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Opening Extract from...

The Dinner

Written by Herman Koch

Translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett

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HERMAN KOCH

THE DINNER

TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH
BY SAM GARRETT



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THE DINNER

APERITIF

1

We were going out to dinner. I won't say which restaurant, because next time it might be full of people who've come to see whether we're there. Serge made the reservation. He's always the one who arranges it, the reservation. This particular restaurant is one where you have to call three months in advance – or six, or eight, don't ask me. Personally, I'd never want to know three months in advance where I'm going to eat on any given evening, but apparently some people don't mind. A few centuries from now, when historians want to know what kind of crazies people were at the start of the twenty-first century, all they'll have to do is look at the computer files of the so-called 'top' restaurants. That information is kept on file, I happen to know that. If Mr L was prepared to wait three months for a window seat last time, then this time he'll wait for five months for a table beside the men's room – that's what restaurants call 'customer relations management'.

Serge never reserves a table three months in advance. Serge makes the reservation on the day itself, he says he thinks of it as a sport. You have restaurants that reserve a table for people like Serge Lohman, and this restaurant happens to be one of them. One of many, I should say. It makes you wonder whether there

isn't one restaurant in the whole country where they don't get faint right away when they hear the name Serge Lohman on the phone. He doesn't make the call himself, of course, he lets his secretary or one of his assistants do that. 'Don't worry about it,' he told me when I talked to him a few days ago. 'They know me there, I can get us a table.' All I'd asked was whether it wasn't a good idea to call, in case they were full, and where we would go if they were. At the other end of the line, I thought I heard something like pity in his voice. I could almost see him shake his head. It was a sport.

There was one thing I didn't feel like that evening. I didn't feel like being there when the owner or on-duty manager greeted Serge Lohman as though he were an old friend; or seeing how the waitress would lead him to the nicest table on the side facing the garden, or how Serge would act as though he had it all coming to him, that deep down he was still an ordinary guy and that was why he felt entirely comfortable among other, ordinary people.

Which was precisely why I'd told him we would meet in the restaurant itself and not, as he'd suggested, at the café around the corner. It was a café where a lot of ordinary people went. How Serge Lohman would walk in there like a regular guy, with a grin that said that all those ordinary people should above all go on talking and act as though he wasn't there – I didn't feel like that, either.

2

The restaurant is only a few blocks from our house, so we walked. That also took us past the café where I hadn't wanted to meet Serge. I had my arm around my wife's waist, her hand was tucked somewhere inside my coat. The sign outside the café was lit with the warm, red and white colours of the brand of beer they had on tap.

'We're still too early,' I said to my wife. 'What I mean is: if we went to the restaurant now, we'd be right on time.'

My wife: I should stop calling her that. Her name is Claire. Her parents named her Marie Claire, but in time Claire didn't feel like sharing her name with a magazine. Sometimes I call her Marie, just to tease her. But I rarely refer to her as my wife – on official occasions sometimes, or in sentences like 'My wife can't come to the phone right now,' or 'My wife is very sure she asked for a room with a sea view.'

On evenings like this, Claire and I make the most of the moments when it's still just the two of us. Then it's as though everything is still up for grabs, as though the dinner date was only a misunderstanding, as though it's just the two of us out on the town. If I had to give a definition of happiness, it would be this: happiness needs nothing but itself, it doesn't have to be validated. 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy

family is unhappy in its own way,' is the opening sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. All I could hope to add to that is that unhappy families – and within those families, in particular the unhappy husband and wife – can never get by on their own. The more validators the merrier. Unhappiness loves company. Unhappiness can't stand silence – especially not the uneasy silence that settles in when it is all alone.

So when the bartender at the café put our beers down in front of us, Claire and I smiled at each other, in the knowledge that we would soon be spending an entire evening in the company of the Lohmans: in the knowledge that this was the finest moment of that evening, that from here on it would all be downhill.

I didn't feel like going to the restaurant. I never do. A fixed appointment for the immediate future is the gates of hell, the actual evening is hell itself. It starts in front of the mirror in the morning: what you're going to wear, and whether or not you're going to shave. At times like these, after all, everything is a statement, a pair of torn and stained jeans as much as a neatly ironed shirt. If you don't scrape off the day's stubble, you were too lazy to shave; two days' beard immediately makes them wonder whether this is some new look; three days or more is just a step from total dissolution. 'Are you feeling all right? You're not sick, are you?' No matter what you do, you're not free. You shave, but you're not free. Shaving is a statement as well. Apparently you found this evening significant enough to go to the trouble of shaving, you see the others thinking – in fact, shaving already puts you behind 1–0.

And then I always have Claire to remind me that this isn't an evening like every other. Claire is smarter than I am. I'm not saying that out of some half-baked feminist sentiment or in order to endear women to me. You'll never hear me claim that 'women in general' are smarter than men. Or more sensitive, more intuitive, or that they are more 'in touch with life', or any of the other horseshit that, when all is said and done, so-called 'sensitive' men try to peddle more often than women themselves.

Claire just happens to be smarter than I am, I can honestly say that it took me a while to admit that. During our first years together I thought she was intelligent, I guess, but intelligent in the usual sense: precisely as intelligent, in fact, as you might expect my wife to be. After all, would I settle for a stupid woman for any longer than a month? In any case, Claire was intelligent enough for me to stay with her even after the first month. And now, almost twenty years later, that hasn't changed.

So Claire is smarter than I am, but on evenings like this she still asks my opinion about what she should wear, which earrings, whether to wear her hair up or leave it down. For women, earrings are sort of what shaving is for men: the bigger the earrings, the more significant, the more festive, the evening. Claire has earrings for every occasion. Some people might say it's not smart to be so insecure about what you wear. But that's not how I see it. The stupid woman is the one who thinks she doesn't need any help. What does a man know about things like that? the stupid woman thinks, and proceeds to make the wrong choice.

I've sometimes tried to imagine Babette asking Serge whether she's wearing the right dress. Whether her hair isn't too long. What Serge thinks of these shoes. The heels aren't too flat, are they? Or maybe too high?

But whenever I do, I realize there's something wrong with the picture, something that seems unimaginable. 'No, it's fine, it's absolutely fine,' I hear Serge say. But he's not really paying attention, it doesn't actually interest him, and besides: even if his wife were to wear the wrong dress, all the men would still turn their heads as she walked by. Everything looks good on her. So what's she moaning about?

This wasn't a hip café, the fashionable types didn't come here – it wasn't cool, Michel would say. Ordinary people were by far in the majority. Not the particularly young or the particularly old, in fact a little bit of everything all thrown together, but above all ordinary. The way a café should be.

It was crowded. We stood close together, beside the door to the men's room. Claire was holding her beer in one hand, and with the fingers of the other she was gently squeezing my wrist.

'I don't know,' she said, 'but I've had the impression recently that Michel is acting strange. Well, not really strange, but different. Distant. Haven't you noticed?'

'Oh yeah?' I said. 'I guess it's possible.'

I had to be careful not to look at Claire, we know each other too well for that, my eyes would give me away. Instead, I behaved as though I was looking around the café, as though I were deeply interested in the spectacle of ordinary people involved

in lively conversation. I was relieved that I'd stuck to my guns, that we wouldn't be meeting the Lohmans until we reached the restaurant; in my mind's eye I could see Serge coming through the swinging doors, his grin encouraging the café regulars above all to go on with what they were doing and pay no attention to him.

'He hasn't said anything to you?' Claire asked. 'I mean, you two talk about other things. Do you think it might have something to do with a girl? Something he'd feel easier telling you about?'

Just then the door to the men's room opened and we had to step to one side, pressed even closer together. I felt Claire's beer glass clink against mine.

'Do you think it has something to do with girls?' she asked again.

If only that were true, I couldn't help thinking. Something to do with girls … wouldn't that be wonderful, wonderfully normal, the normal adolescent mess.

'Can Chantal/Merel/Rose spend the night?'

'Do her parents know? If Chantal's/Merel's/Rose's parents think it's okay, it's okay with us. As long as you remember … as long as you're careful when you … ah, you know what I mean, I don't have to tell you about that any more. Right? Michel?'

Girls came to our house often enough, each one prettier than the next, they sat on the couch or at the kitchen table and greeted me politely when I came home.

'Hello, Mr Lohman.'

'You don't have to call me Mr Lohman. Just call me Paul.'

And so they would call me 'Paul' a few times, but a couple of days later it would be back to 'Mr Lohman' again.

Sometimes I would get one of them on the phone, and while I asked if I could take a message for Michel, I would shut my eyes and try to connect the girl's voice at the other end of the line (they rarely mentioned their names, just plunged right in: 'Is Michel there?') with a face. 'No, that's okay, Mr Lohman. It's just that his cell phone is switched off, so I thought I'd try this number.'

A couple of times, when I came in unannounced, I'd had the impression that I'd caught them at something, Michel and Chantal/Merel/Rose: that they were watching *The Fabulous Life* on MTV less innocently than they wanted me to think: that they'd been fiddling with each other, that they'd rushed to straighten their clothes and hair when they heard me coming. Something about the flush on Michel's cheeks – something heated, I told myself.

To be honest, though, I had no idea. Maybe nothing was going on at all, maybe all those pretty girls just saw my son as a good friend: a nice, rather handsome boy, someone they could show up with at a party – a boy they could trust, precisely because he wasn't the kind who wanted to fiddle with them right away.

'No, I don't think it's got anything to do with a girl,' I said, looking Claire straight in the eye now. That's the oppressive thing about happiness, the way everything is out on the table like an open book: if I avoided looking at her any longer, she'd know for sure that something was going on – with girls, or worse.

'I think it's more like something with school,' I said. 'He's just

done those exams, I think he's tired. I think he underestimated it a little, how tough his sophomore year would be.'

Did that sound believable? And above all: did I look believable when I said it? Claire's gaze shifted quickly back and forth between my right and my left eye; then she raised her hand to my shirt collar, as though there were something out of place there that could be dealt with now, so I wouldn't look like an idiot when we got to the restaurant.

She smiled and placed the flat of her hand against my chest. I could feel two fingertips against my skin, right where the top button of my shirt was unbuttoned.

'Maybe that's it,' she said. 'I just think we both have to be careful that at a certain point he doesn't stop talking about things. That we get used to that, I mean.'

'No, of course. But at his age he kind of has a right to his own secrets. We shouldn't try to find out everything about him, otherwise he might clam up altogether.'

I looked Claire in the eye. My wife, I thought at that moment. Why shouldn't I call her my wife? My wife. I put my arm around her and pulled her close. Even if only for the duration of this evening. My wife and I, I said to myself. My wife and I would like to see the wine list.

'What are you laughing about?' Claire said. My wife said. I looked at our beer glasses. Mine was empty, hers was still three-quarters full. As usual. My wife didn't drink as fast as I did, which was another reason why I loved her, this evening perhaps more than other evenings.

'Nothing,' I said. 'I was thinking … I was thinking about us.'

It happened quickly: one moment I was looking at Claire, looking at my wife, probably with a loving gaze, or at least with a twinkle, and the next moment I felt a damp film slide down over my eyes.

Under no circumstances was she to notice anything strange about me, so I buried my face in her hair. I tightened my grip around her waist and sniffed: shampoo. Shampoo and something else, something warm – the smell of happiness, I thought.

What would this evening have been like if, no more than an hour ago, I had simply waited downstairs until it was time to go, rather than climb the stairs to Michel's room?

What would the rest of our lives have been like?

Would the smell of happiness I inhaled from my wife's hair still have smelled only like happiness, and not, as it did now, like some distant memory – like the smell of something you could lose just like that?

3

'Michel?'

I was standing in the doorway to his room. He wasn't there. But let's not beat around the bush: I knew he wasn't there. He was in the garden, fixing the back tyre of his bike.

I acted as though I hadn't noticed that, I pretended I thought he was in his room.

'Michel?' I knocked on the door, which was half open. Claire was rummaging through the closets in our room; we would have to leave for the restaurant in less than an hour, and she was still hesitating between the black skirt with black boots or the black pants with the DKNY pumps.

'Which earrings?' she would ask me later. 'These, or these?' The little ones looked best on her, I would reply, with either the skirt or the pants.

Then I was in Michel's room. I saw right away what I was looking for.

I want to stress the fact that I had never done anything like that before. Never. When Michel was chatting with his friends on the computer, I always stood beside him in such a way, with my back half turned towards the desk, that I couldn't see the screen. I wanted him to be able to tell from my posture that I wasn't

spying or trying to peek over his shoulder at what he'd typed on the screen. Sometimes his cell phone made a noise like pan pipes, to announce a text message. He had a tendency to leave his cell phone lying around. I won't deny that I was tempted to look at it sometimes, especially when he had gone out.

'Who's texting him? What did he/she write?'

One time I had even stood there with Michel's cell phone in my hand, knowing that he wouldn't be coming back from the gym for another hour, that he had simply forgotten it – that was his old phone, a Sony Ericsson without the slide: the display showed '1 new message', beneath an envelope icon. 'I don't know what got into me; before I knew it, I had your cell phone in my hand and I was reading your message.' Maybe no one would ever find out, but then again maybe they would. He wouldn't say anything, but he would suspect me or his mother nonetheless; a fissure that, with the passing of time, would expand into a substantial chasm. Our life as a happy family would never be the same.

It was only a few steps to his desk in front of the window. If I leaned forward I would be able to see him in the garden, on the flagstone terrace in front of the kitchen door where he was fixing his inner tube – and if Michel looked up he would see his father standing at the window of his room.

I picked up his cell phone, a brand-new black Samsung, and slid it open. I didn't know his pin code, if the phone was locked I wouldn't be able to do a thing, but the screen lit up almost right away with a fuzzy photo of the Nike swoosh, probably taken from a piece of his own clothing: his shoes, or the black knitted cap

he always wore, even at summertime temperatures and indoors, pulled down just above his eyes.

I scrolled down through the menu, which was roughly the same as the one on my own phone, a Samsung too, but six months old and therefore already hopelessly obsolete. I clicked on My Files and then on Videos. Sooner than expected, I found what I was looking for.

I looked and felt my head gradually grow cold. It was the sort of coldness you feel when you take too big a bite from an ice-cream cone or sip too greedily from an ice-cold drink.

The kind of coldness that hurt – from the inside out.

I looked again, and then I kept looking: there was more, I saw, but how much more was hard to say.

'Dad?'

Michel's voice came from downstairs, but then I heard him coming up the stairs. I snapped shut the slide on the phone and put it back on his desk.

'Dad?'

It was too late to hurry into our bedroom, to take a shirt or jacket out of the closet and pose with it in front of the mirror; my only option was to come out of Michel's own room as casually and believably as possible – as though I'd been looking for something.

As though I'd been looking for him.

'Dad.' He had stopped at the top of the stairs and was looking past me, into his room. Then he looked at me. He was wearing his Nike cap, his black iPod nano dangled from a cord at his chest and a set of headphones was slung around his neck; you had to

give him credit, fashion and status didn't interest him; after only a few weeks he had replaced the white earbuds with a standard set of headphones, because the sound was better.

Happy families are all alike: that popped into my mind for the first time that evening.

'I was looking for …' I began. 'I was wondering where you were.'

Michel had almost died at birth. Even these days I often thought back on that blue, crumpled little body lying in the incubator just after the Caesarean: that he was here was nothing less than a gift, that was happiness too.

'I was patching my tyre,' he said. 'That's what I wanted to ask you. Do you know if we've got valves somewhere?'

'Valves,' I repeated. I'm not the kind of person who ever fixes a flat tyre, who would even consider it. But my son – in the face of all evidence – still believed in a different version of his father, a version who knew where the valves were.

'What were you doing up here?' he asked suddenly. 'You said you were looking for me. Why were you looking for me?'

I looked at him, I looked into the clear eyes beneath the black cap, the honest eyes, which, I'd always told myself, formed a not-insignificant part of our happiness.

'Oh, nothing,' I said. 'I was just looking for you.'

4

Of course they weren't there yet.

Without revealing too much about the location, I can say that the restaurant was hidden from the street by a row of trees. We were half an hour late already, and as we crossed the gravel path to the entrance, lit on both sides by electric torches, my wife and I discussed the possibility that, for once, just this once, it might be us and not the Lohmans who arrived last.

'Want to bet?' I said.

'Why should I?' Claire said. 'I'm telling you: they're not there.'

A girl in a black T-shirt and black floor-length pinafore took our coats. Another girl, in the same black outfit, was flipping through the reservations book lying open on a lectern.

She was only pretending not to recognize the name Lohman, I saw, and pretending badly at that.

'Lohman, was it?' She raised an eyebrow and made no effort to hide her disappointment at the fact that it wasn't Serge Lohman standing there in real life, but two people whose faces meant nothing to her.

I could have helped out by saying that Serge Lohman was on his way, but I didn't.

The lectern-with-book was lit from above by a thin, copper-

coloured reading lamp: Art Deco, or some other style that happened to be just in or just out of fashion at the moment. The girl's hair, black as the T-shirt and pinafore, was tightly tied up at the back in a wispy ponytail, as though it too had been designed to fit in with the restaurant's house style. The girl who had taken our coats wore her hair in the same tight ponytail. Perhaps it had something to do with regulations, I thought to myself, hygiene regulations, like surgical masks in an operating room: after all, this restaurant prided itself on serving 'all-organic' products – the meat came from actual animals, but only animals that had led 'a good life'.

Across the top of the tight black hairdos, I glanced at the dining room – or at least at the first two or three visible tables. To the left of the entrance was the 'open kitchen'. Something was being flambéed at that very moment, from the looks of it, accompanied by the obligatory clouds of blue smoke and dancing flames.

I didn't feel like doing this at all, I realized again. My aversion to the evening that lay ahead had become almost physical – a slight feeling of nausea, clammy hands and the start of a headache somewhere behind my left eye – not quite enough, though, for me to actually become unwell or fall unconscious right there on the spot.

How would the black-pinafore girls react to a guest who collapsed before even getting past the lectern, I wondered. Would they try to haul me out of the way, drag me into the cloakroom – in any case, somewhere where the other guests couldn't see me? They would probably prop me up on a stool behind the coat

racks. Politely but firmly, they would ask whether they could call me a taxi. Off! Off with this man! – how wonderful it would be to let Serge stew, what a relief to be able to put a whole new twist on this evening.

I thought about what that would mean. We could go back to the café and order a plate of regular-person food, the daily special was ribs with fries, I'd seen on the blackboard above the bar. 'Spare-ribs with fries €11.50' – probably less than a tenth of what we'd have to cough up here, each.

Another alternative would be to head straight for home, with at the very most a little detour past the video shop for a DVD, which we could then watch on the TV in the bedroom, lying on our roomy double bed: a glass of wine, some crackers, a few types of cheese to go with (one more little detour past the all-night shop), and a perfect evening would be complete.

I would be entirely self-effacing, I promised myself, I would let Claire choose the film: even though that meant it was bound to be some costume drama. *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Room with a View* or something *Murder on the Orient Express*-ish. Yes, that was a possibility, I thought, I could pass out and we could go home. But instead I said: 'Serge Lohman, the table close to the garden.'

The girl raised her eyes from the page.

'But you're not Mr Lohman,' she said.

I cursed it all, right there: the restaurant, the girls in their black pinafores, this evening that was ruined even before it began – but most of all I cursed Serge, for this dinner he'd been so keen to arrange, a dinner for which he couldn't summon up the

common courtesy to arrive on time. The way he never arrived on time anywhere; people in union halls across the country had to wait for him to show up too, the oh-so-busy Serge Lohman was probably just running late; the meeting in the last union hall had run over and now he was caught in traffic somewhere; he didn't drive himself, no, driving would be a waste of time for someone of Serge's status, he had a chauffeur to do that for him, so he could spend his precious time judiciously, reading important documents.

'Oh yes I am.' I said. 'Lohman is the name.'

I kept my eyes fixed on the girl, who actually blinked this time, and I opened my mouth for the next sentence. The moment had come to clinch the victory: but it was a victory that smacked of defeat.

'I'm his brother,' I said.