

The Cooks · *Darcy Vebber*

ELISE AND JOHN never go to places like this. Most often when they eat out, they eat at the usual places, the ones that are the same in everyone's neighborhood. This restaurant is new, in a part of the city that was dangerous not long ago. The waiters are young men in black jeans and white t-shirts who wear their hair in sly, half-grown out crew cuts. The food is Northern Italian. Tuscany, Florence, Milan. Rocks, ruins, fields of ripe grain.

Elise sees the girls over her husband's shoulder. The door to the kitchen opens and two young women come out in white aprons and chef's hats dancing the tango. They take a few quick, light steps forward then stop, hands clasped, heads tipped back with laughter, turn and disappear again behind the big silver doors.

"The cooks are dancing," she says to her husband.

"What?" John twists around to look back to where they were. "Where?"

"They're gone now," she says. "Never mind." The sight of the laughing girls makes her chest hurt a little. She is tired and hungry and their slightly sweaty, angelic faces fill her with desire for things she doesn't have.

"But what was it?"

"The cooks were dancing the tango. They came out and went right back." Lately explaining things has become a terrible chore for her. Never mind, she finds herself saying over and over, at work and at home. Never mind. She is pregnant for the first time after thirteen years of marriage and no one knows but John. At a store in the mall, she quietly, secretly bought two books, but neither of them speaks to her. (She is not the young mother and they are not the young couple—she and John know each other. They have waited and waited for this.) She thinks it ought to be different but she isn't sure how.

She and John came into the city for the wedding of her friend William. Before the ceremony, Elise saw the bride and her attendants through the half open door of a hotel room, some already in their big skirts, some still in jeans, laughing and toasting each other with champagne. The room was chaotic with curlers and discarded clothes and warm breath. She

wanted to stay and watch but John, who hated to be late, was calling her from down the hall.

In her new tan snakeskin purse, she has a piece of wedding cake wrapped in a silver edged napkin. Laura and William, November 2nd. Why do you want that? John asked. To dream on, she said. You put it under your pillow to dream on. He looked frightened. No, she said, not to dream about another husband. I love you. You're the only husband I want.

"Do you think Laura and Will're going to be happy?" she asks him now.

"I hope so. They looked happy, didn't they?" He is studying the menu, eager for adventure.

"You know, Laura's mother baked that cake—her mother and her sisters. Her mother decorated it."

"Willy was afraid the mother might've put arsenic in his piece—he doesn't trust her."

"He shouldn't. She thinks he's a heathen come to break up her family because he didn't want Jesus mentioned in the ceremony."

They laugh together. Sometimes, when they are sitting, talking, leaning forward with their elbows on a white table cloth like now, they forget about the things that define and separate them. When they are interrupted, by the waiter, standing at the edge of the table, waiting for them to look up, they feel surprised by their bodies, their hands and eyes and fingers and all the ways that it is impossible to say, even to each other, exactly what is meant.

John orders first. He likes things to move quickly. He fidgeted through the long serious wedding ceremony but she talked him in to staying at the reception almost until the end. Will and Laura ran around, spilling champagne from their slender glasses, talking with everyone about how wonderful it all was and they almost forgot to cut the cake. Elise wanted that last moment of ceremony, like the moment when two become one or wine becomes blood or a pale cracker, flesh, when they would cut into the sweet white cake together and feed each other with their hands.

She thought she might tell people at the reception about the baby—but she didn't say anything. The girls in their pink ruffled dresses moved through the party like birds. John waited with his hands in the pockets of his slacks, a friendly looking man in a camel colored blazer, talking about work or the weather with people he knew. She thought about how differ-

ent they looked from the people they were in their hearts, she and John standing near the bar, nicely dressed, their glasses outstretched for more champagne. She placed her fingers across her belly like a fan, waiting to feel change.

She orders calzone and they decide to share an antipasto.

“Wine?” the waiter asks.

John shakes his head. It isn’t good for Elise or the baby and he is trying to be careful for her. It makes her feel strange.

The night air cools and the glass windows in front of the restaurant fog. They might be in Italy or Spain or any warm country where people gather to talk loudly and at once and voices steam the glass. Of course, people in Los Angeles don’t know each other, don’t lean from table to table talking but they are loud among themselves here and an illusion is maintained. On the back of the menu, Elise reads that the cooks are co-owners of this place. She imagines them in the kitchen, bent over an open fire exchanging secrets while they stir the pots. They listen equally to each other, the same size, the same smile, the same way of thinking.

Her friends have always been men. She liked them best, men and boys, smart boys who ran wild outside the school gates and wouldn’t study and didn’t care. Awkward, long-legged boy heroes breaking rules—they still caught her attention when she saw them riding bikes or hanging around in front of the 7-11. They felt like freedom, they smelled of it, fearless boys and men. Her woman friends have been women who understood this, who agreed with her that boys’ games were best and that bravery was the most important thing. But they were rare, these women, and they were always going someplace else, an adventure in Nepal or a lover in the east. They sent postcards. They had no phone numbers.

The air smells of garlic, lemon, hot oil, sweet tomatoes, drying basil leaves. High overhead lights turn the steamy air gold, the color of afternoon champagne. The waiter brings an earthenware dish of antipasto. The antipasto is this: rough bread, fruity olive oil in a ceramic pitcher, bitter dark olives, grainy white cheeses, salty salami and tiny scallions. They tear the bread apart and eat olives with their fingers, easily peeling away the loosened pits. Elise thinks of the cooks carefully placing these items on the big oval dish.

“What do you think Laura and Will’re doing right now?” she says.

“Sleeping. He’s sleeping and she’s sitting up looking at wedding pres-

ents. They're all unwrapped now and not exactly what she expected—maybe Will fell asleep with the TV on and she's thinking something terrible—”

“That she's still alone—”

“After all that.” He squeezes her hand and smiles at her.

With her tongue she presses the flesh of the bitter olives against the roof of her mouth. She's always sorry to discover that he's felt these disappointments, too. She'd like it if his life, at least, could be perfect. Laura's mother made almond flowers for the wedding cake. On the back of the menu there is no mention of the cooks being married. She imagines they are not. She imagines a friendship like that would not endure marriage, endure or survive, she isn't sure which. What if one were to marry and the other to remain free?

John looks up from a piece of torn bread. “Elise, are you ok? Is something wrong?”

The language of food is so exact: hot, cold, sweet, sour, ripe, rare. She'd like to say that nothing is wrong, that she is just tired or dizzy or confused and maybe those things are true but that isn't all. She and John live in a small house with hardwood floors that give color to the rooms. They go hiking together in the mountains behind the house and at night they sometimes sit in front of the fireplace reading, each in a pool of light, just the way she once imagined they would. It's the duty of the marriage partner to be honest, to open doors, to tell the truth but she wants him to believe that nothing is wrong, that she is still unafraid. “I don't know. It's not you. It's just . . .” What? An ache? Something in the warm air? The sight of the girls dancing. “I've been thinking about friends . . .”

“About Willy?”

“About girls, women . . . you know, girlfriends . . .” The word sounds silly and small. It's not exactly what she means. “I don't have any women friends anymore.” She watches him carefully, wondering if he will understand even though she doesn't, entirely. He does not look puzzled and when he nods easily, she wants to shake him, to grab his shoulders and give him a light shake.

He says, “It gets harder as we get older, don't you think?”

She doesn't know what to think. She just knows that there is this desire.

“What about at work? I thought there were women you liked at work.”

She shakes her head. "I eat lunch with them sometimes. We don't talk." Who does she talk to? She talks to him.

"But you could." He has faith in her—he thinks she can do whatever she tries.

"Yes, I could." But that isn't it. There is something more.

"It's the baby," he says. She lets him take her hand. "Don't you think it's—the baby that makes you feel this way?"

No, she wants to say, it's something else. It's the desire to look into a mirror and see a reflection. It's something else entirely. I dream at night about a girl who's been murdered. I know who did it but I won't say. I can't confess.

The waiter brings the food. It is perfect, the crusty calzone rich with smoky melted cheese and the pasta steamy with garlic and bright colored peppers. They eat without talking.

Elise is going to have to tell her mother about the baby soon. Her hands on the table remind her of her mother's hands, pale and old looking. Her mother lives alone in southern Illinois and goes out every evening until winter to water her lawn and watch the sun go down. She stands there with the hose in her hand spraying one part of the lawn and then another, taking the time to let it all soak in, until it is dark. Some days she doesn't talk to anyone else all day but she seems to want that. She was never the type of mother who wanted grandchildren. She always wanted silence—as if they might otherwise use up all the air in her small, finite world.

Elise reaches across the table for a forkful of John's pasta. The red peppers in it are charred and she imagines one of the cooks holding up a burnt pepper on a skewer, holding it close to her face while she tenderly peels the black flesh from the red fruit and the other slices it into the steamy bowls of white noodles.

John is finished. He watches her for a moment, looks for the waiter, wonders about coffee. He is ready to move on again.

A busboy comes to take the plates. The sly waiter brings coffee and a check. "This was good," John says. He likes to sum things up. "It's too bad they're so far away." He finishes his coffee.

"Wait," she says. "Please, wait. I'd like to see them—the cooks. I'd like to tell them how much we enjoyed the meal." She pushes back her chair and stands.

"We could ask for one of them to come out."

“No—I want to see—” She wants to see them alone, together in their kitchen. “I’ll be right back.” She never does things like this.

The boy waiters are leaning against the wall outside the silver door, their bare arms crossed over their chests, resting. They watch her pass without comment and she swings through the heavy door.

The kitchen is a narrow steamy room, too new to be greasy or much marred. The cooks are at a stainless steel island. One tears greens into a wooden bowl, the other stirs sauce pots on the range behind them. Their faces and the faces of the dishwashers are pink, the only color in the silver and white room. One of the cooks has dark, braided hair like Elise’s that is curling out from under her white hat. The other is a redhead with pale blue eyes. There is music on the radio, jazz piano barely audible over the gas jets and running water.

“Excuse me,” Elise says. The cooks look up and smile as if they are used to people coming in like this. “I wanted to tell you how much I liked the dinner.”

“Thank you.”

“And . . . to tell you . . .”

The girls wait. The redhead holds a wooden sauce spoon to her flushed cheek.

“. . . To ask your names.”

“I’m Marie Pinola and this is Betty,” the dark haired one says.

“Betty Kline.”

Betty smiles. The dinner hour is over and traffic in the kitchen is slow.

“Have you known each other for a long time?”

Betty looks at Marie. “Not a long time-four or five years. Our mothers were friends in college.” They laugh together. “But we didn’t meet until later.”

Elise notes the easy way she says we. “And do you like this work?”

“We love this,” Marie says. “We’ve been really lucky and we really do.”

A boy comes in to pick up the salads and he winks at Marie as he passes. She smiles.

Elise breathes deeply the rich kitchen air, trying to memorize its damp warmth on her arms and face. “Will you give a school?”

“Classes? I don’t think so,” Betty says. “We don’t think it’s right—not the right way to learn, I mean. We think people should experiment.”

“It’s mostly a matter of feeling, isn’t it?” Marie says.

“Exactly—and memory. You remember the tastes of things and then you find a way to put them together. You get a feeling for how they might go.” Betty smiles. “That’s all there is, really.”

Elise nods. The cooks wait, knowing there is something more. She sees shadows under Marie’s dark eyes. They don’t understand about schools and advice. They think older people always want answers to things—how did you do this, how will you do it next time? Elise remembers that feeling. They think this is not the best way to live, always asking for other people’s recipes. Elise has never done this before. “You see,” she says, “I’m having a baby.”

“Congratulations,” says sweet Marie.

“Bring it here and we’ll make special things for it to eat,” says Betty. They take a step closer to her, to see.

She doesn’t want to leave. “Won’t you give a class?”

“Experiment,” Betty says. “You only have to remember the tastes and imagine the way they might go together.”

“Trust your luck, that’s all we’ve done.”

They turn to take a bubbling kettle off the range, each taking a side and lifting like dancers or sisters or old friends and Elise leaves.

In the parking lot, the cold air is so quiet that she can hear the crunch of gravel under John’s feet when he steps back to open the car door for her. Then she is alone for a moment in the car. She knows she has been wrong somehow about boys and men and bravery, that she will have to go looking for the women she has lost and forgotten, to touch their shoulders, to confide in them, to tenderly brush their hair, and hear from them the secret of making friends.

John gets in the car. He puts the key in the ignition then pauses to look at her, to lean over and kiss her forehead and her lips. She tastes salt, champagne, coffee, and his own clear, familiar taste. On the long drive home, she feeds him little pieces of wedding cake from her snakeskin bag.