine is that?"

"The Monitor."

She shook her head.

"Of course you haven't heard of it—I haven't got there yet. It doesn't exist yet."

"That's a challenge."

"I've got Merton behind me. I like a challenge." Danielle took this in. Augustus Merton, the Australian mogul. Busy buying up Europe, Asia, North America. Everything in English and all to the right. The enemy.

Lucy, bearing coffee, appeared suddenly, tinily, before them. "He's done it before, Danielle. He's a man to be afraid of, our Ludo. He's got all the politicians and the journos on the run in this town. *The True Voice*—have you seen it?"

"Oh. Moira told me about it. I mean, she told me about you."

"We don't see eye to eye on pretty much anything," Lucy said with a conciliatory smile at Seeley, touching her delicate hand with its black nail polish to his lavender shoulder. "But my God, this bloke makes me laugh."

He bowed his head slightly. "A true compliment. And the first step on the road to revolution."

"And now you're going to take on New York?"

Danielle's skepticism evidently made him bristle. "Yes," he said clearly, his gray eyes, their hoods fully retracted, now firmly and unamusedly upon her. "Yes, I am."

Danielle rode home in the backseat with her eyes shut for most of the way. She opened them periodically to glimpse flashes of the city, the sul-

furous lights on the asphalt and the marine sky. "Roger certainly loves to talk," she said.

"Did he tell you about his novels? Bore you senseless with unwieldy plots?" Moira asked.

"No, scuba diving. And the wine route. Better than that Asian guy."

"Gary's new boyfriend? He seemed sweet."

"Sweet?" John scoffed. "Sweet?"

"He was sweet. No, he really was. But not very interesting."

There was a silence, during which Danielle longed to ask about Seeley but did not want to seem to care. Of the evening's underwater blur, Seeley was all that stuck out.

"Did you talk to Ludo at the end?" asked Moira.

"Ludo, is it now?" John said. "My dear, aren't we grand?"

"Is he really a big deal?" Danielle hoped her voice was neutral. "He seemed a little creepy, or something."

"He's moving to New York, you know," said Moira. "He's been hired in to launch a mag—they sacked the first guy, you may have read about it. Merton thought his vision was wrong—Billings, was it? Billington? Buxton, I think. Big scandal. Makes Seeley the chosen boy, plucked from halfway across the world. He's going sometime very soon."

"Next month," Danielle said. "I gave him my e-mail. Not that he'll need it, but in case he's at a loose end. Trying to be neighborly."

"That's a good one," John said. "Seeley at a loose end. That I'd like to see."

"Think he'll succeed?" Danielle asked.

"*He* thinks so," said Moira. "In fact, he knows so. But he doesn't give much away, so it's hard to know what he's really plotting. And it's hard to know whether he's running to something or running away. He's made such a splash here in the past, what is it, five years—Christ, he's only what? Thirty-three? Thirty-five? A baby!—and he's got a lot of friends—"

"And a lot of enemies," said John.

"And I just don't think there's any challenge for him here anymore, that's all. But a ton of hassle. With this kind of backing—jeez, Merton's choice!—he probably reckons he'll conquer New York, and then the world."

"Like Kim Jong Il, eh? Or Saddam Hussein?" said John.

"Well, it might not be as easy as he expects," said Danielle, thinking herself surprisingly witty in spite of the quantities of red wine. "It may just be a case of 'our chef is very famous in London.' "

"That it may," John said, obviously satisfied at the thought. "That it may."