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Opening Extract from...

White Truffles in Winter

Written by N. M. Kelby

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WHITE TRUFFLES IN WINTER

N.M. KELBY



To Steven – always.

"The day is coming when a single carrot freshly observed will set off a revolution."

Paul Cézanne

1

THAT LAST SUMMER, the kitchen reeked of pickling spice, aniseed and juniper berries. Watermelon jam, lavender jellies and crystallized fennel cooled on the pantry shelves. Jars with mango pickles and pickled onions, an old habit from his days in London, were set aside in the wine cellar to cure. Honeycombs were stacked in bowls on the sideboard, draining, waiting to be melted into candles or mixed with olive oil and pressed into soaps. Thunderstorms were canned along with plum jam. Memories seeped onto the pine floorboards. Tears turned to sweat.

Escoffier didn't notice. He was too busy writing his memoirs.

Lushness had returned to Monte Carlo and, surprisingly, to La Villa Fernand. Monte Carlo was an island of rock floating on the pristine blue waters of the Côte d'Azur, leaning into Provence. Embroidered with bougainvillea-covered mansions and villas, it was a fortress, a magical confection, a surreal wedding cake topped with gilded casinos, hotels and cafés that lit up the night, seemingly spun from sugar and wayward stars. La Villa Fernand, Escoffier's grand stone manor house, curved along its winding coast. Every evening, clouds crawled over the horizon and pushed the pink sun down into the blinding noise of blue that was the sea.

Quiet. *Quiet*, he would think, and keep writing.

At sunset, Madame Escoffier instructed the staff to pull back the curtains and throw open the windows to capture the night air. Blackcurrant pies, tart and sweet, often warmed the cool evenings. The sound of crashing waves against the shore lulled the

gaggles of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, grand-nieces and grand-nephews – their names now interchangeable to Madame and Monsieur Escoffier – to sleep in the evenings. And woke them in the mornings. The air swirled with the gales of laughter.

But it was all just noise to him. Made it difficult to think. Every morning Escoffier wished for evening to come again; the only time he could concentrate was when the house finally fell silent.

In that final year, every triumph was hard won. The 1st of May had brought an unseasonable heat; waterspouts spun like ballroom dancers across the brilliant sea but never touched ground. Fruit withered on the vine. When the rains finally came, the earth cracked open and drank them whole.

Madame Escoffier found herself dreaming of the first days of their marriage.

"Close your eyes," he had said to her. "Food demands complete submission." And then he placed a perfect scallop in her mouth. "Do you taste the sea?"

Delphine did. Not just the salt of the sea but the very air of the moment that the shell was pulled from the sand. "A storm, perhaps. There is a dark edge to the sweetness of the meat. What do you taste?"

"The hand of God."

That was not surprising. He was, after all, a devout Catholic.

Before Delphine married Escoffier, food was bothersome. A piece of toast, an egg, a handful of greens – it made no difference to her. All she wanted was to write her poetry and be exempt from the foolishness of the world. Love, motherhood, marriage – they all filled her with disdain. "A woman only needs herself to survive."

Her father, apparently, had other ideas. Or, at least, that was to be assumed. He used her hand in marriage as a stake during his weekly billiards game.

"You 'lost' me?"

"Escoffier played as a man possessed by love," Paul Daffis told his daughter.

It seemed impossible. Her father was a very good billiards player. For a moment, Delphine thought she'd misheard him. He rarely lost this weekly game and when he did he always complained that Escoffier had an unfair advantage. "He never has to bend over to sight the cue!"

It was unkind, but accurate. Escoffier was an exceedingly small man.

"Is this some sort of a joke?" she asked.

"It is the perfect love story, is it not?" her father said, hoping for forgiveness.

It was not. Delphine had only met Escoffier a handful of times and always in the company of her father. They were nearly strangers.

"How could this happen?"

"It was quite simple. He said, 'Today I shall win.' And I said, 'What will you bet?' and he said, 'Anything you want for the hand of your daughter in marriage.'"

"I don't understand."

"I have to admit that I was very partial to the idea of Escoffier's bet. He's such a very talented chef. How could I refuse? A weekly dinner from him would have been heaven."

"I truly don't understand."

But she did. It was obvious. Delphine was not unattractive. She had a sturdy beauty with a straightforwardness that suggested an adventurous spirit – and yet her prospects for marriage had been slim. "Too independent," her father told her, even though he admired the spirit in her. She was, after all, a respected poet and writer. Her independence was what made her successful, fearless even, and yet in the nineteenth century fearlessness was not a desired trait in a wife.

And so Paul Daffis had no choice but to marry off his eldest daughter any way he could. A publisher of antiquities, he was in a business that lacked "vigour", as he often told Escoffier. Paul had no sons – just two little girls, whom he called his "surprises", as both were less than three years of age, and Delphine. If something

happened to him, his family would be left destitute. Delphine needed a successful husband and Escoffier was certainly that. He was thirty-four years old: older than Delphine, but not too much older. For many years, he'd served as the *chef de cuisine* at Le Petit Moulin Rouge – which, Escoffier was quick to point out, was not associated in any way with the risqué Moulin Rouge cabaret in Montmartre but was a very respectable post at an exquisitely famous restaurant.

It was, however, only open during the summer months, and so he also owned a small grocery store and restaurant in Cannes that he operated during the winter tourist season.

Industrious, hard-working and successful – Escoffier seemed to be everything a father could hope for for his daughter. The fact that he was slight and delicate-boned as a small child was unsettling to Paul, but he understood his friend to be driven to succeed. Escoffier was the kind of man who would provide well for his daughter and that was all Paul needed to know – at least that's what he told himself – and so he took Delphine into his arms and said, "You must trust me. He is an artist in the kitchen. And you are an artist with words. You will be happy."

She could hear the question in his voice.

He whispered, "He is my friend. I love him as if he were my own son."

She had no choice.

The next day Escoffier came to claim his bride. Delphine sat on the settee in the parlour, surrounded by trunks and hatboxes. When he came into the room, she did not speak or move but looked at him as if she'd never seen him before. He was pale and nervous, seemingly as uncomfortable as Delphine herself. But he was not unattractive and appeared well groomed for a cook – that was what he was to her at the time, a labourer. He was, however, impeccably dressed in a cuffed shirt that was stiffly pressed, an extremely expensive dress coat – a Louis-Philippe – and knife-pleated trousers. His dark moustache was manicured and well oiled. He smelt of lavender water and talc. If he were

not a cook, he would have been nearly perfect. But he, unfortunately, was a cook.

Delphine could not imagine living the rest of her life with this man.

He is so small, she thought, *more like a young boy*.

Escoffier seemed to hear her thoughts. His face reddened. He spoke without looking at her, focused on the array of belongings at her feet. "I cannot make you love me," he said. "Nor do I expect it. I am not unaware that I am a man who is compromised by nature, but yet I think that you may find my heart to be most agreeable."

They sat for a moment, at a loss for words. Behind the parlour door, Delphine could hear her mother, father and baby sisters whispering. When her father cleared his throat, as if to prompt her into speech, Delphine closed her eyes and said, "I have been told that love eventually comes."

Behind the door, her father popped the cork of the champagne. The bottle overflowed. The effusive wine spilt onto the floor, slipped under the door and puddled at Delphine's feet. The sight of it made her weep.

The early days of their marriage were spent in the kitchen of Le Faisan Doré, the Golden Pheasant, Escoffier's café in Cannes. There was no time for a honeymoon; winter season was less than a week away. "A menu must be created," he had told her as they boarded the overnight train.

The next morning, Escoffier made coffee and left the apartment before sunrise. "Join me," a note said. When Delphine finally woke, she dressed carefully and walked down the street to take her place at a long kitchen table that Escoffier had set for her alone. There were fine linens and silver, just as in the dining room, and a series of crystal glasses for both water and wine. He placed a fresh bouquet of red roses in a blue Chinese vase.

She had never been in a restaurant kitchen before. It was surprisingly clean and orderly, with large windows to let in the light. It was not what she expected at all.

As soon as she sat down, Escoffier began to lecture her as if she were a student.

"Kitchens," he explained, "need organization, and so I have created a system, a concept that I am working on, a hierarchy, a ranking, a *brigade de cuisine*. Instead of making a cook frantically try to prepare each element on a plate, I have divided the kitchen into certain areas, each run by a *chef de partie*. A plate is moved from chef to chef and assembled as it goes. Someday all kitchens will be run this way."

Delphine did not really care about how kitchens were run, or would be run, and yet the way he spoke of it, the passion he brought to the work, made it all seem very interesting. Her father had told her that Escoffier had been a cook in the army, and then a prisoner of war. And it was clear. He seemed to have a love of rank and systems that was common for military men. His overwhelming need for order spoke to her of a time lived in chaos.

"I have given this system an extreme amount of consideration and hope someday to perfect it."

"Professor, will there be an examination later?"

"There will be," he said and kissed her hand. Delphine blushed for the first time that day, although she was not a woman given to blushing. They had not yet shared a bed.

One by one, Escoffier's staff arrived. After a warm embrace and a series of questions about each man's family, of which Escoffier seemed to have intimate knowledge, they took their stations and work began. Chopping. Peeling. A suckling pig was butchered. A basket of fish filleted. Ducks were plucked and scalded. Everyone had a task.

"Do you not see how brilliant and yet simple this is? Each man is in charge of one element of the dish. When the plate is brought to the *poissonnier*, he places the fish on it and the *entremetier* adds the vegetables. Each element is given the finest care."

It's only a kitchen, she thought. *You're just making something to eat. Fuel for the body and mind. It's not poetry.*

But it was. As soon as the cooking began, Delphine could see that. Escoffier would create each dish while the men watched. They in turn would replicate several servings of it. The *brigade de cuisine* allowed the cooks to move like dancers; an orderly rhythm was soon established. The plate travelled from one hand to another. The men moved as verses moved; they built upon each other until the final conclusion.

Slowly, Delphine began to understand that each dish was created, not merely cooked as one would cook a slice of toast. Each had its own beauty and depth: its own poetry.

Course after course, the finished plates were passed among the chefs and sampled with care: small briny oysters from Corsica were nestled into a bed of pink rock salt; white asparagus were trimmed and served alongside a smoked-duck salad; cream-fed pork was braised with pears and apples, and new potatoes were browned in duck fat and dusted with late-summer truffles. Each dish was more amazing than the last.

After each tasting, the discussion of the chefs was lively. Each chef, no matter what his station was, offered suggestions. There was little praise.

Escoffier sat across from his new wife and studied Delphine very carefully while she ate. He seemed to weigh her response to each dish. It unnerved her.

"And this?" he would ask. The other chefs fell silent and waited for the verdict.

She wasn't exactly sure what he wanted her to say. "It's delicious," she said time and time again until finally Escoffier could bear those words no longer.

"No. It is not delicious. It has what I call 'deliciousness'. The fifth taste. Bitterness, saltiness, sourness, sweetness and deliciousness. I tell people this and they think it is all in my mind, but it is on your tongue and so deliciousness is there by design. Veal stock imparts it. Someday everyone will recognize this. But that is not what I am asking of you. Think of each plate as you would a poem. It is not enough to say that food is edible or that

the words are properly spelt. Where in this alchemy is beauty? Where in this is the nature of the divine?"

"But it is only food, Auguste."

"Perhaps when someone else is the chef. But when I give you this plate, I give you the nourishment that you need to continue to live, and yet I also change how you see the world. I offer you a creation that allows you to see a single fresh carrot in a way that you have never seen it before, in a way that bespeaks not only its beauty but the unexpected possibilities of roots buried in the earth – I make them sing. I give this carrot a new life, which, because you eat it, will give you life. It becomes part of your very skin, hair and teeth. And so, when you address the plate, you must ask yourself where in this beauty is the knowledge that there is a God? Where is evidence of His love?"

From that moment on, Delphine never thought of food in the same way.

"We will begin again," he said, and another round of courses was created, served, critiqued and refined.

Despite Escoffier's best efforts to create an elegant setting for Delphine, it was still a kitchen, and the heat soon became oppressive. Only coal and coke could achieve the high temperatures necessary for the roasting and rapid finishing of dishes, and so the room was an inferno. The young bride had arrived wearing a proper bonnet, jacket, gloves and boots – but eventually the heat made her feel as if she herself were aflame. First hat, then gloves, jacket and waistcoat – little by little, parts of her propriety were neatly folded and set aside. Her hair slipped from its combs.

After a time, the heat made everything in the kitchen seem heightened. The staff, sweating, moved with the rumble of storm clouds. The aroma of lamb grilling on the coals or wild strawberries puréed with fresh mint nearly made Delphine swoon with pleasure.

At the centre of it all, Escoffier in his Louis-Philippe dress coat and striped trousers seemed calm, unmoved. While the others spun around him in their kitchen whites and toques, he never stopped teaching, answering her questions before she asked them.

"The tradition of the caps began with the master Marie-Antoine Carême. They keep your hair from burning and also designate your rank. Sauce cooks and bakers wear little more than a cap; the supervising chef, a small pleated toque; and the head chef balances a towering toque of starched white, the number of its pleats dependent on the number of ways he knows how to cook an egg. Everyone knows that he is the man in charge. His toque is the tallest of them all."

"But why do you not wear one?"

"I do. But, to be quite frank, the wearing of a toque is a demeaning practice. Most men only know a hundred ways to cook an egg, which is why there is a hundred-pleat limit. However, I know six hundred and eighty-five, and so when I wear a toque I am forced to compromise. And that is unacceptable."

In that sea of white, in his formal clothes, Escoffier was the sun that everything revolved around. Searing. Chopping. Silent. He was focused beyond the moment. In his own kitchen, in control, he was more handsome than any man she had ever known. As the day wore on, Delphine's heart raced at the sight of him. The wave of his hair, his dark quick eyes, his pale skin: he was luminous. He wore tall platform shoes that allowed him to reach the stove and made him tower over everything, and yet he had a gentleness that Delphine had never seen in a man before.

Everyone called him "Papa". No matter what happened, Escoffier never would shout or lose his temper. Any time he seemed at the edge of anger, he pulled at his earlobe with a fist of his thumb and finger and rubbed his cheek, as if he were a tired child. Any disagreement was taken outside and settled in whispers. "In my kitchen, you are expected to be polite," he said. "Any other behaviour is contrary to our practice. Here we approach cuisine as an art and cooking as a gentleman's profession."

And it was true. Delphine soon learnt that in Escoffier's kitchen manners were valued above all else. No cursing. No fist fights. No smoking. No drinking. In his kitchen, the endless wine that most provided for their cooks to keep them hydrated and happy

was replaced by a special wheat drink that Escoffier had commissioned a physician to create.

"In most kitchens, heat, wine, knives and temperament of the chefs lead to violence. Violence does not sell plates."

And even simple things were different. The man who always shouted back the waiter's orders was not called "the barker", as he was in other kitchens but "the announcer" – and was forbidden to shout. The staff worked in whispers.

"Rush hour in the kitchen is not the time for a rush of words. Cooking is the most sacred of the arts and should be approached with the required reverence."

At the end of that first day, Escoffier shook the hand of each of his staff members. "Thank you, chef," he said to everyone, even the dishwasher.

"It's a matter of respect," he told Delphine. "They must all have the desire to replace me someday." And then he poured her a glass of Moët. He was not a drinker – "Medicinal purposes only," he said. Nor did he smoke. This pleased her.

"One last dish," he said. The sun was now setting. He lit the beeswax tapers, placed them in the silver candelabra, and set it on her table.

The dish was simple. Six large brown eggs, thirty grams of sweet cream butter, and a *poêle* – "Americans charmingly call this a 'fraying pan', but since it is not frayed, I have no idea why" – that was the heart of it. Escoffier beat the eggs, but not too much. He then added a bit of salt and pepper and placed the pan on the barest of heat. With one quick movement, he stabbed a peeled garlic clove with the tip of a knife, and held it up as if it were a prize.

"Madame Escoffier," he said as if testing the sound of her new name, trying it on.

He glistened with a thin sheen of sweat – as did she. Her cotton blouse was damp, as were her skirt and stockings. Her long dark hair was thick and unruly. All she really wanted was a bath and a glass of water. And yet, when he said her name, all that was forgotten.

"Madame Escoffier, come here."

Blue flames hummed beneath the *poêle*. It was so quiet she could hear herself breathe.

"Delphine Daffis Escoffier," he said again. "It has such a lovely sound, does it not?"

Delphine stood at the edge of the chopping block, an arm's length away. The butter was beginning to melt. He held up the knife topped with the garlic clove. "This is my secret. I tell everyone that the eggs are made in a special silver pan and that is what gives them their perfect taste."

"Why not tell them it's garlic?"

"Garlic is peasant food. If they knew, it would scandalize."

"But it smells like garlic. They believe you?"

"Of course. I am, after all, Escoffier."

"And now I am too."

"Yes," he said, pleased. "That is delightfully true."

And then he kissed her hand, slowly, finger by finger. He never looked away. She felt the heat of him. "Now," he said softly, "we will stir the butter with our secret and then let the eggs set for a moment and then stir again. Gently."

Then he corrected. "Well. You will stir the butter gently. I have cooked all day for you. It is your turn to cook for me."

Delphine took a step back as if she were about to bolt from the room. "I don't cook. Not well, at least."

"Stir," he said. It was not a command, but an invitation.

"I can't."

He shook his head. "You can. I wanted you as my bride from the first moment I saw your eyes – fearless." He handed her the knife and she took it. She leant across the chopping block and began to stir but each stroke was awkward – tentative and elliptical. She barely touched the butter at all.

"That won't do," he whispered and took her arm and gently pulled her closer to the pan, then stood directly behind her. "What do you smell?"

"Butter."

"At this point you should only smell cream with a slight edge of garlic. When it smells like butter, it's beginning to brown. The flavour cannot develop with too much heat. Turn it down. Slow it down. Some things cannot be rushed. Some things need a gentle hand."

He then put one hand over hers and held the knife with her. With the other hand, he reached around her thin waist and poured the beaten eggs slowly, a golden ribbon, into the centre of the warm butter.

He was standing so close that she could feel the quickness of his breath. She leant into the heat of him. "Only a moment in the pan to set and then continue to stir," he said softly. "The eggs cannot cook too quickly or that will cause lumps to form – this is a thing that should be avoided above all. So again, slow. Slow. Do you understand?"

She did.

They stood together like that for a long time – stirring, not speaking, just leaning into each other. There was no need for words.

When he finally stepped away, he hollowed out two brioches with a quick turn of a knife and then chopped a fist of butter into a fine dice. Delphine continued to stir, not looking at him, still feeling the heat of him, until the eggs were creamy and smooth – and yet, still moist.

"*Finis*," he whispered, pulled back her hair, kissed her neck, and took the pan away from the heat. He sprinkled in the chopped butter, added cream, and with two turns of a spoon he slid the eggs into the brioche cases and then placed them on china plates.

One taste. One kiss. She was lost.

The thought of that moment still made her blush.

Now, fifty-five years later, she must remind Escoffier of that night, and all the rest, when he cooked for her alone, made love to her alone. When he was hers and no one else's.

It was, after all, her last chance. She was dying, that much was quite clear. And in all those years, Escoffier had never created a

dish for her. Kings, queens, emperors, dukes, duchesses, opera singers, cardinals, diplomats, clowns, hairstyles (the pompadour having at least two), American presidents, actresses (including so many for that Sarah Bernhardt that Delphine had lost count), painters, musicians, a housekeeper, patrons, characters from books, foreign countries and a girl who sold flowers – even the voyagers on the *Titanic* had been graced with a meal specially designed for that momentous and yet ultimately unfortunate journey. But Delphine was forgotten.

She knew that Escoffier could, with just a bit of cream or a shaving of truffle, allow her to live for ever. Not many could remember the great diva Nellie Melba any more. But when she performed *Lohengrin*, her soaring operatic voice greatly moved those at Covent Garden, including Escoffier. And so while the details of her performance are forgotten, as is the opera itself, nearly everyone in the world has had a variation on Peach Melba. Perhaps, unlike the original, it was not covered in a lace of spun sugar or served in a silver bowl resting on a block of ice sculpted to look like the wings of the mythical swans that appear in the opera's first act, but it still contained ripe peaches, vanilla ice cream and a purée of sugared raspberry, and was most certainly called "Melba".

Madame Escoffier had asked him many times for a dish but he always refused.

"One should never attempt to define the sublime."

"You are afraid?"

"Of course."

She didn't believe it.

And so Delphine needed to convince Escoffier to create a dish for her. And, although she wasn't sure how, she would make that kitchen girl, that Sabine, help her.