



A
Certain
Hunger

a novel

Chelsea G.
Summers

"A *Certain Hunger* reads like a dark, delicious feminist fairy tale. Modestly funny and lushly baroque, it's *American Psycho* as rewritten by Angela Carter. Irresistible."

—Megan Abbott

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AN UNNAMED PRESS BOOK

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First Edition

To all the bad girls, but especially to Molly and Katelan.

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A Certain Hunger

1

Corpse Reviver #2

They all look the same, hotel bars, even when they don't. The oak and the glass, the palms and the bottles, the lighting that casts that singular glow, wrapping you in its warmth and pin-spotting your loneliness. Hotel bars smell like class privilege, desperation, and hope.

I sat at the hotel bar, drinking a Corpse Reviver #2. Corpse Revivers, as connoisseurs of cocktail culture know, were created as hangover cures, those hairs of the dog encouraged by Aristophanes, who, so long ago in ancient Greece, looked to quell the storms that come from swilling an excess of wine. Like many of the best things, the origin of the Corpse Reviver family of cocktails is shrouded in mystery. The obscure siblings of the Corpse Reviver first appeared in the 1871 publication of *The Gentleman's Table Guide: Being practical recipes for wine cups, American drinks, punches, cordials, summer & winter beverages; Recherché bills of fare with service of wines & c., & c.* It is a heady title, and a heavy book, one that runs as dizzy a gamut as its title suggests. Every proper young man should peruse a copy; every improper one should own it.

Most contemporary cocktails date from Prohibition, a profoundly stupid time in American history, and while already soundly middle-aged in 1920, the Corpse Reviver found its stride during these years of dumb deprivation. Harry Craddock, the legendary American bartender at London's legendary Savoy Hotel, ushered the Corpse Reviver into the modern age in the Roaring Twenties, cementing the drink's status in 1930 with the publishing of his *The Savoy Cocktail Book*. Craddock's own prim, starched lines are not to my taste. I enjoy a man who's kissed with a yeasty beastliness. Craddock's staid and studied ersatz Englishness aside, I detect a ruffled rebel's raging heart beating in his white-coated breast, if only when I drink his creations. Craddock's Corpse Reviver #2 is an exquisite drink that sits on the lintel of anarchy: what makes it also breaks it. The splash of absinthe propels the Corpse Reviver #2 into the territory of the faintly hallucinogenic—the absinthe also dates and places the drink. Absinthe was, of course, unfairly banned in these puritanical United States for about a century, returning in

2007. Those were happy days when absinthe returned to North American shores, even with its severely decreased wormwood percentage.

The hotel bar where I sat sipping my Corpse Reviver #2 was not the bar of The Savoy Hotel. There are not sufficient superlatives that one can lay at the feet of The Savoy Hotel, or at least there weren't; times change, likewise places. This historic hotel—home to Oscar Wilde's love that dare not speak its name; habitat of Sarah Bernhardt; domicile of Noël Coward; and abode to countless other filthy gorgeous stars—has fallen from grace, or at least from the grace of those who live graciously. Still, I love The Savoy, if primarily for its history, its unswerving devotion to the laws of luxury, and its inordinate British taste. Others may enjoy their sex acts tick-a-tack in tawdry motels, pilled acrylic under their backs, shag rug as pestilent as the fur of a feral dog beneath their feet, and the illuminating, flickering, cold blow of a television screen. To say I'm immune to the charms of no-tell hotels would be disingenuous. But there's nothing as heavenly as sundry perversions perpetrated in rooms with views, high thread counts, Turkish towels, and price tags to match. Cheap is fine; expensive is almost always excellent. The Savoy is, above all things, expensive, even if more recent days you'd be likely to find me in the Hotel Café Royal or The May Fair. (The decoration is better, and, after all, only the superficial lasts.)

I was not in The Savoy, and the bar was not in London. It was the fall of 2013 in New York City, my hometown, and the bar belonged to the NoMad Hotel. I like to visit hotel bars, even when I'm in my own city. You sit at a bar and you're gifted with that feeling of utopia peculiar to places frequented by wanderers. Hotels are like train travel, like early-morning pillow talk with a stranger. They allow you to occupy a space that's caught in indefiniteness.

I sat at the hotel bar, alone, the Corpse Reviver #2 beading in the glass before me, a wicked shade of stepmother white. Five other humans, two pairs and a single, ranged down the bar, a wide slab of wood as smooth as fine Belgian chocolate and almost as dark. One pair: businessmen in business suits, doing business; the eyes of one stole over his raised glass to meet mine from time to time. The other pair: a couple, husband and wife, most likely, who stared past each other's dead eyes as they spoke. And the single: a young man, tall and thin, with long aristocratic fingers and skin the color of Brillat-Savarin. Though clearly here on business, he wasn't wearing a suit; his shirt gleamed lustrous, lavender as an old bruise. Unlike the man who

flicked his glances toward me like a cigarette in the general direction of an ashtray, this young man met my gaze in the mirror and held it steady. Nothing spilled in that cocksure gaze.

I drank my Corpse Reviver #2, I took notes on my most recent meal (Vitals & Orts, a new gastropub helmed by Rupert Bonnard, the *enfant terrible du jour*, who gleefully dished up offal to foodies desperate for some new sensation, their mouths gaping as baby birds', as Egypt's Blue Hole, as porn-stars' assholes. The food was excellent, especially its duck liver toast—unctuous as a Vegas emcee, salty as a vaudeville comedian—and its steak-and-kidney pie—tender as a love song, rich as Warren G. Harding). I bided my time.

In the wide mirror, I could see the slender single man fluffing himself in preparation to approach me. First, he leaned into the bartender and gestured in my specific direction; a fresh drink was placed before me, an abject offering. Next, he caught my eye and nodded at me, a slight dip of his sharp chin. Then, he slid off his chair, smooth as a pat of butter oozing from a pile of hot flapjacks. I felt him slide beside me.

“You know,” he said, “you pose an interesting challenge.”

His voice was deep and kissed with an indeterminate accent. It dripped with excellent upbringing, winters skiing in the Dolomites, summers spent in a ten-room “cottage” on the Baltic, private school with British teachers. His skin smelled like expensive paper and sap.

“Do I.”

He glided onto the stool next to me, sliding his long legs under the bar, every moment as calculated as the luster on his shirt. No man wears a sateen shirt without wanting to be petted. “You have what I call ‘resting bitch face.’ It’s interesting,” he said.

I looked at him and arched a brow. “Well, wait until you see it in full fucking action, little man.”

Later, though not much later, I’d explore the inside of this young man’s mouth with my tongue and my fingers; it would taste of bourbon and ennui. His mouth would explore the lemon and salt of my pussy; it would taste of multiple orgasms and poor judgment.

The young man in question was long and creamy. A delight; a cream puff stuffed to bursting with pointed sweetness and cum. He was remarkably well raised, brought up by his single mother, a British émigré from the USSR, a woman in possession of an un-disputable fortune and inexplicable good taste.

This young man seemed to have been reared by Gigi, had Gigi lived in Soviet Russia and served as the mistress of an unnamable party chief. This young man was tangentially involved in hedge-fund trading by day, but he wrote poetry by night, his long fingers tip-tap-tapping on the keyboard, wishing that quills were not so difficult and so pretentious.

One learns so much about a person when one merely wants to fuck him.

In retrospect, it's easy to see how I should have known better. At the very least, I should have known something. All the others were different, you see. I'd built years of intimacy with them, great sprawling manor houses of shared histories with vaulted ceilings and crepuscular cellars, secret rooms and libraries shelved with books we'd read, breathless, in the dark, together. In my time with Giovanni, Andrew, Gil, and Marco, we had built memory palaces that telescoped with extra wings, added rooms, flying dormers, baroque spaces that expanded with time and shared experiences. With Giovanni, with Andrew, with Gil, and especially with Marco, I had spent fat swaths of my life, and even if we'd not spent much of that time together, the points had intersected often enough to create the illusion of a straight line.

From a distance an ellipses looks solid.

This man, this Casimir, which is the name of the young man in question—and it should have told me something, a dirty translation of it means “destroyer of peace”—was a nothing to me, a single blip in the Morse code of my life, something too brief to read. He was a phoneme, a dangling modifier, a printer's orphan. He was an incomplete thought. Some cautionary voice peeped a quiet squeak as that long, white Russian took my hand and led me to his room, but I did not listen. I have always found it hard to listen when a man pulls my head back by my hair. I should have listened. I should have known. I did neither.

Preverbal, love is the smell of a known body, the touch of a recognized hand, the blurred face in a haze of light. Words come, and love sharpens. Love becomes describable, narratable, relatable. Over time, one love comes to lay atop another, a mother's love, a father's love, a lover's love, a friend's love, an enemy's love. This promiscuous mixing of feelings and touches, of smiles and cries in the dark, of half-hushed pleasures and heart-cracking pain, of shared unutterable intimacies and guttural expressions, layer in embellished bricolage. One love coats another, like the clear pages of an anatomy textbook, drawing pictures of things we can only ever see in fractions. With the coming of words, love writes and is then overwritten;

love is marginalia illegibly scrawled in your own illegible hand. In time, love becomes a dense manuscript, a palimpsest of inscrutable, epic proportions, one love overlaying another, thick and hot and stinking of beds. It's an unreadable mess.

I didn't love Casimir. That relationship didn't even live in the same zip code as love. When Casimir approached me, wrapped in sateen and creamy skin and erupting in clumsy pickup lines, I should have listened. I look back at the loves in my life and I think I should've known, I should've seen, I should've listened. I didn't.

Instead, I fucked Casimir in his hotel room, the bed snuggled into an alcove like a broad white tongue into a groove. In addition to a fine hand with the hair pulling, this young Russian had, I remember, the straightest, narrowest cock I'd ever seen. It was slender as a ruler and nearly as direct. That night, we had sex for an hour or so, then ordered room service. I was hungry. My ill luck to have told the waiter to wheel the cart into the room—later, much later, he'd remember my face, wrapped as I was in nothing but the top sheet, and testify in court.

Inconsequential things would later return to haunt me. The room service waiter. The video cameras in the hotel lobby, elevators, and hallway. The bartender at the chocolate-silky bar who'd so adeptly made my Corpse Reviver #2. These trivialities would conspire against me, bear witness, place me in exact time and space, and will my actions into repeatable being. Later, much later, I'd see grainy black-and-white footage of Casimir and me groping in hotel hallways, kissing in hotel elevators, engaging in erotic acts altogether unseemly for public behavior. I looked, I thought, surprisingly good for a fifty-one-year-old. My cheekbones are formidable.

Not that I was stupid enough to have killed Casimir in his hotel room. I may have been shortsighted with lust, but I wasn't crazy. Nor, for that matter, was I prepared. It's not easy for a woman to kill a man.

Why, I wonder now, did I kill him. Oh, Casimir, you were so little to me, a screen for the projection of my desires, twelve feet high and luminous, silvered and flickering. That first night, I left you in a muddled heap in your hotel bed, dusted with room service crumbs and slumbering. As I stepped out into the gimlet dawn, sunlight was beginning to slip like white lies between the skyscrapers. The doorman held the door for me. I walked into the opalescent half-light, flagged a cab, and was gone.

I could've left well enough alone. It would've been easy. The real mistake wasn't fucking Casimir. The real mistake was fucking him *again*. And, I suppose, the next few times. I should have made it a one-off, a lone death-defying act in a high hotel room. Maybe I was bored; maybe I was lost. Maybe he was simply that toothsome. Maybe he was my middle-aged madness, my little red Corvette, my last great gasp before I sloughed off into menopause and the attendant hormonal horrors that anti-puberty has to offer. Whatever Casimir was to me, he wasn't just once, and now, of course, he is with me forever. I am marked by Casimir. We are joined unto death, which is a little ironic, if you think about it, and I do.

Thus I passed weeks with Casimir, multiple nights in his hotel room, fucking. There was a hand job under a table, too, Casimir's fingers parting my labia as I slid forward on a banquette, sly paroxysms of bad posture and muffled orgasm. There was also, if memory serves, a luxe bathroom stall, the click-click-click of expensive heels on the vintage tiles, and the red-lipped "O" of a surprised woman who had too much to drink (and not enough dick). For weeks, Casimir saw me, neither of us knowing that his life was ending. It wasn't as if I planned it.

Just as I was not so crazy as to kill Casimir in his hotel room, I was not so stupid as to kill him in my apartment—Casimir never saw the inside of my apartment! Indeed, I can think of only three lovers who have seen where I live; my home is mine, and I don't like to share. If you followed the trial, and I assume if you're reading this that you paid attention to my trial, then you already know how and where I killed Casimir—or you think you know. You saw Nancy Grace call me bloodthirsty; you read how *Vulture* hung on my trial, rated my outfits, made GIFs of my face, and thrilled at the testimony of Emma Absinthe; you saw my episode of *Snapped*; you read the tweets and you liked them, stabbing that tiny red heart with your forefinger in a hot dopamine rush. What the tabloids named me: the "MILF Killer," the "Butcher Food Critic," the "Bloody Nympho." None got it right. You know only enough about me to be sufficiently interested to shell out money to hear me tell my story, or, if you're cheap, to snag a copy from your public library. You may think you know, but believe me, you don't.

I had keys to my friends' house on Fire Island. It was October. Apple and wood smoke bit the air, but the ferries were still running skeleton schedules. I invited Casimir to spend the weekend with me at a house in Robbins Rest, a tiny townlet tucked between Atlantique and Ocean Beach and the only central

township that lacks a road. To get there, you had to hump your luggage hard over the soft sand—there was no packed path on which to roll your wooden wagon, no easy ingress or egress. If you drove to Robbins Rest, you drove on the beach, dipping into the townlet's small enclave of buildings like a toe into the wind-whipped Atlantic, but mostly you walked through sand. Easiness is not the virtue of Robbins Rest. Remoteness is.

Fire Island was barren, and it was beautiful. The air felt like a giant's clean hand brushing your hair back from your face. Around me, all was silent but for the rare car whooshing in the distance, the odd dog barking, and the ceaseless waves, beating like the heart of a great somnolent beast.

I met Casimir at the Dunewood ferry—not exactly at the ferry, but close to it. I ran late, as it happens. I had duck confit in the oven; it takes time. The only thing better than heating a cold house with the warm smell of duck fat is heating the house with the scent of baking bread. I had that, too, a large crusty loaf of saltless Tuscan bread. It's a lovely accompaniment to duck confit, and an ideal conveyance for duck fat. (There's so much you can do with rendered duck fat. Like God's own lard, duck fat is great emperor of fat, the most generous of lipids. Sauté anything in duck fat, and it tastes infinitely better. You can live without many things, but to live without duck fat is the very essence of privation, something with which I am now achingly, hallucinatorily, hungrily familiar.)

I found Casimir wandering dazed as a startled possum near the ferry landing. He kissed me continental style, and then I led him along the quiet paths. We walked, he and I, the sun dropping like a final consonant; soon the night would be navy as '50s velvet flocked with gilt stars. He tried to hold my hand. It's charming, really, that affectation of affection. A stand of three deer warily watched us as we passed, our feet clunking in heavy boots on the wooden walkway. They watched, but did not scatter. The deer in Fire Island are so cheeky, insouciant in the way of *West Side Story* Jets, standing their ground, cigarettes rolled in their shirtsleeves, whistling a tune, singing an expletive-free song of defiance. Someone could so easily shoot them. Venison steak is best cooked rare and served with cherries, figs, or forest berries. Some meats do enjoy sweet things.

Casimir and I wended our slow way to the house at Robbins Rest, and he delighted at the secret, tree-lined walks. Fire Island feels like the place where the elves of Lothlórien go for vacation. In the October cool, it was

empty, row upon row of homes quiet as the grave, dark as repressed desires. Here or there a house blazed alight, like a life raft in the wake of the *Titanic*.

The house, when we entered it, smelled good. Warm and inviting, reaching out with its savory tendrils, pulling us close to its breast. I had a hard time finding the salad spinner, but then it wasn't my house. I gave Casimir the job of chipping the ice for our cocktails with an old-fashioned ice pick. There were cubes, of course, but cubes are frustratingly angular and unforgivably pedestrian.

I lit the fire (the trick is to soak wine corks in denatured alcohol in a mason jar). We sipped Old Fashioneds and ate Marconi almonds as the duck sizzled in the oven. Later, we ate the duck with our fingers, skin like oiled paper crackling in our mouths, grease happily coating our chins. We drank a nice '99 Brunello, a hot year, but you can't go wrong with Gianfranco Soldera, even if he was an asshole.

Then, as one should, we fucked in the glow of the fireplace, the lambent light turning even Casimir's white skin a toasty tiger. I found his mouth pressed against the vertical slit of my cunt a pretty sight until I came and was done. Casimir snuggled me and guided his pin-straight cock into me. I locked my legs around his pelvis and flipped him onto his back, straddling him. Leaning back, I rode him.

My left hand found the handle of the ice pick warm, weighty. I held it, appreciating its vintage heft, its history, and its design. I knew what to do. In an arc as perfect as a fifteen-year-old girl's breast, I plunged the ice pick deep into the right side of Casimir's pale throat. I felt it pierce his skin, his meat, and his cartilage. I felt it graze something hard, a cervical bone, likely. Casimir's eyes met mine, asking something. "Why," perhaps. I pulled the ice pick out, and crimson jets spurted rhythmic and sure. It was a metronome of blood, a ticking of the heart's time, told in rich red. I stabbed again. Casimir moved, darting away. I struck and hit his raised left hand; the point deflected away, bouncing off the hand and skittering across his face to his eye, where it lodged. I pulled the pick out again; it left the eye behind, drawing a slick slug trail of mucus. I stabbed at his heart and struck the sweet spot between his ribs. The pick stuck in his chest, quivering, like an arrow that has found its target.

I remember there was so little sound. Gurgling, mostly, some harsh rasping for breath. Perhaps I severed something in Casimir's vocal cords; they weren't working. I stood up, and he seemed so distant below me,

huddled and bloodied on the floor. Blood jetted from his throat in rhythmic arterial arcs; each spurt came more slowly, each weaker than the one before, like an old clockwork toy slowing down, every surge another last tick of the works. Casimir turned over and began to crawl toward his pants, fumbling into his pockets, reaching for his phone. His hands were palsied. I watched him claw the phone from his jeans pocket. Casimir cradled the phone with his stuttering, weakened hands. He jabbed the screen with his forefinger, vainly trying to hit the emergency number icon at the bottom of the screen.

I kicked the phone out of his hands and across the room; it made a satisfying whoosh before thudding solidly against the wall. Casimir looked up at me; his whole body deflated, limp and lost. He paused in an exquisite stoppage of time, caught like a film still in the black frame of nothingness. And then, my breath caught in reverence, I watched as his eyes grew blank with ethereal suddenness. It's such an intimate thing, to witness another's death. Orgasms are a dime a dozen. Any old human woman can see a man orgasm. We so rarely get to see them die; it has been my greatest gift and my most divine privilege.

There was blood, a lot of blood, such great black-red sprays of blood in the firelight. It's shocking how much blood a body holds. I'd seen it before, but it never gets old.

I stepped and slipped. Blood underfoot. Blood trickling like chocolate sauce off my breasts, onto my belly, and down to the slit of my pudendum. Blood everywhere. I read somewhere that in filming *Psycho* Hitchcock used chocolate sauce to simulate blood, and looking at my delectable body, he made a good choice. I walked across the room and checked to make sure that Casimir was dead. Pressing fingers against his pulse points, I found nothing. Where Casimir had been there was naught.

Naked but for a pair of latex gloves, I wrapped up the remainder of the duck confit to bring with me; then I laid out layers of woolen clothes on a chair by the door. I checked my steps around the house, chucking anything that might have my prints into the center of the living room. I moved about the kitchen, cleaning up telling traces. When I felt sure I'd wiped, tossed, and cleaned all of my marks, I showered, taking my time, drying my hair.

Then I tossed all of Casimir's belongings on top of his cooling body, and I poured the rest of the mason jar of alcohol over the muddled mound of corpse, clothes, dishes, and pans. I scattered a few corks on top of the mess. At the door, I dressed, lit a match, and tossed it into the center of the room. A

bright, clear flame flew with a whoosh, and I turned out the door, into the darkness. Paces down the walk, I could see the flames bright orange through the beach-house's wide, clean panes of glass. I walked past a row of darkened, still houses down to the shore; the wind blew clean and hard, cutting through my canvas overcoat as I walked along the beach.

I walked for an hour or so in the black, the smell of the sea washing me, the stars peering like wallflowers from behind the curtains of cloud. A half hour later, fire trucks passed me, sand whirling like dervishes after their wheels, their sirens wailing banshee songs, their red lights blurring like two drunks talking.

I returned to Dunewood, to the house I'd borrowed from my friends, took another very luxurious shower, settled down on their ivory shabby chic couch, poured a nice glass of cognac, and watched a couple of episodes of television before falling asleep, delighted.

The house in Robbins Rest wasn't my house, you see. It wasn't even the house of my friends. It was just a house, a stranger's house, an empty house located apart from others, one with an easily picked lock and running electricity. A house closed for the season, empty of people and barren of company, and now it was burnt. I'm quite certain the owners had insurance. After all, they had a lovely Le Creuset cast-iron French oven.

That sort is always well insured.

2

Roast Parsnips

Prison is boring. It's noisy, and it's bright. All around you, all the time, every day, there are people, unless you're in solitary, which I might enjoy if I knew I could leave when I wanted, which you cannot. Moreover, you aren't allowed pens or pencils or sometimes even books in solitary. I tolerate humanity's crush in order to be allowed to write. I behave beautifully so that I have paper, pens, and occasional access to a computer. I suffer for my art.

In my nun's narrow bed at night, I hear covers rustling. So much whispering, so much snoring, so many people breathing—I might as well be sleeping with all of them. These are not, almost to a one, people I want to spend time with, yet together we do time. Time binds us, time flattens us out, time makes us familiar. So much time, so many people. I've never liked people, and now I like them less. They're nearly all women, too; I've so little to play with. There are male guards—the less said about them, the better. I see them, the guards, terrifying the vulnerable inmates. They're bullies, these men living their fantasies of power, as if their squalid teenage dreams cracked open and spilled incarcerated candy at their feet.

Prison company is bad. Prison food is worse. Even when you game the system, the food is lamentable. My kingdom for a delicately roasted parsnip, a perfectly cooked rack of lamb, a slice of *coppa di cinghiale*, a glass of Monteverdine Le Pergole Torte. I'd kill for some biodynamic Tuscan extra-virgin olive oil. This last is not an overstatement, nor is it a threat—not yet, anyway. It's also the only item on that list that I have any chance of getting here in the pen.

For the first time in more than a decade, I have a job—you can't freelance in prison. I work in the library. I am not yet allowed to help people find books. I'm not yet allowed to check books out or check them back in—these jobs come with nearly unfettered access to a computer, and they're positions of much envy. I stack books on a cart, I push the cart to the stacks, I find the books' rows, and I return them to their predetermined locations. It's dull work, humiliating and borderline pointless, but at least it's not physical. At the end of my working day, I've got energy to write. Rolling my cart under the numerical guidance of the Library of Congress, I mark my days by

remembering meals, and they're not the meals you'd imagine. It's not a parade of gourmet dishes, baroque as popes and twice as rich. No fantasy ortolan, delicate songbird bones crunching as fat runs down my veiled chin. No Thomas Keller-orchestrated dinners, each plate a bar played in a grand, pure symphony that edges on Wagnerian excess. No savory, silky feast of the seven fishes; no effusive, bubbly banquet of El Bulli foams, extractions, and mousses.

No, the dishes my memory presents me with are stark as a wimple. A simple plate of cut tomatoes oozing their sun-warmed guts, drizzled with oil, and sprinkled with flaky diamond-white salt. A fat slice of fresh, hot bread spread with daisy-yellow butter. The crackling skin of a roast chicken spitting hot fat into my mouth. A bowl of berries daubed with obscenely thick cream. They're the foods, God help me, my mother would have served.

People tend to think that the most natural stories begin at their beginning and unwind through their middle to their completion, and sometimes they do. But that narrative structure is only as true as time, which is to say it's as much a construct as a house or a dress or a turducken. Stories are, like justice or a skyscraper, things that humans fabricate. I started this story, for example, somewhere near the end, but that doesn't make it any less true. It makes it artful, but not false. Let me pause to tell a story from when I was a little girl. It's also true. Everything here is true because, really, why would I lie.

When I was very young—long before I ever lost my virginity or even kissed a boy, around twelve, I think—I had a vision. I imagined throwing a lavish affair, a sort of punctuation mark on my adult life. I saw myself inviting all my lovers, present and past, to a dinner party. I knew even as puberty was dawning, fluffy and pointed as a kitten, that my life would be rich with men. These men, I imagined, would be plentiful, interesting, attractive, and, above all, devout.

In my imagination, I'd send each of them an invitation. Something etched in black spiky ink on heavy stationery—weighty as *Schlag*, textured as flan, colored the delicate white of the fat marbling a prime cut of steak. Each man would RSVP yes, delightedly, each unknowing that the invitation was not for him alone, and each thrilled to his core to see me. I could not then imagine I'd ever have a lover who would not want to see me again. I still can't.

I envisioned a long dinner table, so much longer than it was wide, shiny and black as a beetle's carapace, lined with tall straight-backed chairs that were topped with long, spired skewers, like the spikes in an iron maiden. In

my imagination, these men I loved would sit together, ranged along the two sides of the table, joined by their adoration for me, and united in their befuddlement. They wouldn't know one another. They wouldn't know why they were there, and I would sit at the head of the table, smiling.

In my jejune imagination, my dream lovers were uniform, each as beautiful, masculine, and replaceable as an Arrow shirt model. Really, what does a twelve-year-old know about men. To a girl, a man of thirty is impossibly old, if inconceivably desirable and infinitely replaceable. At twelve, my lust was little more than a vague mauve ache nestled in my cotton panties. I knew that lust was a dangerous thing, but I wanted these men to lust for me because, even though I didn't know the precise shape and weight of lust, I knew that lust was power—and I wanted power even then.

Thus my painfully specific imagined feast, the formal invitations, the long and slick black table, the two martial lines of men, the spiky dining chairs, the shiny cutlery, the glinting of glasses, the smell of roast meat, the quiet sound of polite if menacing conversation, the palpable bewilderment, and my sitting poised and plumped as a Persian cat at the table's head. Thus my fantasy of power. This from the fecund imagination of a twelve-year-old girl.

It's amazing I didn't turn out worse than I did.

It's not as dangerous as I thought it would be, prison. A couple of women have tested me, but being a tall, known murderess tends to keep potential harm at bay. Just after I first arrived, two women—what do they say?—*got all up* in my face. It was kind of adorable, really, their desperate grab for dominance. They cornered me as I was exiting the shower; I looked down at them, their faces hot with inarticulate want, and told them that I'd killed a man with a piece of fruit. I let that assertion sit, and I saw their limited wonder about their own personal and painful Achilles' heels. Then I swept out of the shower area, stunned silence in my wake. These women were merely petty felons clad in stolen dominance, you see, while I was a naked, dripping murderer. There's a lot to be said for intimidating intelligence and a dearth of conscience, and I possess both.

It didn't take long for the forensic psychology and criminal justice students to start fluttering to me, like common gray moths to a bonfire. Two weeks after I'd landed at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, and I'd received my first interview request from a Ph.D. candidate. One request became two, then three, then more. Like hail dropping from the sky, eager students fell before me, jostling each other for my attention. It was delightful

to be so avidly courted by so many keenly interested young things. I felt like the belle of the carceral ball.

I was given batteries of standardized tests. I acquiesced to MRIs and genetic testing. I was asked repeatedly about my childhood. I was plied with cans of mineral water and the finest snacks the vending machines could provide, and I gave my permission to have my psyche plumbed and prodded, plumped and pushed. The students were mostly thirty-year-olds, who, irrespective of gender, wore studious glasses and the kind of asexual, atonal clothing that functions like mental saltpeter. But I've always found that being the center of attention is an implicitly erotic state, and I spread my exotic wings under the students' bland collective gaze. The Hawthorne effect is real—as I was observed, my behavior changed, not always innocently.

For one thing, I knew that the students' interest in me was in direct proportion to how well I conformed to their prepackaged expectations, and I knew that the more I teased the edges of their working diagnoses, the longer I could keep them hanging on. I enjoyed my place in the limited limelight. I wasn't going to let my audience down, so I bubbled in the responses that would make me spicy to these students' lips. And above all, I knew what these darkly optimistic students were hoping to find.

It wasn't hard. I do have a long, florid history of using aliases. I do have a delicious record of nonconformity. I was convicted of violent crimes predicated upon a piquant mélange of impulsivity and preparedness. I genuinely lack remorse. And one of the reference books in the Bedford Hills library stacks happens to be the *DSM-IV*, out-of-date but extremely useful. Knowing what I knew, it was easy to lay the derangement on thick when I wanted and to drizzle it with delicacy when I determined that was the right approach. I can't, of course, tamper with the MRIs, but even neurologists admit that when it comes to mapping the human brain, we are Christopher Columbus: motivated by dubious ethics to search for a route to Asia and "discovering" these America-shaped continents by mistake. Brains are an imprecise science, in short. Easy to fake and even easier to deceive.

I am special, the students intimate. I am valuable, their breath-lessness suggests. I am, as one excited student exclaimed, "A perfect specimen of a female Anti-Social Personality Disorder!"

To this, I laughed. I know what I am. It may not appear in the *DSM-5*, but just because you can't prescribe a pill for us doesn't mean we don't exist.

Indeed, I am the Bronze Copper of psychopaths, a big, beautiful auburn butterfly that flaps her darkling wings as she eats. I am rare, and sequestered in this endlessly gray penal institution, I am endangered. I first suspected I was a psychopath years ago with an armchair test of twenty-six questions, but even before I sat down with my computer and ticked “agree” for “I tell other people what they want to hear so that they will do what I want them to do” and “Love is overrated,” I knew that I was different. I merely lacked a name for how.

One mark of psychopaths, or so I’ve learned, is that we calculate an action’s personal benefits before we take it, and it benefits me to proclaim my psychopathy, both in prison and out of it. Here at Bedford Hills, my psychopathy earns me a wide berth. There in the world, my psychopathy sells better than sex—and sex plus psychopathy, well, that’s a heady delight.

As a woman psychopath, the white tiger of human psychological deviance, I am a wonder, and I relish your awe.

For a long time, the scientists who study such things were reluctant to admit the existence of women psychopaths. Even with all the cliché evidence—the bad mothers who leave their children to cry in wet beds, the nurses who “help” their unwitting patients to die, the black widows with a wealth of dead husbands—people did not want to believe. Female psychopaths, researchers eventually realized, don’t present like the males. To which I respond: No shit. We women have an emotional wiliness that shellacs us in a glossy patina of caring. We have been raised to take interest in promoting the healthy interior lives of other humans; preparation, I suppose, for taking on the emotional labor of motherhood—or marriage; either way, really. Few women come into maturity unscathed by the suffocating pink press of girlhood, and even psychopaths are touched by the long, frilly arm of feminine expectations. It’s not that women psychopaths don’t exist; it’s that *we fake it better than men*.

Take a quick trip through history, and you see no shortage of flashy female psychopaths. Elizabeth Báthory, who killed between eighty and a few hundred people, mostly women, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, before being walled inside a castle tower. Chile’s La Quintrala, colonialism’s poster girl, who slaughtered about forty indigenous people. Darya Saltykova, Muscovite, who dispatched a hundred or so serfs, mostly girls, in the eighteenth century. Delphine LaLaurie, who tortured and killed numerous slaves in her nineteenth-century New Orleans home. Women like

these punctuate time with their bloody body count, yet people are still disinclined to believe. Even as Victorian women slayed whole families with heaping helpings of arsenic to reap health insurance monies; even as Aileen Wuornos shot her seven johns; and even as Stacey Castor's matricide got her fifteen minutes of fame on 20/20, people didn't want to believe. Feminism comes to all things, it seems, but it comes to recognizing homicidal rage the slowest.

You who call women the fairer sex, you may repress and deny all you want, but some of us were born with a howling void where our souls should sway. I am a psychopath—and whatever their reasoning and whatever their diagnoses, the eager psychology and criminal justice students are right to study me. And if they're wrong, I still enjoy their attention, and I'll do what I must to encourage it.

Aside from the eager Ph.D. students—so well groomed and so poorly dressed, especially the men—I receive few visitors here in prison. My father comes; my sister has visited twice; my brother has sent his regards. Emma has applied to visit, but I won't allow it, for obvious reasons. I am impressed that she would consider leaving her apartment for the long, intricate trek to Bedford Hills.

(Though perhaps she knows I'd never approve the visit and she's merely applying to toy with me. That's not a possibility I'm willing to indulge, on the off chance that she appears some Sunday afternoon, dripping Vivienne Westwood and Guerlain Nahema. I don't even open Emma's letters.)

It's one small mercy that here in prison we don't have to see anyone we don't choose to see. In this way, prison is beautifully unlike real life. In real life, people from your past litter your life like cockroaches, popping out of crevices and scuttling across the dark. In the outside world, you can't escape fate's cruel crossing. You turn a corner, and there buying a hot dog is the editor of your college paper; you engage in conversation; you go out for lunch, and then to dinner, and then into bed, and then you love. Love is the languid sigh of death, and no one will ever convince me otherwise.

Prison may be the hell of other people, but at least it's not a hell of people you love.

3

French Fries

*J*ust as most people don't wake up and become a murderer, most don't wake up and become a food critic, but I did. Embracing this particular skill set felt like slipping into a bespoke garment, something cut to flatter my exact, idiosyncratic body. And yet, however much I feel put on this planet to instruct people on how, what, and why they should eat, I am compelled to admit that my vocation as food critic wouldn't have been possible without men. I owe them so much.

In 1990, you had to squint to glimpse the Internet looming. In today's time of newspapers and magazines gurgling a nonstop deathrattle, it's hard to recall that, just a quarter century ago, print was basking in a halcyon moment. In '90s New York, it felt as if a new four-color magazine hatched everyday. It was a dizzying time of weighty glossies with oddly specific names like *Egg*, *Paper*, *George*, *Spy*, *Blurt*, and *Spin*. (These magazines, I believe, foretold the days of single-word restaurant names: Plum, Parm, Sauce, Supper, Den, Carnivore, and Home.) Ideas, print, writers, and money mushroomed with sweet yeastiness. One begat another, which begat another, which begat another, and before you knew it, you had a giant amorphous mass of words and people, pages and layouts, advertisers and editorials, subscriptions and readers, all demanding constant feeding.

During these *Twin Peaks*, *Pretty Woman*, "Ice Ice Baby" days and cocaine-fueled nights, ideas grew with fungal fecundity, and relationships were traded like currency. It was all about whom you knew, whom you blew, and whom you'd yet to screw. You just had to be at the right cocktail party, at the right gallery opening, at the right restaurant, in the right club's bathroom doing the right drug, on the right coast, in the right tight black skirt, thighs pressed to the right person, in order to find your name on a masthead of some slick publication.

And that was how I became the food critic for *Noir*.

I remember the exact night that birthed my career. It was at Beignet, where I found myself wedged on the restaurant's beige nubuck banquette next to Manhattan playboy Andrew Gotien. Over the thudding bass of C + C Music Factory and a sea of upended vodka shots, I shouted that the braised

Malpeque in lemongrass crème tasted like a fifteen-year-old boy's fantasy of cunnilingus. I remember Andrew heard me and laughed as he slid his hand up my thigh. I remember going home with him. I vaguely remember some assertively athletic sex that ended in a misfire. I remember waking the next morning in Andrew's Tribeca loft, and I remember, as Andrew's sperm dried on my belly like donut glaze, he propped himself on one elbow, looking at me appraisingly.

"I want you to be the food critic for my new magazine," he said.

Noir, he said, would take a dark sideways look at culture, fashion, politics, art, and pretense. I'd be perfect for it.

"Of course," I said, drawing an idle doodle with his spunk. "You'll pay me \$4,000 a column."

We sealed the deal with a sloppy kiss and a squelchy fuck.

I say I woke up and found myself a food critic, but it's equally true that my life's sinuous lines led me to my career. Looking back on it now, as I often do—prison really facilitates introspection—I feel as if I was raised to write about food. Just as dairy cows are raised to give milk, Nebbiolo vines are cultivated to make wine, or civet cats were created to defecate the world's best coffee, I was raised to give voice to food's consumption.

In retrospect, it seems fated to be, and, much to my distaste, it begins with my mother. You see, unlike most Americans born in the early '60s, I was reared on hand-crafted food. Like Daniel Boulud, I never ate store-bought bread unless I was at a restaurant—in fact, I never ate store-bought anything. My mother made her own bread, kneading it with measured sensuality, dough perpetually drying in the crescents under her fingernails. She grew her own tomatoes, then she canned them, and then she used those jarred tomatoes to make fragrant cassoulet, salty steam rising as from a bagnio. She drove to the dairy and carted home great pails of unpasteurized milk from which she then made her own butter, yogurt, and crème fraîche—creamy, blond cups of it. She'd pour it, unctuous and fragrant and drizzled with honey, over bursting berries, sun-warmed and brambly. My mother grew the berries and kept the bees, too.

She made it, she made it all, and she made it well. She stood with arms akimbo in her Connecticut garden; she strode her kitchen as a colossus. In our small world, she was the great, ever-giving Mother, maker of mysterious soups, magical stews, peerless fluffy loaves of bread, shiny fruit tarts glowing like family jewels, crispy-juicy brown hunks of roasted meat,

vegetables cooked so crunchy-tender that your teeth wept, pottages of cream, sauces of jus, mysterious dishes of rice and herbs, salads that slayed you, all from produce grown in my mother's own meticulously kept garden, or from ingredients sourced with an alchemist's care. My mother was a witch in the kitchen and a Demeter in the garden. We hated her for it.

My father worked all day, churning out advertising copy with an electric mind that crackled and popped syntactic snaps. His kinetic brain prickled with quick, thick witticisms that sold stuff well and reliably. He worked long, late hours (time that, as it turned out, was punctuated with a series of mistresses, women whose identities blurred furry into a string of pronouns and epithets—*her, she, that one, that bitch, your whore*. I'd hear my parents argue in raw hushed tones, my mother making a show because propriety demanded it. In truth, she expected more integrity from the jars of preserves in her pantry). For a man given to 60-to-80-hour work weeks, my father's home was less his castle and more his weekend office.

My mother, who ruled our home with a floured fist, was nominally, philosophically, and aesthetically French. Her Francophilia inflected her speech, her cooking, and her red lipstick, which she wore even when tending her organic garden, her hair tied up in a careful bun, giant gloves on her hands, faded cotton jacket on her back, and Wellies on her feet. Her faux Frenchness enabled her to roast a chicken to succulence, then take that chicken and, with a shaman's magic, turn it into an evolving kaleidoscope of meals: roasted chicken became chicken in aspic, chicken sandwiches, chicken stock, chicken with dumplings. My mother made a roast chicken stretch forever, an unblinking eternity of chicken.

Taking her work as head nurturer seriously, my mother lived to feed her three children—my two younger siblings, one son and another daughter, and me—from her garden, her pantry, and her larder, places defined by my mother's necromantic abilities, Protestant determination, and single-minded snobbery. (Protestant, after all, because my mother was fake French. She was, like a gilded Louis XIV chair in a despot's palace, a knockoff.)

In contrast to my ever-present stay-at-home mom, my father was a presence in equal parts ephemeral and unchanging. He smelled like tobacco and brown liquor; his voice sounded like an emery board; he carried his slender body with a slight, resigned defeat, even as he made the kind of money and owned the kind of property and gave his Gen-X children the kind of education that defines privilege. My father was always precisely dressed

—Brooks Brothers during the week, L.L. Bean on the weekends, and Ralph Lauren for special occasions—he complemented the wood-beam and cotton-duck farmhouse like he'd been purchased to match. Limited as my father's home life was, you could set your watch by his presence, even if that presence felt as solid, and as visually perfect, as a cinematic projection. Together, my parents constructed a Potemkin village for our nuclear family; it looked good from the outside.

But every family has secrets, and my family's was me.

Here's an interesting thing about privation—it causes hallucinations. For example, sleep deprivation often brings psychosis. The human brain can go only so long without deep REM rest, a break from our walking, talking, acting cognitive selves, before our brains do it for us, taking a deep dip into the waking dream state. Enough time awake, our skin begins to crawl with insects, centipedes and butterflies alighting, itching, fluttering, inching. Our ears ring with the voices of the dead or the detested. Our eyes see apparitional flashes of ghosties and beasties, exploding shafts of light and shifting landscapes; we can't trust our hands to hold that shuddering doorjamb. Our adrenaline spikes and our hearts beat a tachycardia tattoo. Our brains wrap nightmares around our sleepless flesh.

Food privation similarly sheathes you in a cocoon of yearning. I'm not saying that Bedford Hills starves its female populace—it doesn't. We eat. We eat puce goop and ecru glop and flat brown patties of unknown origin. We get peas tepid from the can, swimming in an oleaginous, salty bath. We get gluey, chewy bread spread with near-rancid margarine. Swallowing meals of government-issued apathy, we eat, three times a day. Sometimes, to slake our phantom appetites, we cobble together dishes from vending machines and commissary goods.

But most of all, we want. I want so hard and so viscerally that my brain wills food into being and floods my head with a tsunami of perfect ceviche from Playa del Carmen in Mexico, shrimp and tilapia basking in the spiky tang of sun-warmed limes, shivery slivers of papaya and guanabana cuddling with serrano and jalapeño. I'll reach to shelve a book, and I'll be slammed with olive oil cake, rough and crumbly, salty-sweet and scented with the fat bellies of green olives, chased with a mouthful of bittersweet espresso. I sit on my bed and pomegranates crush my lips, rack of lamb curls in my nostrils, hot black bread slathered with cultured butter fills my throat, and it chokes me. Ghost food wafting in crystalline recollection—a perfect besotted

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