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The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2013

‘A Dish of Chocolate Ice-Cream’

by Emma Seaman

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were received for the 2013 prize...



old parsonage



A Dish of Chocolate Ice-Cream

Luc Marin sat on his narrow bed studying a battered copy of *Le Guide Culinaire*, marking pages with slips of paper and making notes in his neat, slanting handwriting. Barron lounged on a similar bed on the other side of the room, a copy of *Playboy* tipped sideways in his hands as he scrutinised the centrefold with his insolent, white-lashed eyes.

“Hey, Marin; take a look at this... c’est ravissante, n’est-pas?”

Barron thrust the picture towards him and Luc glanced at it reluctantly. His olive skin was well-used to the steam of boiling pans, dry heat of ovens like forest fire, the howling of temperamental Patrons, but still, he felt a betraying flush suffuse his face. The woman sprawled on a rumpled sheet of dull champagne colour, her blonde hair artfully tumbled and tousled, her hands clasped round her breasts. She held the fleshy globes in her hands, cupping them frankly, weighing them dispassionately, like a housewife assessing fruit in the market. Her lipstick was glossy and plasticky, lips thrust forward in a disdainful moue. Alluring? Perhaps so... but all

Luc could think of was the oily smear her red-stained mouth would leave behind on every glass and cup, on the tines of the fork as she ate, how the heavy greasepaint would overwhelm the subtle tastes of every mouthful.

“I think we should make room for this beauty, non?”

Barron pulled at the picture without tenderness, the magazine’s staples tearing a jagged hole in the soft dough of the woman’s stomach. He pinned her to the wall, leaving her untidily spatchcocked amongst many others, for Barron’s half of the room was already papered with these women. They looked saucily back over plump creamy shoulders, or adjusted their stocking-tops, naked beneath flimsy negligees, ruffle upon nylon ruffle. Luc sighed, for he knew this mood of Barron’s; tonight he would come back late and loud, reeking of cheap perfume.

Barron dropped the magazine and lit a cigarette, the smoke rising up in thin strings. Luc stood and quietly opened the room’s sole window.

“It’s better than your stench of the kitchens,” said Barron angrily, “I can always tell what’s on the menu just by the smell of your clothes; you sweat it from every pore.”

“It is as well you are merely a waiter, not a chef,” Luc remarked mildly, “Smoking will kill your taste buds stone-dead.”

Barron favoured Lucky Strikes, which had a dry sharp smell like burning paper, nothing like the Gauloises Luc remembered his father savouring, with their deep blue smoke that became a melancholy lingering perfume on the air. But then Barron craved anything American; a black leather jacket, blue jeans, he even greased his curls at the front into a kind

of cockade, like a movie tough. Barron was more like a bull, a Charolais perhaps, with his meaty haunches in tight black trousers, shiny at the seams where he had carelessly pressed them with a too-hot iron. His blond curls were crisp and pale as pinewood shavings over a low, wide forehead, his wide nose with flared nostrils so very bovine that Luc envisaged it pierced through with a heavy brass ring.

Luc pushed back the encroaching ivy leaves which filtered the afternoon sun and gave the room a greenish underwater tinge. The attic rooms where the staff lived all had these small windows and sloping ceilings, infernally hot in summer and frigid in winter. Not that there were many staff to complain, these days.

Tartuffe was the name above the hotel door, and the last Tartuffe, Benoit, was Chef Patron. He was a big man, whose shirts pulled taut over his belly so that the stripes stretched into broad arcs, his fat cigars smouldering like sullen autumn bonfires. Monsieur Tartuffe put his florid signature to the menus Luc so carefully created, but only after querying the expense of each item; Luc maintained the Hôtel’s reputation for luxurious dining, but on a provincial housewife’s budget. M. Tartuffe devoured Luc’s exquisite food, swanned through the restaurant in high pleated toque and immaculate whites, but it was Luc who cut and trimmed and devised ways to economise without sacrificing flavour; fewer truffles, more vegetables, the cheaper cuts of meat. It was an eternal balancing act.

“Are we to dine on cabbages and pork?” M. Tartuffe would querulously demand, “Are we peasants? Or indeed Germans?” Luc would furrow his brow and explain that truffles now cost

so much per kilo, that the fat ducks promised by le fermier had been sold instead to the chef from Maison Rousseau who was prepared to offer the full market price... But that was the way of the world; guests wanted luxury, not rooms that were tired and faded, undecorated since Benoit Tartuffe re-opened the hotel after the war. The whole town looked a little tired now the new road diverted the bulk of the holiday traffic further south. Small boys played around the crumbling plaster pillars of the Mairie, matrons wore hessian aprons and swept fallen petals from their doorsteps instead of lunching, and the pepperpot towers of the once-famous chateau were almost hidden by an unkempt fringe of encroaching trees.

One thing the hotel could still offer, besides Luc's culinary expertise, was an embarrassment of fine wines; there never seemed to be any desire to trim their cost or water them down. Tartuffe employed no sommelier, but prided himself on his choices, though his tastebuds were sullied by smoke and alcohol and his judgement likewise dulled. But still, Luc shrugged, this place was but a stepping stone, and his Patron's culinary neglect gave him freedom to experiment - for Luc's true aim was to create the perfect meal, the most exquisite possible combination of flavours.

His menus were a balance of tastes, of textures, of emotions; they dwelt in the realms of the sublime. Every week as he changed and refined his creations, he selected one dish from each course that was the diamond amongst the rhinestones. It was so very rare that any diner could navigate all five courses and select that perfect combination... it was a matter of probability, of chance, and for Luc, the selection of those secretly favoured dishes would reveal his perfect customer.

He had expanded upon his philosophy to Barron, a little, when they were first sharing a room; he'd shown the waiter his notebooks, with their neatly written recipes, an asterisk denoting each star dish. But it was easy to see that Barron would never select the perfect menu, for he grabbed his meals at the kitchen door, happiest with anything he could fold up in one hand and cram in his mouth.

"Don't you find it *décourageant*," Barron had drawled, "All that time and preparation for something that gets eaten in a trice and then shat out?"

Luc had heatedly tried to defend his art, but his words were clumsy and inadequate, for only food could ever truly speak what his heart felt. Barron had turned away, sneering.

"Food is fuel, nothing more."

Luc was no scholar, could not calculate the infinitesimal chances of a diner picking the right selection of dishes from the many choices he presented... for one path, one flavour, led on to another, each selection to a different turn, and only the most refined sensibility could pick a safe way through the maze.

This week, Luc favoured une Bisque de Homard to start, a smooth soup garnished with the lightly fried and buttered tailmeat of the lobster, presented in a demitasse; just a few exquisite mouthfuls to pique the appetite. Then, for l'entrée, one perfectly shaped Quenelle de Brochet, made from young pike that hunted in the deep shadows under the town bridge. He served that dainty morsel with a pool of butter cream sauce and shavings of truffle, accompanied by a tiny bouquet of Asparagus Mimosa.

That evening, Barron reported to him, with an odd, sideways glance, that a diner had selected these first two dishes, and it was an English visitor, no less.

“Les Anglais? They can’t cook, they can’t even eat...” Luc muttered to himself. But still, when the customer sent in their order for the next course, he noticed with a surge of joy that it was for his Mousselines de Perdreaux. These he topped with a small roast partridge fillet, and a fumet sauce of brandy and butter finished in the poêle, the little heavy frying pan championed by the great Escoffier. Accompaniments were a heaped tablespoon of Purée de Marrons and a tiny oven-baked potato cake, the size of a large coin, no more. It was so important not to overload the stomach at any point in the meal, to allow satiety to take the edge off the appetite, the anticipation.

Luc could not remember how many months it was since any diner had selected three perfect dishes in a row and he pushed open the swing door from the kitchen to the restaurant, just a little, so that he could see the mysterious diner.

The English girl sat alone, her head turned slightly away, so he could not see her face. He noticed that she had her hair in the new mode; a short bob that swung like a bronze bell with every movement. The girls here usually wore their hair pulled up in stiff waves, crimped and set like pie-crust, but this style was so much cleaner. Luc imagined running his fingers through that softness, unhindered by hairpins or sticky spray.

She had tiny studs of pearl in her ears, nestling gently against the soft pink lobes, and wore a simple linen dress in apple-green. Fresh as spring grass, it picked up russet lights in her hair, shimmering like threads of bright wire. Her breasts,

he couldn’t help but notice, were like two small, perfect crème renversées. As if she felt his gaze, she looked up and he saw her eyes at last, clear light brown flecked with gold, like the trout streams flowing swiftly through the Morvan hills. Her eyes widened when she saw him standing at the kitchen door in his chef’s whites, then she flushed a little and looked away.

For le plat principal, Luc had prepared Tournedos aux Morilles, tender beef cooked with morels and fresh parsley butter, with his own refinement of adding the seeds of the parsley, to give that little extra crunch to the dish. M. Tartuffe would prefer to offer the more usual Tournedos Rossini, with a topping of foie gras, but the expense was ruinous, and besides, Luc felt there was something rather epicene about those fleshy pale folds of fattened liver. And to his delight, the young girl unerringly sent in her order for his Tournedos, and again he peeked through the kitchen door to watch her address the meat with delicate gusto.

Now they reached the pudding, the crowning glory of any meal, where Luc’s preference was always for something decadently rich yet deceptively simple. Sometimes he chose Îles Flottantes, lightly poached clouds of meringue languishing on tender vanilla custard, but today he had put a tiny asterisk in his menu-book against the Brise du Printemps, an opulent Chantilly cream, chilled and scented with crystallised violets. He quivered a little at the thought of the English girl’s soft pink mouth fragrant with the scent of those shy and elusive blooms.

There was a little delay before Barron bought in her final order, but instead of slapping the slip of paper down on the counter, as was his custom, he crumpled it in his hand. Luc

stared at him impatiently, but Barron said nothing.

“Well?” Luc demanded, and snatched the order from Barron’s slack grasp. The waiter would not meet his eyes.

“She did not want the Brise de Printemps,” Barron said sulkily, “She said she did not care to eat flowers.”

Luc could not understand Barron’s truculence, nor, once he’d read the order, the girl’s faulty reasoning. There were many things on the menu designed to tempt, some delightful crêpes de cerises for instance, flamed in liqueur, or even the selection of cheeses; these choices he could have understood. But chocolate ice-cream? It was a child’s dish. He scooped the dessert with a grudging hand, then ignored Barron’s outstretched arm and stalked into the restaurant, determined to take the glass saucer to the girl himself. She looked up at him briefly as he placed the dish on her table, then avoided his hard, accusing stare. He stood there, glowering down at her, his arms crossed around his chest as she took her first taste. She had a pointed tongue like a little cat, red as raspberry coulis, and she gave a shiver as the icy sweetness hit her tongue. Luc felt his heart crack, just a little.

It was very much later that evening when Barron slammed into their shared room, his tread heavy, face bloated with drink.

“I had hoped to find you otherwise occupied,” Barron said, his voice rough with Pernod.

Luc, uncertain of Barron’s meaning, wrinkled his nose at the sickly smell of anise on his room-mate’s breath and turned his head away. Barron kicked off his shoes and slumped onto his bed.

“I could tell you the English girl’s room-number, if you’d still like to try your luck.”

Luc fixed Barron with a glare.

“There was never any question of that, I can assure you,” he said stiffly.

“Ah, that’s right,” Barron sneered, “You would never deign to kiss a girl who failed your test, would you?” He laughed dreadfully, eyes gleaming with animal cunning. “I paid her, you know. It didn’t take much. She’s just some child’s nurse, a nounou travelling to her next posting. Her employers had given her money for the journey, but not for food. I saw her hungry eyes when she looked at the menu and told her about you, our shy virgin chef who so badly needs his cherry popped. I offered to pay for her meal, told her what to order. There would have been extra if she’d had you as well, but she chickened out; couldn’t stomach the thought, I suppose.”

“I cannot believe you would do such a thing...”

“Bah, it was a waste of my money. She fooled us both, cette petite salope; she refused your dessert and made me a failed pander for a crazy chef. Still, it is your loss, Luc Marin; she could have been yours for the asking, for the price of a meal.”

He rolled over, hunching his shoulders against Luc’s impotent fury; within minutes, the alcohol overwhelmed him, and he slept, dead to the world. The drunken snoring of Barron was an insult, Luc decided, worse even than his laughter. Luc fumed and fretted and resolved that in the morning he would ask, no demand, that Benoit Tartuffe finally grant him a room of his own. He would not sleep another night in a room with that beast, that cochon.

Luc rose from his bed and went down through the dark and

sleeping corridors to his kitchen, his haven. As he opened up, he saw a scrap of paper pushed under the kitchen door, a bill perhaps from one of his suppliers. Luc bent wearily to pick it up, aware of his aching back, then recognised the weight of the card in his hand, cream linen-fold, finely ribbed. It had been torn carefully from one corner of his menu, a message written there in a small and rounded hand.

“Dear Monsieur Le Chef,” it said, “I am afraid I must catch the early train and so will not be able to thank you in person. I wanted to tell you that your menu was the most beautiful, the most perfect meal I have eaten, could ever hope to experience. I am so sorry for the deception; but at the last I could not bear to play such a mean trick on you.”

And she had signed the note in squiggling, curving loops. He couldn't read the name. He realised he didn't want to.

Luc sighed and reached for his pen to write the menu for the next week, then changed his mind and seized instead a bag of sugar from the pantry. He was suddenly inspired. This then was the way forward; to create the dish for the woman, not try to mould the woman to the menu. He would make the pudding to end all puddings for la belle inconnue. He would weave a cage of spun sugar, like the fine strands of her coppery hair, and place a sweet peach at the heart of it, the flesh quivering and delicately scented... or, no, maybe a soufflé of pure white-fleshed apple; for she was surely his Eve.