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By Kim Sunée

INTRODUCTION

Let me start by saying where I am. I've always thought that knowing this much may help me understand where I was and, if I'm lucky, to better know where it is I'm going. Luck. I know something about it—it got me out of an orphanage in Asia and across the waters, through various port cities, to right here, in France, where I am.

Looking out onto the foothills of the High Alps, in a damp Missoni bathing suit, I'm sitting on a cane-seat chair that once belonged to the father of the man I love. The father is long dead, of cancer, too much alcohol, and not enough tenderness. He's buried in a monastery high in the hills of Ganagobie, just a few kilometers from here. Olivier, my companion of nearly three years, is somewhere on the property. I hear his voice every now and then as he goes from room to room discussing colors with Ariane, the artisan from Carcassonne he has hired to repaint the walls of the entire house before the end of summer.

"Ici, un bleu chaud, pas clair. .. là, du vert foncé. .. à la main. .. Tout." He wants warm, chalky blues, strong greens, and everything rubbed in with bare hands—the reason Ariane charges so much money. Ariane lights a cigarette and, after taking a long, dramatic puff, stops to nod at the appropriate moments.

Tout, I repeat to myself, trying to say it like Olivier, but the o and u together is a sound I still have trouble pronouncing. Tout, not tu. Everything, not you.

After he has finished instructing Ariane, Olivier will busy himself with various tasks: opening bottles of red Bordeaux, negotiating tickets for a performance of *La Bohème* at La Scala, and tasting the mint sauce for a fresh fava bean salad I have chilling in the refrigerator. He'll do this and more while waiting for me.

I have just finished swimming forty laps and am trying to catch my breath before the long evening ahead. It is midsummer, the longest day of the year, perhaps one of the longest years of my life, and I'm barely twenty-five years old. It's almost dusk, the first starlight splinters through the slender leaves of the linden trees. If I open the upstairs window wide enough, I can catch glimpses of Olivier's daughter, Laure, and her best friend, Lulu, the caretakers' daughter, as they chase each other barefoot through the orchards. They have eaten so many wild berries and plums that their small round mouths will be stained for days.

Maybe because they are French children, or because I want them to be like me, I think they enjoy being at the table. But today the girls have so thoroughly stuffed themselves they will not be hungry for dinner. It seems we are always finishing one meal and preparing for the next. This is the way it's been every day, every

season, for the last three years together with Olivier. But tonight's meal seems different somehow. I have taken extra care to tend to all the details.

Sophie, the caretaker's wife, and I were first at the market this morning, choosing small, ripe melons only from Cavaillon, the fattest white asparagus, and long, fragrant branches of fresh lemon verbena. The best salt-cured ham from Bayonne, fresh pork livers, and juniper berries for a terrine still warm from the oven. Our friend Flora gathered poppy leaves and wild mushrooms to bake with yard eggs and flowering thyme to accompany the lamb. Olivier always roasts the meat and chooses the wines. Laure and Lulu helped shell garden peas, the bright green juice spreading across the prints of their tiny fingers. And they played with pastry, smearing rich butter into the dough and cutting out hearts and stars before helping me to wrap it gently around wild peaches. Zorah, the Moroccan housekeeper, has been baking large golden moons of semolina bread all day.

All this for Olivier's family and our friends who have come from both small surrounding towns and as far away as Marseille and Paris. Some will stay through August and maybe into September. They watch as I begin to cook and then ask me questions about where I'm from. Olivier's friends from deep Provence still think it exotic—an Asian face telling stories in French about la Nouvelle-Orléans, le jazz, la cuisine Créole. Olivier, who loves to be in the kitchen, feels that I am better suited for it—he thinks it is here that I am happiest. And because I'm young, or haven't yet mastered the language of opposition, because I don't quite know what it is that makes me happy, I oblige as they gather for the spectacle: Midas and his Golden Girl.

Later, with full stomachs and slipping, slightly tipsy, between crisp, heavy linen sheets, the visitors will ask one another: What more could she possibly want? If they looked a bit closer, would they notice that despite Olivier's insistence on making me the mistress of the house, I still don't have a clue as to what is expected of me? And that Laure is both fascinated by how different I am and envious of the love her father bestows on me? Her mother, Dominique, a French woman whose beauty has been pinched with bitterness, sends letters filled with threats due to the pending divorce and malicious remarks in reference to the chinoise Olivier has taken up with.

But they do not see any of this, because in the face of gastronomic pursuits, I appear fearless and without age. I am filled with courage as I take on two ovens, three refrigerators, one neglected caretaker's wife, a few sleepy housekeepers who turn about like broken clockwork, and a soon-to-be-official stepdaughter who loves me instinctively but hasn't quite figured out why I am sometimes distant, melancholy.

As always, at some point toward the end of the meal, Olivier will propose a toast, pleased that I can make a daube or soupe d'épeautre like the best of the locals.

Laure will lean into me, her small ear pressed just at the level of my stomach, and she'll whisper to me that it's grumbling, that I must still be hungry. Then her giggle will turn into a deep, rich laughter, like a drunken sailor's. This always makes me smile. Olivier, who's always searching for a sign, will see this and think that I am almost happy. And sometimes I think so, too, believe that I have buried my constant need for departure. I always remind him, though, that this is really not my home, that I am just a small part that completes his world and not the whole of it. Nonsense, he declares.

After years spent expanding his company while ignoring the yearnings of the heart, Olivier tells his friends and family that meeting me has proven that love—despite its elusive market value—is also an enterprise worth investing in. And sometimes I believe him, because being loved by him makes me feel whole, makes me forget sometimes that life was not always like this.

With Olivier, I am the least lonely, and I love the family he has tried to give me, love this country that will never be mine but whose language and markets and produce, flavors and secret recipes, I have come to know and desire as well as any native.

Later, when I tuck the children into bed, Laure, cranky and still smelling of suntan lotion, complains of a bellyache. She holds up her tiny hand to mine, marveling at how close they are in size. *Tu t'es coupée*. You cut yourself, she remarks. And then she shows me her green fingertips, stained from shelling the spring peas, before she and Lulu giggle themselves into a half sleep.

Sometimes, late at night, Laure asks to hear the story about how I met her father, in a cold country, how he rescued me from winter and brought me to be her American *belle-mère*. Then she hugs me with all the love of a ten-year-old stepchild, as she has been doing ever since we met.

Before I turn out the lights, she makes me promise to take her and Lulu along wherever it is I may be going tomorrow. *Mais il faut revenir avant qu'il fasse nuit*. She wants to be back before nightfall. She has been having nightmares lately that she is lost in a forest, and just before dark her father comes to save her. *Mais parfois, j'ai peur. Je ne sais pas quand il reviendra*. Sometimes she's afraid; she never knows when he'll return. *Et toi? And you?* she asks. I hug her one last time, amazed and surprised at how a little human being can already sense so much.

I wait a few minutes more until I hear Laure's breathing slow down, until she finally lets go of my fingers. If I move too quickly, though, she grasps my hand again. *Tu te rappelles la première fois où l'on s'est rencontrés?* Do you remember when we first met? she mumbles. Yes, I nod.

IT WAS SUMMER 1993; she would soon turn eight. Olivier and I picked her up at her mother's in Forcalquier, the nearby village, just about a kilometer from the house here in Pierrerue. I was still expecting boxes to arrive from Stockholm, where I had been living when Olivier and I first met. While waiting for Dominique to move the rest of her stuff from the house, Olivier had rented a huge apartment in Aix-en-Provence for us, but we spent most of the time in the Pierrerue house anyway. He and Dominique had been separated almost a year when we met. She lived part-time with Laure in Forcalquier and the rest of the time in an apartment in Paris. Olivier was paying for both and more, all because this was what Dominique demanded, knowing he would do nothing to jeopardize custody of his daughter.

When Laure and I met, she greeted me with the customary kiss on both cheeks. I remember thinking how much more radiant she was than in the photos Olivier had shown me. A Venetian blonde with violet blue eyes, resembling, she claimed rather proudly, neither her mother nor her father. She ran her tiny hand along my smooth skin before turning to her father to say that she wished her limbs were brown and freckleless like mine.

"My name ees Laure, what ees your name?"

I told her slowly in English, but then she responded in French that she was learning my language in her school this year. Muscular and animated, breathless with questions, she seemed to understand I was the new woman in her father's life. She had never met anyone named Keem. She wanted to know how old I was, where I was from, but twenty-three and New Orleans meant nothing to her.

"Je te montre le jardin?" When we got to the house, she took my hand and showed me through the gardens and the fruit orchard. "Voilà mes arbres." These are my trees. She stood firmly on the ground. Like her father, she knows and loves where she is from. "Cerises. Figues. Mirabelles." She waited, like a patient schoolteacher, for me to repeat after her as she pointed to the cherries, figs, and tiny yellow plums. "Et des pêches de vigne."

Together we stooped to pick up fallen wild peaches. Blood peaches. It was the first time I had ever seen a wild peach. I held one up to the light, broke it in two to study the scarlet veins running through the flesh.

"Do you sleep with Papa?" Laure asked, picking distractedly at a scab above her knee. Her question seemed so natural, so French, but I was still torn between nervous laughter and scolding.

"Yes," I answered firmly, biting into my first pêche sauvage ever. I had never tasted anything so delicious and forbidden. I almost wanted to cry, not from joy, but from some distant awareness that we would pay dearly one day for such sweetness.

I kiss Laure's ear good night and wish her sweet dreams, and she whispers it back to me. Sweet dreams. It is one of her favorite phrases she has learned in English.

As I walk back downstairs to the remnants of the dinner party, I think of what I will teach her tomorrow and the next day, because soon, in a month, two, a year from now, I may be on a high-speed train back to Paris. On the TGV, men will look at me and see a foreign woman in an expensive dress and sandals, carrying a soft leather bag, and one of them may ask me to spend a moment telling him something it looks as though I should know.

Staring out the train window, though, I'll think of all the things I have yet to learn, and I might catch a fractured glimpse of this same woman and see her for who she really is: a lonesome voyager, with uneven tan lines, knife cuts on her hands, and a heart speeding fast toward the season of fall.

Wild Peaches Poached in Lillet Blanc and Lemon Verbena

We picked pêches de vigne* direct from our trees in Provence. If you don't have access to wild peaches, use ripe yet slightly firm and blemishfree white or yellow peaches. Substitute aromatic Pineau des Charentes Blanc, Monbazillac, or your favorite white wine for the Lillet Blanc. I've experimented cooking these in red wine, and the peaches, although delicious, are not as pretty.

6 medium-size ripe wild peaches*
1 (750-ml) bottle Lillet Blanc
1/3 cup sugar
2 to 3 tablespoons honey
1 (3-inch) piece orange rind
Squeeze of fresh orange juice (from 1 quarter)
4 to 5 fresh lemon verbena sprigs, plus leaves for garnish

Cut an X in blossom end of each peach. Plunge in boiling water, about 30 seconds. Remove and peel peaches. Place peeled peaches in a large, wide, heavy-bottomed pot. Pour Lillet Blanc over. Add sugar, honey, orange rind, and juice. Gently crush lemon verbena leaves with hands to release fragrance and add sprigs to pot. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium, and poach, occasionally turning peaches gently for even cooking, 20 to 30 minutes (depending on ripeness) or until peaches are tender when pierced gently with tip of knife. Carefully remove peaches and place in a large serving bowl. Turn heat to high and cook poaching liquid 6 to 8 minutes or until thick and syrupy. Pour over peaches. Let cool and chill in refrigerator at least 4 hours or overnight. Garnish with more lemon verbena leaves. This is also delicious with a swirl of crème fraîche or soft vanilla ice cream and grated Amaretti di Saronno cookies. Serves 6.