

Philippe Cartau

LES AGAPES DE BOSANGE



A novel

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*To my mother,
To our kitchen conversations,
For what she passed on to me,
Fonds de sauces et fonds de vérités.*

1 - Mise en Bouche

Saint Koffe was right. But when he was alive, nobody listened to him, and when he was dead, even less.

The real question is, why do we persist in ingesting reconstructed sludge when the freshness of the season offers us in a vegetable or fruit all the felicity imaginable, just as the cow offers us its calf and its pretty little liver, notably the one I was about to feast upon?

But be careful! This is a very serious matter! Cooking veal liver is a ritual. You can't waste such a beautiful gift from nature: it has to be sublimated on the altar of taste!

Of course, the veal doesn't share this opinion. In fact, it shares none. And that's why I vouch for a worthy celebration of its present. For, since a certain age, I've had a certain idea of Gastronomy according to which it's only through its science and art that liver can reveal all its greatness.

As I was saying, there are some things that should be taken seriously, that border on the divine, and that should be respected.

Freshness, for instance. It's essential. It's like a joke, a bon mot or an idea in a dinner conversation. The further you get from the point of inspiration, from the word itself, the more bland, indigestible, even unpalatable the joke becomes. Freshness goes quickly, and you don't want to waste it, especially when it comes to l'Oiseau's liver. Freshness is like *l'esprit de l'escalier*¹: at the bottom of the staircase it is useless.

L'Oiseau is the nickname of "my" butcher. Why I appropriate this worthy fellow with such pride, I couldn't say. After all, what have I done to make this butcher *mine*? Nothing, really. He moved into the neighborhood, I chose him, and that was that! Besides, why should I be proud of him? Apart from being the guarantor of a long tradition, of high standards and constant renewal, there's nothing extraordinary about him - this concept of rejoiced fool, happy with what he hasn't done, puzzles me.

It's just that I invest such an emotional charge in my butcher that my posture is perhaps normal. He's my kitchen chaplain, a trusted

¹ Staircase wit

spiritual figure. To discover that he's deceiving me in the pulpit would be tantamount to discovering that "my" priest is feeding me tainted ideas.

Fortunately, I don't belong to this parish. I don't have a priest, I only have preachers like my butcher, my cheesemonger or my wine merchant, even if I am a bit polygamous on that side.

But I'm going astray.

Butter, garlic, parsley, temperature. Layout is a cardinal virtue in the kitchen: it's essential to have ingredients, dishes and utensils in working order, at the risk of ruining or even outraging magnificent ingredients. Something was missing. The salt flower, in its little Japanese bowl. And pepper. I hesitated among the many pepper grinders in my collection. The emotion of the coffee gear becoming an aerial vehicle² mingled with that of the different fragrances that each of these mills could unveil. With so many bicentennials approaching, both my taste buds and my neurons exulted.

I picked up the rust-orange cast-iron Bali model, into which I had poured a very fragrant white pepper. There was only one thing missing, but I'd have to do without it: company.

It had been a tough choice - *Cornelian* even - between imperious freshness and a partner on the plate. But even if you're a queen, you can't keep a calf's liver waiting. Of course, a good meal is a joy to share, and it's even a deep conviction: we'd made immense progress since the solitary *gueuletons*³ of our founders, Grimod and Brillat. However, the events I'm about to describe, which would follow on from one another like a poorly-constructed meal, took a first turn that would prevent me from sharing this immoderate pleasure. Let me be clear: this is not onanism, it's a tribute to Barnabé the calf.

Having to travel to the police station to make a statement, my bed and table companion was unable to join me at the late hour of the afternoon to enjoy this divine delicacy. Since the liver couldn't wait, I was obliged to honor it, alone.

² Peugeot cars started off in the 1830' making gears to grind coffee. Maybe they will make flying cars soon

³ A joyous and hearty feast

The wait at the police station had been long and tiresome. Why I had been there shortly before noon, I had no idea. I blamed myself for my lack of anticipation. With my taste buds moistening with my own saliva, generous at the thought of feasting on that tasty flesh, at the ideal temperature, smooth in texture, embellished to near-perfection with those fine chisels of garlic, neither too browned nor too little, time seemed endless.

Especially as lunchtime had in the end long been over, leaving my stomach to take over from my palate.

This ordeal thus made the impertinent ringing of the bell all the more inconvenient. No matter - no one had announced themselves beforehand, I wasn't expecting a single person, no deliveries were planned - whether they were standing in line or walking around the pâté, I didn't care, apart from my frying pan, which was starting to heat up, just ready to receive my fresh butter from the market.

But the technicalities involved in cooking a calf's liver don't allow for any distractions, especially when they become insistent. Cursing the oddball who had come to disturb me at such a sacred moment, I pushed aside the frying pan and its bruised butter to go and castigate this bad-looking bird.

With age, my hearing was beginning to fail me. So, through a door, you can imagine the difficulty.

'I don't understand. Are you saying that my physical integrity is at stake? You're here to protect me?

Because it was like a thread through butter, it didn't matter to me how this lunatic had managed to get into the building. It was what he was saying that was the problem. I examined his face through the digital peephole. Aside from bad taste in clothing, it suggested nothing else, but that was bad enough. His outfit was almost aggressively plain, exceedingly ordinary. No subtlety, not the slightest ambivalence, not an ounce of *recherche*⁴. Ordinary in all its splendor. Which I distrusted the most, because it was in this forced banality that the worst of the enraged lurked, a kind of extremist without nuance.

*'Billevesée!*⁵ I shouted.

⁴ Research, as a monk searches for enlightenment a gastronome searches the absolute in taste and presentation

⁵ Nonsense, BS

'Mr. Grimoire, I assure you that the threat is very serious and that you must follow me.

'I've got my liver on the plate. Please come back a little later.

A hesitant silence punctuated the exchange.

'I assure you, the risk is imminent.

'Imminent, imminent, I'll give you imminent. What department are you with?

'Intrapol.

'Show me your card. There, against the sensor...no, not too close. It's blurry! That's it, don't move!

That's stupidity at its best when you don't know what to say. The detrimental influence of poorly crafted thrillers with calamitous dialogue: as if I knew how to recognize a counterfeit badge.

'Forget it, come in.

When the devil or fate is relentless, you have to invite it to the table.

'Close the door and come in.

'I assure you, we don't have time.

'To the table!

Equally resigned, or at least that was the only conclusion that seemed relevant to me, the tall fellow settled himself with ill-fitting mastery in a chair that seemed almost too small.

I put a second plate in the stove and turned the burner on again. Life's constraints had prompted me to take up this dwelling without gas, in effect without flame cooking, meaning little character and no soul. A fundamentalist particle in me had hesitated in the face of such fundamental deprivation, but temporal priorities had called me to order. From then on, I made it a challenge. The quest for the right temperature became all the more heroic. Isn't it said that to cook without peril is to make wine without glory⁶?

This conjecture proved true. Contemplating the mutation of butter, I wondered why I hadn't yet tried to cook veal with a clarified version of this delicious lipid. Perhaps because then, without the risk of burning this fatty luminosity devoid of its whey, without its delicious and revealing quiver, we'd lose a valuable indicator of the cooking of the flesh; we'd no longer see that ceiling of entropy and its menacing

⁶ Pun with the expression « A combattre sans péril, on vainc/triomphe sans gloire »

brown that, once exceeded, would disrupt the established order of the sapid riches of my exquisite dish! Without this irreversible risk, wouldn't we lose part of the flavor? Flavor is life!

'Don't you have a maxiwave?' asked my new guest. It would be quicker.

'Another low ceiling fanatic, I thought.

When it was launched, this new technological pill blew me away. The principle consists of inserting two new wave emitters in addition to the microwave emitter, which itself only stimulates water. These new emitters are tuned to heat lipid and carbohydrate molecules, the aim being to excite matter faster than a microwave, particularly that of Frankenstein foods.

That such a device could be imagined and designed fascinated and frightened me at the same time. The craze that followed its commercial launch was so contrary to my expectations that it left me shaking my head. How could I describe a collective concept as lacking in ambition as that of nibbling a few seconds while waiting for a dish? My Osso Bucco are prepared two days in advance! I was left speechless.

What decent answer could I give, Oh! great Brillat, to my big pluck of a visitor about his maxiwave and nanomax culture?

With a raised finger, I deflected a disparaging reply, inviting my impromptu to silence with a somewhat forced air of concentration, avoiding in the process to chastise him with my murderous gaze.

Instead, I inspected one last time in its natural state the vivid color of the flesh, this undulating red, guaranteeing a feast for the taste buds. Quality porcelain, discreetly transparent and as white as ever after so many years, served as a receptacle for this imminent happiness. The harmony of this white, singing to the still simmering carmine, aroused my mucous membranes to such a frenzy that I forgot to follow the precepts of the wise: sharing and *la cuisson juste*⁷. If I didn't stick to them, this poor bovine would pass a tear to the left in vain.

'You like calf's liver, I hope.

'I'm not hungry, thank you.

'Have you had breakfast yet?

⁷ La cuisson juste : the state of being cooked in accordance with its intrinsic requirements :))

'No, I haven't. I mean, it's not the right time. We're running out of time.

I nurtured my patience with sincerity.

'Listen, young man, I'm not giving up on this calf's liver, even if I have to sacrifice myself to the most outrageous nonsense afterwards. People always talk to me about urgency, and more often than not, all I find is the urge to press on others. So, until I've honored this veal, we're not leaving.

Noting his reluctance to press me beyond reason, I continued.

'I suggest we enjoy it together.

Finally, things were well done: I was offering myself freshness as well as company, even if I still hesitated to qualify my visitor as such.

'Actually, I don't like liver...it tastes like flour. Or well cooked in that case.

So many misunderstandings and sacrificed hopes. To spoil nature's true flavors with overcooking! Wasn't it the greatest of crimes to censor taste in this way?

'You're right, I said hastily. There's no reason to insist. Between sharing and sacrilege, I'll sacrifice the former to avoid the latter.

'I don't understand.

'The explanation will come if patience allows. In the meantime, I'm going to ask for silence as I now need the utmost concentration.

I checked my gustatory setting one last time. A light, tangy wine waited patiently in front of a fine-toothed knife next to the place reserved for the receptacle plate. Salt and pepper waited at hand. Everything seemed ready. But a moment's anxiety passed through me. Between the maxiwave episode and the overcooked one, this silky wine had perhaps already ventured into a deliquescent temperature fringe. I grabbed my wire thermometer from the counter. Under the stunned gaze of my *tablemate*, I plunged the pointed stem into the balm of my liquid soon-to-come happiness. The dial slowly descended, then froze at 17°C. No extremism, I thought, this will do the trick. I still had enough time to enjoy it without the fever getting the better of me. It would be admirable even with one or two degrees more. Especially as I'd opened the bottle the day before, punctured a glass and laid it back in my cellar vestibule. A trick to bring out all the aromas, a bit like the preamble to a sensual evening to soften the flesh, or a tangy marinade.

The butter beckoned me with its light bubbles. I delicately placed the escalope on the lipid film.

We often say, to watch the milk on the stove, but that's nothing compared to a liver in butter. You have to follow the quivering of this other holy bovine gift, its little bubbles, whether they activate steadily or crescendo, whether their complexion glistens or darkens, even if it means removing the pan for a few moments.

Cooking liver is the ultimate shibboleth. If chefs use the egg-cooking test to evaluate their potential apprentices, perhaps it's because they prefer to spare the liver; and I can understand the profound suffering that would follow the botched cooking of just one of these ruby-garnet jewels. But the fact remains that, from my perspective, liver requires even more science and technique.

For the layman would instruct us to heat the cooking instrument beforehand, but then we'd have an organ that would turn inside out like a mollusk. On the other hand, the faint-hearted would recommend excessive caution and moderation in the heat, but if the pan isn't lively enough, the inner core of the cutlet will turn a bland brown before the outside has even acquired that little brownish crust essential to a successful tasting experience. I'm telling you, I could write a thesis on the subject. But with my *escogriffe*⁸ impatiently tapping his foot, that initiative would have to wait.

I delicately turned the liver over, making sure to rest it in a bed sufficiently profuse in butter; I moved the pan slightly away from the heat, thus finishing the cooking of the meat away from direct contact; I drew the remaining butter with the spatula towards the exposed part of the pan where I poured in the finely chopped garlic, varying between the translucent and the opaque, a paper equivalent between 80g and 160g. The former was too easily cooked, while the latter gave way to a garlicky taste slightly above my preference; between the two, perfectly tapered, these pistils of happiness perfectly matched the appetizing size of the bites.

My taste buds quivered, my heart pounded, my commissure deepened, betraying my impatient joy.

Concentration! In now way could I allow myself to botch the job. I needed to stay attentive to the end so as not to cut perfection short through impatience; nor, through indolence, to spoil it through lack of temerity.

⁸ Tall, thin wavering fellow with awkward moves

It was about time. Let's hope Interpot doesn't ruin this meal for me with a derogatory comment.

'Are you sure you don't want any?

'Absolutely, thank you.

It was then that a thought disrupted everything. This wasn't the time. Yet an inner force called me to order, even as my aesthetic alter ready to savor cried outrage and conspiracy. I huffed, removed the pan completely, closed the oven.

'Will you share a glass with me?

Not even waiting for an answer, with a celerity bordering on mastery, I took out a stemmed glass, which I planted with as much delicacy as possible in such an urgent situation.

'Not while I'm working, thank you.

Relieved, I answered nothing, preoccupied with my liver in the frying pan, which was in danger of withering forever under the persistence of this heat as ambivalent as Aesop's tongue.

Wooden planks lend themselves magnificently to the exercise of conserving heat. They don't steal heat from food like porcelain or other more deceitful materials. However, they lend themselves less well to meat accompanied by garlic. The blessed condiment quickly dries out and even loses its fragrant juices. The hot plate remained my preferred receptacle. I took one out of the oven.

Breaking one of my precepts, I cut the piece in half where it thickened. The second half would finish cooking on a low flame, while I feasted on the first. I placed it delicately on the plate with my wooden spatula. I dutifully returned the instrument to its place in the spatula rest; I took the plate with both hands, as if holding a sanctified offering, and placed it on the altar of our happiness, a rustic wooden table repainted a faded white, revealing through its worn film the veins of the walnut as well as the black, invisible matter of past meals. The steady cadence of the last moments of cooking had to fall quickly for me to find a rhythm suited to delectation. I sat like a monk, breathing deeply. We were entering the climax of the ceremony.

'So, in short, digestible sentences, tell me what all the fuss is about.

My big fellow, somewhat bent over the table with both arms drooping, searched for words, as if confused by the situation, hampered by excessive politeness preventing him from expressing himself as he should for a representative of the order. I took the opportunity to smell the wine, letting it caress my little olfactory buds. A

light sip reassured me that the wine's temperature was flirting with eighteen. We were still in the blessed zone.

'So, let's hear it!

'Mr. Grimoire, we have received information from reliable sources that your life is in danger. Our social network bots have detected a high level of animosity towards you, indicating a significant likelihood of violent action against you. Over the past twenty-four hours, your name has become progressively and exponentially associated with words such as revenge, sacrilege, irreverent, poisoner, syllabub, pickle and so on. Our protocol is that after a predefined number of threats, we dispatch a law enforcement officer to protect you. It's a protocol we've had time to fine-tune.

'I don't doubt it," I commented.

I finished chewing before continuing.

'If I summarize, because a few mindless starlings get excited alone in the virtual and in the presence of their real cretinism, it would be necessary to spoil such a meal?

'I wouldn't put it like that, but your physical integrity is paramount.

'Pardi, that's going to make some 100kg nannies to maintain if you have to protect all the well-tempered dissidents! It's a good thing you don't have to worry about psychological integrity either! And tell me, what does Intraball have to do with all this? This is a matter for national jurisdiction, don't you think?

Intrapol. I'm not in a position to say. It seems to be...geopolitical.

'Geopolitical? You've got to be kidding me! How is my case geopolitical?

'I think it has to do with the subject of your hobby.

'You presume it has to do with my gastronomic activity?

I seized the opportunity to put to the test a long-held theory that emotions added flavor to food or, at the very least, altered receptivity. These notes of surrealism did seem to confound the gustatory experience with a slight bitter note.

'That's right. Your 'Coco in the Pan' podcast is stirring up trouble far beyond the borders, it seems. And then there's the event you posted on the social networks. The outrage became...international. Hence Intrapol.

'What have I done with Coco in the Pan, apart from freeing people from their food lies?

Painpol regurgitated his text without conviction.

'In my opinion, you've crossed the line by inconveniencing people with some of your inappropriate opinions.

I glared at him. I saw in him a reflection of one of my wacky theories, that of the Great Reversal, where the uprooted world was walking on its head.

'It's your post, he continued, almost with a hint of remonstrance. It's triggered real indignation.

'A cabal, yes. Indignation is when you don't want to get out of your chair and do something, just moan like an old English lady. Now you're talking about a witch-hunt. I'm going to deglaze their opinions, these puddings, with some liqueur of common sense!

'I'm sorry you feel that way. However, time is of the essence. I have orders to take you to a safe place.

'A restaurant?

I seized the opportunity of his surprise to fetch the second piece of my guilty pleasure.

'To begin with, the police station. An escort is waiting there to take you to a place known only to the Intrapol commander.

'Near a market, I hope!

'Mr. Grimoire, I must ask you to take this very seriously. You've offended sensibilities, the whole thing has snowballed. Going back to the digital thread, it seems that it all started with a meal you wanted to organize. You must tell me where and when this meal is...

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement on the terrace. Turning my head, I discovered behind the bay window a lump of garish blue cloth, struggling to feed a flame, itself reluctant to consume the rag, as if repulsed by the tasteless object.

2 - A mouthful

I opened the terrace door. A hullabaloo coming from the courtyard reached the third floor.

'What's that?' I asked.

'It looks like a turban.

'No, too thick.

'A cheche⁹?

'Too short.

'A scarf?

'Too ugly.

'I don't know.

My heralding angel took a few swipes at it with his red sneakers. As he pounded away at the steaming ball, I examined his eccentric style of dress. Without being a fashion expert, it seemed to me that only black people knew how to wear red. In this, I felt there was a profound chromatic injustice, for with my flushed head, there was hardly anything that could accommodate my lobster complexion, and especially not red sneakers.

'Looks like... a jogging suit?

He nudged the ball again.

'Yes, it does. It's definitely a jogging suit, I confirmed. First-rate polyamide, disillusioned stripes, a tone resistant to good taste as well as to Moletov cocktails. The only thing missing is the *crossbuddy* bag.

Why would anyone send us a fireproof jogging suit when the intention is obviously for it to catch fire? It looked a little wet. Was it alcohol? Had it not soaked enough? In any case, for a cocktail, I thought it lacked verve.

I poked my head over the railing. Shouts erupted at the sight of my lobster head.

'Oh, now I understand!

He, too, poked his head over the railing, awakening another round of hollering.

'They're *sloggers*," I clarified.

What's a slogger?

⁹ Taglemust, scarf worn in the Sahara

Pfff. Another kid who didn't have any vocabulary.

'Madmen of the slogging generation, who don't know the difference between their couch and the courtroom.

Muscleman seemed to be thinking. Obviously he needed some help.

'Sloppy people in jogging suits, child. Neglected. Obvious, isn't it?

A second ball crossed the thigh-high wall of the balcony, barely grazing me, this one though animated by a more convincing flame. Puzzled by the rapid learning curve of the bell-heads below, I took another look over the railing. Everything was becoming clearer.

'It's so touching when humanity joins forces, I remarked.

'What do you mean?

'There Wasanis are below too, in addition to the Douche with the bags.

'So?

'They're allowed to touch the booze on Fridays!

'And the others aren't?

'Buttonhands, for instance, it depends on the geographical region.

'And here they're not allowed?' he asked, extinguishing the ball with his sneakers turning black.

'You're not familiar with their customs, are you? Otherwise they'd have soaked the jogging suit in something more flammable, not mint tea or organic natural seed extract from I don't know what untraceable plant, don't you think? Where are you from exactly? And that barely discernible accent, or lack of accent I should say?

'Later sir ...

A third ball crossed the wall. Intergaul extinguished it just as quickly. A scent of CBD emanated from the untangled ball.

'The QirScan are getting into it too! This is definitely the crème de la crème of the feathered bunch! What admirable solidarity, especially between zealots! Look, even the Gretons are getting in on the act.

'What's a Greton?

You had to explain everything to this rookie.

'We say one greta. One greta, many gretons.

'And?

'They're like itching powder, very virulent.

'Unfortunate.

'A misery. People you wish you'd never met. A bit hysterical around the edges. They want to save the world, or rather, the earth. Aesthetics

are secondary and humanity tertiary. For them, it's the whole pineapple that should be thrown away, even though they're the pineapples.

'Why a pineapple?

'The skin is rough and the core is hard. Not everything is edible. Interpolen didn't seem to want to think this through.

'And also because...

'Sorry, Monsieur Grimoire, we have to leave.

He disappeared inside the apartment, apparently to inspect the street from the opposite side. I took the opportunity to sit down and offer myself a sip of my Saumur-Champigny, so silky, taunting my memories of libidinous youth with its mushroom-like reminiscence.

'Shit! I heard him shout.

Sometimes it's the contrast that makes you appreciate all the happiness you hold in your hand. I put my glass down and let the delicate Bacchus trail flow from my taste buds.

He returned briskly.

'What's the matter, young man?

'They set fire to my car!

'A real mania, almost a trend. You should have guessed it in this *bellyfied* neighborhood. Didn't you notice they all seemed gorged with grub?

His facade of politeness was showing signs of weakness, like a bad coat of paint.

'Do you have a vehicle? he shouted as he headed for the balcony while I went to the window on the other side of the apartment.

I watched the unmarked car emit a heavy, ominous smoke.

'Curious it worked better on the car than on the jogging pants! I wondered aloud.

'Monsieur Grimoire, do you have a car?

'Absolutely, in the collective garage. But we can't take it.

'Why not?

'Forbidden to drive today, it's not *QualifAIRed*.

'So what?" he said.

I was actually starting to enjoy this. Why not push the cursor a little further.

'I'm not allowed to use it on prime number days.

'What do you mean?

'Don't you know a prime number? 1, 3, 7, etc. Which can only be divided by itself and 1.

'Yes, I know what a prime number is! he exclaimed, in over his head with my playfulness. What's the deal?

'A fine ethereal invention of our Grand Central masters, I ventured.

'Never mind. We'll take your car anyway.

'A thousand Jerusalem artichokes! I cried. I forgot! My son borrowed it!

'Couldn't you have said so before?

'Apologies, it slipped my mind. I forgot he couldn't bring it back for another six days.

He tapped his temple twice. Latest communication technology, the subcutaneous cellular interface. It gave me the creeps. The end of filters and civilization.

'I'll call for reinforcements.

'You've got to be kidding! I cautioned. The street will end up like a skewer of burnt-out cars if they come!

'What d'ya suggest then?

There was something in his expression that rose like mustard to my nose. But I sensed that my linguistic remarks would not be received with the enthusiasm they deserved.

'Don't you have any Volovents in your department? Otherwise I'll order a Fluber.

'Intrapol is not the town hall, you know. We don't have those resources!

Valiant foot soldiers without a solution announcing an absent cavalry! Oh, sweet Epiphany, you grace us with much more than *doughknots*: you also provide us with puddings. Fortunately, I didn't lose my bearings.

'I've got an idea!

I stepped out onto the balcony again, where I advanced to the ledge, in full view of the hysterical pack. Spreading my arms wide, I intoned in my berry tone voice, a verse that hits the nail on the head every time.

'I've candied you, greaseful subjects!

With the distance, they couldn't hear much, certainly not the details.

'Long live the moldy grail !

At last they fell silent.

'Don't set us on fire! There are copper saucepans and quality utensils in the house; as well as a cast-iron casserole; not to mention

Grimod's 9 seasons! We surrender! Don't throw your clothes around anymore - it's no use, we'll never wear them! We're coming down!

'Not at all enthralled, they picked up their shouting again from where they had left off.

I hurried to the kitchen. From the cupboard, I drew a long brooch, the gift of an heirloom, adorned with a finely detailed cast-iron tip.

Instapaul scrutinized me with tremendous doubt.

'You! Make yourself useful. Fetch me a book in the bookcase behind you. Any book you can find, but not too thick.

From the freezer, I pulled out a few slices of various meats.

'What did you find?

He showed me a thin book with a provocative cover. My heart sank. *L'École des Filles*, a literary classic, a masterpiece of female development, a foretaste of the pleasures of the table. No, I couldn't bring myself to skewer such delicate words, even if it would always be easier to impale than *Delphine* by Madame de Staël. I hurried through the library. Voilà, I found it. *Indistinction*, by A. Bowl. An indigestible thing that gives a lot of wind, promised to be recycled.

I was about to compose my skewer when doubt came over me.

'What exactly do you want to do? asked Megananny.

'Sow terror in their hearts and stomachs! Impale on these spikes everything they hate and everything they run away from. That way we can keep them at arms length. A bit like garlic in front of Albion's minions.

'You mean vampires?

'Same thing!

'What are you waiting for, then?

'We've got a tough decision to make. Do I start the skewer or finish it with the book? The book is the first of their fears. But it's also the last bastion! The book is the alpha and the omega!

'I'd say it's the first of their indifference and the last of their worries.

'Oh, you gasbag of little faith! In the beginning, there was the book, and the end came when it was gone!

This profound truth made me think: why limit myself?

'Find me a second one!

After piercing the first book with little difficulty, I stacked on a slice of meat.

Durability had its fleeting moment. It wasn't a waste, I told myself: it was to save my skin, much less resistant than the rind I was trying to pierce.

'There, in the bread cupboard! Take out the loaf and cut me a slice!

'For what?

I found myself wishing some geek somewhere would invent hearing aids to filter out sloppy language!

'By the head of Saint Michelin, to make it look like a real skewer, mille sabayons! Except that in this case, sweet pepper is replaced by bread.

'Why bread?

'Firstly, because I don't have any peppers. Secondly, because there may be some gluten intolerant people downstairs. Well, actually, I'm sure of it!

From the look on his saucier's face, he wasn't following my reasoning.

'And why not cheese while you're at it?' he asked.

I looked at him in disappointment.

'Because what they fear, these moldy gretons downstairs, is lactose. But I only have raw-milk cheese, and there's no lactose in raw-milk cheese; and if I skewer a Camembert, I'll smear my whole apartment before I even get to the elevator. Do you have any more senseless questions?

He was taken aback.

'Do you have a gun on you? I inquired.

I examined the skewer. I felt like a proud Gascon with my sword and its beautiful pommel.

'Yes, I do.

'Hold the brooch.

I rushed into the cubbyhole in search of the festive box where I kept my accessories for birthdays, playful soirees, *manducatory* celebrations and other interloping nibbles. All I found were long balloons, much harder to inflate than the round ones. I returned, stretching it to give it a little elasticity. As I stood in front of the door, I noticed the bewildered look on my tart's face.

'Is that what I think it is?' he asked, pointing at the balloon.

'This? No! I don't have any pork casings to spare. I leave the blood sausage work to my butcher!

'I don't understand.

'You're right. We should always have a bit of gut in reserve, it can always come in handy. Go ahead, blow.

He still couldn't shake his puzzled expression.

'Yes, I admit it's funny. I've always dreamed of saying that to a policeman. Go on, until it's long enough.

'Why do you want me to blow up this balloon?

'Firstly, because the balloon will take over from the skewer. It will give us a break. Secondly, because it will save you the trouble of pulling out your pistol.

'And what do I do with it?

Let's see, isn't it obvious? You inflate it, pinch it in the direction of the hysterics and tell them it's your putrefied breath from who knows what meadow parrillada.

'And...

I interrupted sharply.

'I implore you, stop starting your sentences with "And". The copulative conjunction 'And' does nothing to advance your cause, young man. All I ask is that you make an effort. What's your name?

'Kevin.

'Fantastic news, that sounds like Kelvin. Call me Anthelme. Don't look it up, it doesn't sound like anything.

What a will of fate: his first name reminded me of the essential.

'Gall Fricassee ! I almost left without my thermometer!

It was out of the question for me to forget my wet finger, my heart probe, my cursor of morals. I brandished it proudly as I crossed the threshold.

'Never leave home without your thermometer!

Sensing his confusion, I took the lead. Even without the building on fire - or so I assumed - we'd take the staircase, a necessary detour to avoid the unbearable smell of the cleaner applied unabashedly every week by the cleaners in the elevator. This disinfectant was so tainted with an unbearable ersatz vanilla that each time we used it, we risked having our olfactory receptors sterilized forever, or worse still, conditioned to recognize only synthetic vanilla, and to indulge in it!

What's more, the scent reminded me too much of the hygienist shift that had taken hold of our mores the day the Supreme Council decided to spray disinfectant on every square inch of territory. I was determined to enjoy my crèmes brûlées for a long time to come, without the

thought of asphalt or elevators popping up to mind and spoiling my pleasure.

Once downstairs, I stopped in front of the lobby bike room. It was daring, but at least with this mode of locomotion, they wouldn't be able to chase us.

'Listen carefully, Kevin. There are two bikes in the room. I'll take the city bike because it's smart. You take the mountain bike, because...well, it rides really well, on asphalt too.

'But...

'Don't argue. Style will come to you with age. When I yell 'go,' you open the door and clear the way with the balloon.

'This is ridiculous.

'Not at all. Ridiculous is when you have a particle. As far as you're concerned, it's comical. And you can only fight the grotesque with the comical. That'll do the trick. After that, you're on your own to catch up with me.

I mounted the bike in front of the tainted glass door. Their questioning glances through the glass signaled their uncertainty of what stood behind. We'd have the advantage of surprise.

'Ready?

'Ready!

'Go!

Like a knight in shining armor, I charged forward, my pedal swift, handlebars stilted, skewer forward pointing like the prow of temerity, shouting at the top of my lungs.

'Stand clear! Stand aside! Stand down before my steadfast and brazen skewer!

I charged forward like a bolide on the run, whirling my thin blade so far above my head that I lost half my skewer. My instincts proved me right. As I escaped on my iron steed, I saw the hoard move away from the book as if it were the plague, then trample the poor slice of bread as if they were attacking a beggar. I hoped the yeast would get into their white socks and infect them with *glutteny*.

Caught in their sock & sandals, flip-flops and other poorly-secured pumps, I couldn't imagine them keeping up with me. But then I saw a QirScan inquisitor emerge from the courtyard, pedaling like a damned man on fire. I'd forgotten that they always lug around their overloaded velocipedes. I pushed the pace, but felt that my pegs, weakened by age, would not be able to maintain my lead. Already, as I turned

around, I could see his eyes bulging and the little velvet around his chin. He was catching up.

But as I felt his angry, outraged gaze just a few feet away, I began to discern his breathing getting louder and louder. Obviously, eating nothing but lentils had given Bob hypoglycemia: Stew was short of breath, not to mention a few proteins! Poor Dewy! He looked like the late Pepitao, my sodomite cat battling emphysema. I turned to mock the QirScan, still wearing his bamboo helmet. Had he really taken the time to put his helmet back on before coming after me, or had he kept it on during their cabal in front of my balcony? I imagined him in bed frolicking with his dickhead helmet.

'How about that, Tofu ! Don't you miss a good slice of Orloff?! You bag of baconless lentils! A little fat in your cheeks would go a long way! Soft calves!

Turning around, I only had time to give the handlebars a sharp tug. Out of nowhere, another man cut me off with an improbable drawl.

A moment of deep questioning struck me as I flew by. Why were madmen always so badly dressed? It was only a fleeting impression, a singular vision, but like the conclusion of a recurring observation. I forced myself to consider the question further when my flight ended in a bush.

Ill-intentioned hands were already starting to grab me with a snarl that did not bode well. Those of the QirScan, clammy and limp, hardly impressed me, except for the fear of being contaminated by some form of incurable apathy. The Wasani's, on the other hand, detectable by undercooked garlic, were grasping with more force. Others were sure to turn up, sticky with aloe vera cream, all fed on I don't know what frustration. All because of a meal!

'Out of my way or I'll gas you!

I recognized the voice of my guardian angel, Intrapaul. What a clever announcement! The two zouaves stepped aside to reveal my bodyguard brandishing his balloon still taut, just like a big-screen hero would in front of a flock of snakes. But how on earth had he managed to keep the pressure on the balloon while pedaling? He was bluffing me.

'I'm warning you! I'm the one who inflated it!

They hesitated.

'He's eaten sauerkraut with ham!' I shouted, 'with inorganic raw seafood...stuffed with gluten!

At these words, the two of them retreated without my being able to guess which satanic component had repelled them. But already, other table disbelievers were hurrying in our direction. There was bound to be one in this pack, a more dangerous one, who wouldn't be impressed by this nonsense.

'Get back on your bike, quick! he shouted.

Stunned by his efficiency, I was slow to get my bike out of the bush. I watched as my guardian angel, pumped up and full of arms, arched this yellow balloon, the tip of which, I realized, was not fully inflated, reminding me of some other contraption. I contemplated him, admiring his bravery as he defied the ridiculous. He was moving up a notch in my esteem.

'What are you waiting for? Quickly!

I took the opportunity to sabotage the Qirscan's horn with a kick. I hated those enema balls, as vindictive as the trumpets announcing an ill-tempered Torquemada. These fundamentalists of the bicycle never allowed themselves to circulate without a bell. I discovered this during a meeting in the chocolate aisle of the local Biomop organic store: two fatheads castigating a third for going to the store without a bell. He looked so proud of his bravado in announcing it, this four o'clock rebel; I still remembered his contrite expression after the admonishment!

For good measure, I also trashed the spokes of his front wheel, the one behind being protected by a bike seat.

I got on my bike without waiting for bicepsoraptor, who was struggling to get back on his bike while keeping them at bay with his *weefull* weapon.

'Let go of the ball! I've got tons more!

After a moment's hesitation, he let the object of passive disruption escape, sending a whirlwind of terror, or perhaps disgust, towards the two vibrios trying to avoid the balloon's erratic swirls.

Popol managed to detach himself and join me.

'So, Captain, where are we going? I enquired.

'Corporal, please. I don't know, we've got to find a safe place while we wait for a vehicle and reinforcements.

'You come to protect me and you don't have a plan B? That's not very professional.

'Monsieur Grimoire, you're not exactly the most important personality we have to protect.

'That we have. Subjunctive. That we have to protect.

The look of irritation on his face was not an invitation to continue the conjugation lesson.

'Nothing suggested such virulence, Monsieur Grimoire. Is there anything else I should know?

'Yes, the White Chariot bakery we just passed is one of the best in the region!

I'd have stopped in, to get some bread or a praline pastry, but the queue was endless. A glimmer of satisfaction though. It showed just how much hope there still was, to see so many fellows prepared to wait endless minutes for access to a good loaf of bread, baked with love, a sense of duty and, above all, good yeast. And to think that the Commies were hijacking the images of these long queues, passing them off as the throes of shortages. Everything's reversed, they're trying to make us take the lanterns for the bladders!

Up ahead, there's the Hypocholic of Sodom Street!

Regurgitation avenue awaited us. We would have to cross a quagmire of tastiness dressed up as deflated pin-ups to avoid the convicts of indolence chasing us. Fortunately, although my words may have spread throughout the *dumbosphere*, my overcooked crayfish appearance must have been repressed by the modesty of the dark algorithms that guard the visual. No one would recognize me.

The string of fat juice soaked essentialization stations represented a challenge that had for many years surpassed my metabolic and sensory capacities. Each shop evoked a gastric brothel eviscerated of all carnal subtlety. These garish neon lights, tuned to a wavelength designed to neutralize those of our encephalogram, stubbornly evoked the flashes of a psychedelic torture center. With their surgical lamps, one would have thought one was in an operating room, with the difference that nosocomial infection was rarer in these dens of frozen sanitized plastic, so much was the whole sprayed with virtuous disinfectant.

Why, oh great Taillevent, were they trying to make this such a traumatic experience? Was it to distract, from all the strained senses, the profound vacuity of that of the palate? Clearly, I was no longer the age for force-feeding. Over forty, our bowels are too sensitive, it becomes fast-ravage.

"I've got another idea!" I said to him.

I turned off at the last moment onto a pedestrian path between two buildings, inaccessible to four-wheeled vehicles. The only ones that could still worry us were the *ferociraptors* on *sloopers* - scooters with sloppy seats, to put it in layman's terms.

The path led us not far from our destination. There, between a place of worship hidden behind a conniving façade and the new Godmichael love center, stood my favorite place of worship, the Hummingbird butcher's shop.

Popol reminded us of a truism before entering.

"Strange to set up a butcher's shop here.

"That's an understatement. But it's the hamlet's best spot for the sow to reveal herself. Bird, my butcher, explained to me that he needed a large area to be able to mature his old carcasses, including his own, not to mention the preparation of the charcuterie. It's impossible to find

such an area in the city center, between the insurance agent and the hairdresser. And then, these days, it's better to do as Godmichel does and keep a low profile. The flesh blossoms in the outskirts, just like the cultist with his impenetrable ways.

I pushed open the door to the sanctuary.

"Hi, Bird!"

"Ciao, Otter, come vai?"

Stentor's knife in hand, he smiled at me before examining my sidekick.

"And this veal?"

"They loved the Osso beaucoup. We had a great time!"

"Such a joker! I know my veal is good. I'm talking about yours, the one dangling behind you!"

I turned around.

"Oh yes. He's my new bodyguard, the latest model. Apparently, they want my flesh.

"What for? We couldn't even make broth out of it!

"That's what I think: unfit for consumption, poorly cut and out of date. But what do you want! Bird, meet...

Intradoll introduced himself.

"Kevin Goodthirst.

"Welcome, youngling. Bird, at your service, in blanquette or boudin, as you wish.

I cold cut straight to the chase.

"Sorry to do this to you, but there's a horde of bulbous deliquescents looking for us. I figured that at least here we'd be safe.

"It's nice of you to think of me, but I already have a loyal clientele, relaxed of the glands, moreover. Now you're bringing me dilated pickle heads. Why don't you take them next door to Michel's?"

"Because I'm not buying his liver and offal every week, nor his bones to do my sauce concentrates, you toothed winglet. What's more, they're not likely to set fire to the place. They're too scared of smoked meat, it's *cancerhygienic*, apparently. Whereas with the drug shop next door, they'd be quite capable of doing it !

"Which one? They both sell ecstasy!"

"Nowadays, it's better to put your ass in the fire than on fire. And they'll avoid those marrow of the cavities on the pretext of respecting the void. So Michael would therefore be their prime target.

Annoyed but determined, Bird put his knife back in his apron strap.

"You're not short of air, Anthelme. What if they come in?"

'In the temple of Satan? Are you joking? With all those sausages, those pig's trotters quivering with joy, those calves' tongues eloquent with flavor, those duck hearts palpitating with taste? Never!

He looked over my shoulder.

'There's your credulous company.

I tilted my head to peer through the glass door and saw a horde of excited *zonebees* walking briskly down the middle of the street. It looked like a union strike. All that was missing were the placards.

"Quick, this way!" he said, nodding towards the back of the shop. You too, big guy. Bring your carcass, we're going to put you on ice.

At the end of the stall, Bird had us go behind the counter to a large refrigerated door, which he opened with the horizontal handle.

"Hey, not here!" exclaimed six-pack.

Bird, just as imposing as my Jason, but with a deep voice and a butcher's knife to boot, shoved him in with a glance.

"No time to argue.

He slammed the door shut.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked him impatiently.

"Can't you see? They're meat carcasses! It's a meat refrigerator!"

"Your powers of observation are amazing! You should be promoted to inspector! Perked with a mask!"

For my part, what I saw was the work of carnal sculptors, their work being refined in preparation for a *vinified* tasting. Hanging from their imposing hooks, they were patiently maturing - not the hooks on which you hang the sausage, but rather those that you see in horror films, where you pin a hysterical victim. In short, I mainly saw festive and delicious BBQs in prospect, works of art in the making, lunches for sated sportsmen. He obviously saw something else, a vision to which he had not been accustomed given his irrational reaction marinated in pessimism.

'After all,' I continued, 'we too are big pieces of meat, with more or less parsley and garlic.

He frowned, perhaps to protect himself from the cold. These fridges were churning out chilled air approaching zero, enough to catch a nasty death. The basis for refining the entrecôte. Bird had already explained it to me at length. And I was already shivering a little.

'What would you prefer? To be lynched in front of a sex shop for protecting someone whose beliefs you don't share, or to be married to the cold for a while...

A touch of nostalgia came over me.

'...as I once was to winter?

Before continuing.

'Get out of here and you'll suffer the same fate as those animals hanging around our noses, but with much less consideration!

'If I get out of here, I can talk to them. And reinforcements will arrive.

'We won't last thirty seconds outside, captain Hook!' I exclaimed, staring at him, amazed at such naivety.

"What do you know about it?"

"Haven't you seen those brigades in Majjistan chasing beef eaters? They lynch them! Those people are not reasonable!"

"Except that we're not in Majjistan."

"With satellite and undersea cables, the league of brainiacs is international! The bidding is going crazy all over the world: it's the Slothemy's of imbecility in search of the future Nobell! Be careful! Between those who want to go back to earth to wallow in their muddy instincts and those who want to cut themselves off from it and carry us away in their sidereal madness, there's enough to tear you apart! They will cut you to ribbons if you go out!

'Reason will prevail. You have offended them, it is normal that they ask for a little consideration. Explain the misunderstanding to them, apologize, it will ease the tension.

Suspicion set in. What a defeat, before even entering battle! Was I facing a mole or a blind man? This inability to see the obvious kept bringing me back to Saint Coffe: why do we continue to eat stupidity? The fear of sweating the shallot? Of crying over the onion? Not enough thrills in the leek? Between those who want to create a new world and those who want to recreate the old one, no one seemed satisfied with the dish of the day. No one seemed happy just to have a beating heart.

'Majjistan, Novistan, same fight for madness! One, just like the other, no longer wants to hear reason: too banal, too weak, not sensational enough! No one is willing to sit around a table to share a meal and their views of the world without getting a spoonful of mash in the pumpkin.

"It's not true!" And what do you have against Novistan?

I had hit the nail on the head. Yes-Yes came from across the ocean. The residual traces of a distant upbringing lingered in his accent

without pinpointing to his exact origins. His spontaneous reaction to my barb left no doubt.

'Instead of saying "That's not true" like a molested dainty ogre, could you say, "I disagree"? That would help us in the conversation, especially so that you can argue why Novistan is not a land floating above ground, all roots shooting in the breeze. It's a blank page without gravity, Novistans believe drawings come to life. They believe that a zucchini from the lab will be better than a courgette from the field, even though they don't even know what it looks like!

'That's your problem here in the Coquistan! You believe in nothing! The earth holds you back, history grinds you to a halt!

'Sometimes, I'll concede. But the courgette is a structure, a tutor: it is my guardian! Perhaps you think that the practice of chaotic freedom can be deployed indefinitely without a framework? It seems to me that there is a middle ground to be found.

'Creativity should not be limited! That is why you are always lagging behind on this archaic continent.

'Nay. What you call lagging behind is in fact a different choice of priorities. As far as creativity is concerned, I believe, on the contrary, that it can only be fully expressed within a framework, such as a meal, for example.

"All you ever talk about is eating!"

"No! Whilst as YOU eat, I dine!"

"What does that mean? What are you implying?"

"Get down!"

I pulled my bawler to the ground. Through the refrigerator window, I had spotted several poorly dressed figures approaching the shop door. I raised my head just enough to make out the little rascals pressing their noses against the shop window. They couldn't see very well from that angle, but some of them would surely think of going around to the exit door right next to our window.

I sat down, resigned, listening to the thudding sounds of consultation. Who would come in? That's what they had to try to figure out. While in the past and elsewhere, these brainiacs fought each other, here they were swarming in harmony: a real league of lanterns!

Who could they send, who would be brave enough to face the display of all their fears? All that meat, those tongues and sausages; that delicious boudin blanc that I enjoy every Monday, or that succulent flank steak with buttered shallots; not to mention the fat, firm guinea

fowl, with their unweaned heads, reminding us that we must face the animal and its defiant gaze; and those quails, those alluring little quails, just waiting for a few grapes and their flambéed juice. Who among these glorious combatants would dare to cross the threshold of the den, this sanctuary of cherished flesh?

The shop bell rang. Through the open door, the murmur of discontent rose briefly. With his deep voice, armed with his knife and beret, Bird greeted the newcomer. A muffled rattle reached us, but the high note found its way through the refrigerator partition.

“Have you seen two men come through here, one a big Neanderthal in a T-shirt and jeans, the other in a black shirt?”

Kevinou offered an offended face.

“Good morning, Miss.”

“Woman-she. Call me Woman-she! I will not submit to your injunctions of categorical assignment.”

Blimey, a raving lunatic in sensual straitjacket and unsexy underswear. She had come to the wrong shop, she should have dropped in a door down. Yet another collateral damage of the immaculate degeneration regressing into ordinary morons who see themselves as spotless.

“How can I make you happy?”

I could sense the Bird in good shape. The amazon did not respond. She must have been inspecting the shop, trying to see behind the stall. I imagined her disgust at the huge carcasses through the window, acutely reminding her of her horror of flesh, as well as her disdain for manners. Her indignation must have reached new heights in front of such icons of the male. It didn't seem too bold to speculate on the repulsive effect of this showcase of decadence. She wouldn't get close enough to our fridge to lean over and spot two heads, or perhaps feet, depending on the angle; close enough in any case to raise the alarm and turn the place into a scene of blood and carnage. No, these masses of flesh reminded her too much of what lurks beneath her own sensitive epidermis: the blood that flows, disease and, one day, decomposition. She wouldn't go near it.

Bird must have been thinking the same thing as me.

“A little meat stew, perhaps?” he began. “Quails flambée, a real turn on?” A blood sausage perhaps, Bird style? With onions?

A curious strategy of provocation, even if it did make your mouth water. But he had pushed things a little too far.

'You pig! You fat pig! All this carnage that I see spread out here shows just how far we have to go to overthrow your oppressive totalitarian system!

The increasing intensity of her voice suggested that she was walking along the stall and approaching the window of our hangout. She must have been only a few steps away, seriously riled up.

'Or a thick rib of beef, marbled with fat, aged to perfection?

"You'll see what we'll do with the blood of those innocents! We'll smear it all over your front to tell the world what you murderers are up to! The tyranny over animals and females is over! We will all rise up to create a new world free from your carnage and your incessant brutality!

"Otherwise, I have an excellent tête de veau', my good lady.

The harpy's last word, stale as a dead rat, pierced my ears. The exit door slammed shut, a moment passed, then the fridge door opened.

"You're not kidding when you provoke!" he said. "What did you do to them?"

I looked at him with a straight face.

"To say that to me after what I've just heard! Bird! A little consideration!

"Well, it's still going around, so stay here until it calms down.

"You wouldn't happen to have a coat?

"No, but I should be able to find something for you.

"Tell me, Bird. The fury that just left, what tribe was she from? Wasanis, Kagan, QirScan?

"I'm not sure. In any case, I'm good to redo the facade with what they're going to throw at me in the way of red paint. It'll be the third time this year! They should professional reconversion: there's a shortage of house painters.

"I think they've gone into fine arts."

"Into tall tales, you mean! Nothing but stale crust! Anyway, I'm not going to thank you."

"It's for a good cause, my friend!" I whispered to him, placing my hand on his shoulder.

"And how about cheddar-box? Not a word, smells strange; and he doesn't look well."

I shrugged.

'Chatty here? I think it's just his nature, not ripe yet. And he's worrying himself sick.

'Don't let that sulk make my flesh turn with his sour humor!

Bird closed the door, leaving us alone with the cold, the carcasses and a very bad taste.

4 - The Nestling

Contemplating the fat carcasses, I tried to remember the films that had used these metal hooks to heighten the suspense or spice up the gore. It seemed to me that a considerable number of protagonists had ended up pinned to one of these shiny claws. The bright white light of the neon lights reminded me of the atmosphere of certain interrogation scenes, while the insistent cold added a final macabre touch.

I turned to Popol, scowling with his legs folded under his crossed arms. It was surprising how large masses could give the impression of being very small when the capricious child took over.

'What's the matter with you?

Or maybe he was just very cold.

'Nothing. I'm hungry.

'Have you eaten this morning? You're very pale. A carpaccio would do you the world of good.

'Nothing, I tell you! I'm not here to laugh.

'You don't share our sense of humor, you mean.

His silence was enough of an admission for me.

'That's a shame. Good humour makes for a good appetite!

'This is not exactly a place to get hungry.

'What's wrong with getting closer to your essence? You have to accept that one day it could be you, dangling up there, and certainly much more lively than you are now.

He didn't answer.

'That's why you should have accepted the liver. It was the right moment, with a nice table, a pleasant presentation, all accompanied by the compliments of Bacchus and great company. And sharing a meal is the ideal opportunity to get to know someone, more so than a freezing fridge!

'Mr. Grimoire, I'm not here to talk about myself but to protect you and get us out of here. On the way out of here, we'll stop at a drive-through and then head to the police station to put you in a safe place.

'Are you joking? A drive-through? You want to eat a meal while driving? Out of the question! If you're so keen to gorge yourself, then we'll go somewhere and sit down. There's no way I'm putting up with the sight of two things poorly executed at the same time! You either eat or you drive, not both!

Approaching his freezing point, Kelvin was shivering. Clearly he was not comfortable with an empty stomach.

'It's not up to you, he said, chattering his teeth. I am responsible for your protection and it would be putting us in danger to stop in a restaurant.

'Young man, your very subtle accent betrays you, as do your libertarian ways. Here, in general, we don't chase two hares at once. Your preposterous notion of protection proves to be incompatible with my line of conduct where one performs one task at time and properly, such as dining. Where you come from, you may like to mix everything and do as you please, but here, even if gung-ho-let-it-all-hang-out is trendy, the resistance is still alive and well!

'It's what we call efficiency, Mr. Grimoire.

'For the love of Saint-Estèphe! Don't try to make me swallow such pretentious and ridiculous nonsense. You remind me of those frenetic women from the Big Apple walking briskly down Fifth Avenue with their coffee in hand. What a preposterous idea to walk your coffee like your dog! One would think that without this appendage glorifying their hyperactive auras, they would lose all social status. One even wonders if they drink their reconstructed juice. After all, in the middle of winter, this poor water-based beverage as sanitized as a nun who missed her calling must arrive at the office just as cold as the latter. Oh, Holy mother of corkscrews ! A coffee is not a fashion item! It is an opportunity for sharing, for an Oh! so redeeming fleeting communion that could save humanity!

'You're being harsh. These are busy women, who are no doubt managing family commitments as well as significant professional responsibilities. They seek efficiency by doing two things at once.

'And do you believe in all this nonsense?

'It's not nonsense, it's a...fact.

'For an Indignant seedling, you protest weakly, I find. But just in case, let's make things clear. First, in my religion, efficiency is not divine but at the service of a much higher ambition which is not content with scratching a few inches to reach the ceiling. Second, it's what we call mindful dining. It's spiritual. Eating without company only serves our primal instinct to let the body enjoy itself alone. And thirdly, looking at you, you're not the kind of person who chews their food properly: it's very bad for your Yang. You're effectively inefficient.

'My what?

'Your Yang. Your inner balance.

'I've never heard about that.

'I just made it up. But I'm sure it exists.

He shook his head as if slapped, indignant as only he and his peeping peers know how to do so well.

'And where does this 'much higher ambition' come from?

Bird opened the door to throw an outfit at me. I shrieked.

'A cassock?!

'I'm not going to give you an apron, am I? It's all I could find.

'And you make you black pudding dressed with that?

'I found it behind the shop. With the wind, it must have come loose from the neighbour's clothesline.

'Luckily the wind wasn't coming from the other direction! I laughed. I would have had to keep warm with a string ! Or an inflatable doll !

I looked as Mr. Freeze.

'Mind you, I already have a deflatable Pol.

My lacquered lackey remained unmoved.

'Say, you wouldn't have a burger with fresh meat for the little one, would you?

'Are you're joking? I'm a butcher, not a grill!

'A steak tartare, then."

I turned to Intermole. He didn't seem to like my idea.

'In any case, I don't have any capers, added Bird.

'That's okay. We'll do with pickles. And your rotten fish sauce.

'My garum?

My Kelvin purist interjected.

'Thank you, I'll do without.

His tone betrayed a hint of fear mixed with annoyance to which Bird responded by closing the door.

I contemplated my disguise, wondering if I wouldn't feel a little wiser, like those children who sometimes think that when you cross the border of a country, they suddenly know how to speak the language. Closing my eyes, I searched for my inner self, I probed the present moment and its thousand sensations, I questioned the micro-vibrations of the all, capturing the waves of the universe in search of disguised wisdom. Nothing came to me except a perplexing void, perhaps due to the distraction caused by this little piece of garlic stuck between my teeth.

'So, what do I look like? I asked Kalvin The Virtuous.

'Nothing. I mean, you don't look like a religious dignitary.

'Am I missing something, perhaps?

He examined me without being able to answer.

'Flip-flops? Curly? I continued

'I don't know.

'A turban?

'No, I don't see...

'Mountain sandals? Or a shaved head?

"I don't know, Mr. Grimoire! I'm neither a fashion advisor nor an expert in religion. I'm only here to protect you.

'Protect me? That's a laugh! Why on earth is there always someone who wants to protect others? Judging by your build, it's not maternal instinct!

Blondy, with the shoulders of a forward and the legs of a back player, rebelled like a mollusc : an All Baked with oval thinking, cooked to the tonsils!

'I am a specialist in close protection.

'Well, that's a laugh! So you're in charge of protecting my body from the madmen who want to purge my soul.

'That's right.

'Quirky. That's how I would define this confluence of dubious inspiration and laborious determination. Who, then, will protect my soul?

'I don't understand.

I didn't dare tell him that he would benefit socially from not leaving his mouth open all the time. I opted instead for pedagogy.

'Here I am, in religious authority attire, plausibly intent on busying myself with the main activity of all religious proselytism, namely the salvation of souls, while you, my dear friend, are here ready to save my body. Only, here's the catch. I have no solution to save your soul - and in particular, no desire to do so - while you have no solution to save my body, and perhaps not necessarily a great desire to do so, if I judge by your haughty attitude towards my gustatory preferences.

'I'll find a solution to get us out of here.

After double tapping impatiently on his temple, he waited long seconds before accepting the fact.

'I have no network.

'You are trying to reach Mr. Faraday, perhaps?

He hesitated at my quip. It was obvious that our metal box did not just lock us in like sardines, it also held back telecommunication waves.

'No, headquarters.

'Now that's a positive attitude. I'll take a leaf out of your book and find a solution of my own!

'To save my soul?

Was there a hint of humor in that kid's voice?

'Why not?" I replied, as if facing a challenge. The religion of the plate! I continued. But let me be clear from the outset, that while registration is free of charge, it remains an invitation to dinner, with the sacred condition, if you accept it, of staying until its dignified conclusion.

'You can't make up a religion, can you?

'Of course you can, it happens every day. Infant mortality is high, though. But right now, somewhere on, earth, the great religion of the 3rd millennium is fermenting.

'Fermenting?

'Yes, a more appropriate term in my opinion to describe the growth of an idea, its unforeseen repercussions, its detours and its organic wriggling.

'I don't believe you can create a religion.

I got up to find inspiration amidst the maturing meat.

'You're right, maybe not anymore: there are too many traces, there can be no doubt about the origin anymore. If people knew it came from me, it would lose all credibility. Or I would have to die a martyr's death, for instance by donating my body to Gastronomy.

But then revered recipes crossed my mind, like that of cassoulet which is relatively recent, but still seemed to have descended from distant ancestors affiliated to the dawn of time. So maybe my ambition could hold its own against cassoulet and find some form of mysticism without sacrificing too much of my thick and dry rind.

'Who knows, I concluded. With enough time, a little enthusiasm and gullibility, maybe it would work.

'I don't believe it. It's not possible! exclaimed Interpop.

'What do you mean, impossible? You come from the continent where anything is possible! Where all have unwavering faith in technology and its redeeming power! All of a sudden you become incredulous in the face of spiritual innovation? What a tragic fate to get bogged down in such certainty! Does this mean that we are

irredeemably chained to a litany of dubious and contradictory texts, interpreted by sleazy people in search of glory? You miscreant! You think as you cook, without appreciating the magic, the ascendancy of time and the promise of the future! I tell you, in truth, let's try the experiment!

'To create a religion?

I poked my head from behind a carcass.

'Absolutely!

'That's stupid.

The poor lad was shivering more and more. I had to offer him spiritual comfort.

'Moderate your words, young padawan, make way for doubt and discovery! Open your heart and your mind!

'Why would we do that?

I got up without worrying about being seen. The energy of the diatribe carried me.

'To counter stupidity! To counter the TPC who pull us beyond the limbo of the reasonable! We need an opposing force to bring the universe back into balance. A kind of Luke the Espuma-Walker!

'What's a TPC?

'An acronym for Three Percent, the necessary but dubious fringe of humanity. The percentage of individuals who only think about one thing, smoking us like fat trout lined up in rows of onions on skewers of rigorism. They are tinned tonsils whose canned brains have neither seen nor felt the world for years. Unable to escape their straitjacket, they are trying to drag us down with them!

'I don't understand.

'And we, noble knights of the fork, are the ones who will have to fight them!

'I'm sorry, but you look like Don Quixote with your pose in the middle of the carcasses.

'Don Quixote with a fork. I must say, the allegory is tempting! Don Quixote attacking waffle mills and other Potemkins of the plate with his fork!

'Get down!

I was parading among the carcasses like Theseus in the labyrinth on the lookout for the Minotaur. In the shop, at the checkout, an old goat with a faded shawl dating to the years of Nouvelle Cuisine gasped in surprise. I pretended to inspect the carcass with a good slap on the

fat, finishing it off with a big grimace. Oh! how we do like Dolly the Cow! Aware of my mediocre performance, I slipped away behind the massive slab.

'Why fight them, this so-called fringe? he asked me.

Sitting anew on the immaculate floor, I adjusted my words.

'On reflection, let's not call them fringe but *limbards*, if you don't mind, which is a nice mix of limbo and the suffix -ard, which is quite explicit in itself. I prefer not to associate the delightful frangipane in any way with individuals of poor taste, especially as it already has to contend with dubious imitations. Besides, *frangipard* or *frangeard* look like bad transplants that wouldn't last more than a day.

'Do you often invent words?

'As often as recipes.

'What's the point? I mean, of inventing words? When there may already exist some that fit the purpose.

'By the guts of Ulysses! The reason is obvious, youngling! It's completely pointless! Except for waking up the next day and not the day before; for reconciling matter with spirit; for provoking the past to ensure it has a future!

'OK.

An expression of assent as relevant as Braille in warm butter. I tried not to be distracted by my linguistic demands. I had to concentrate.

Then Saintpol uttered his superb truth.

'People do what they want... I mean, if someone wants to think they're a king, that's their problem.

'Of course, dear lad. And that's the very drama that gnaws at me with every carrot I slice, every piece of bacon I cut, every moment I wait for Holy Maillard to bless the bottom of my pan with his irresistible brown: the day when everyone at the table will do as they want! Mark my words : that day, the world will be lost!

'You're a sick man!

From his expression, I could see that he regretted this lack of professionalism. Nothing like three days on a sailboat or half an hour in a fridge to bring out the turmoil nested deep in the blood. All I had to do was take out my skimmer.

'For a protector of souls, you are either very disturbing or very incompetent.

I closed my eyes, feeling my cherub's distance, his self-reflective capacity escaping into the night of his certainties. He was between

dusk and dawn, at that moment when a poorly illuminated idea, as if petrified by Medusa, became certainty. Opening my eyes, seeing him with his uptight look, crossing the Rubicon separating joy from contrition, I deduced that nothing in the world had changed, that I couldn't help coming on strong like a hot pan and that I still had a lot to do to soften my cooking of overly tender flesh.

And while I was at it, I thought to myself that the speckled nature of the word "self-reflective" did not encourage its use. One of these days, it should be given a makeover.

'A new religion or body of belief can only be nourished by the maturing of time. It is the nature of any great dish revealing a sincere novelty: it takes time for the palate and especially the brain to get used to it. Like a good steak, it needs to be aged.

He smirked in disgust. As if to prove me wrong, he pushed me to continue.

'And just how do you plan to go about it?

'The way I always do: find a recipe!

'A recipe to create a religion? You're reducing thousands of years of belief to a recipe? I don't think that's very respectful of religions.

My blood was boiling. Here was one of the biggest issues of our time. The fascinating tolerance of infamy. Whilst we had fought the fish of Friday, these ignorant tributaries of past culinary battlefields offered the victorious flame to the new rigorists. Our sister in arms, the Nouvelle Cuisine, had succeeded in eradicating all the intolerance of the old, everything that was restrictive, heavy and indigestible; the New Gastronomy had rid it of the heaviness of outdated manners; Bistronomy offered a new face, a universal siblinghood that brought together joyful modesty and allegiance to taste. These valiant companions had offered us immeasurable freedom. And what did this new generation of toads uprooted like hydroponic tomatoes, all born of an immaculate contraption, so many four-yolk eggs carrying their certainties like cotton candy, do with it? How did these indignation-fed babies perpetuate this immense work, this age-old heritage? By selling it for a few ounces of good conscience and soluble ideas!

'My dear! Are you shocked? Are you outraged! I blurted out, trying to hold myself back. Would you like to write a little post to find some relief?

'Not really, but...

'Well then, if you haven't experienced Calas, witches, the hussars of the republic, how can you be outraged? Your indignation is like cocaine for the withered of the cortex!

'Sorry, but I don't feel concerned.

'Because you're not a TPC with its chicken coop posts. But all it would take is for a TPC to get hold of this indignation, make a big deal out of it, and there you go, the snowball would gather momentum while fattening itself up with sensitive and cozy souls like yours.

'Cozy, me?

'A real chocolate fondant: hard on the outside and soft on the inside. Nourished by self-saturated indignation fat that weighs you down!

He fell silent without me being able to tell if it was out of anger or misunderstanding.

'The fact remains that cooking is the origin of everything! I continued.

'You're exaggerating, and even then, I'm holding back. If I didn't have to remain professional, I would say something else.

'I am not exaggerating in any way. Science, for instance has been glorified by Gastronomy, just ask the Venerable Brillat! Escoffier gave marketing its letters of nobility, with Pêche Melba and Crêpe Suzette. He was ahead of Taylorian productivity, with his brigades! While Mother Brazier paved the way for Japanese manufacturers by offering them lean production: a place for everything and everything in its place. And Adam Smith, during his time in Paris, was inspired by restaurants to develop the theory of the Invisible Hand! The restaurant business, the apotheosis of hearty and joyous liberalism! By the way, did you know that the Invisible Hand refers to a skill that brings a dish to life, with incredible texture and soul to make it unique?

'I don't know what you're talking about.

I rolled my eyes heavenward.

'Oh! Great Carême. Oh! Taillevent and Grimod, nimble spirits with lively cuts, whether of knives or of words, do you hear that?

Turning to Interflop, I landed a last blow.

'You see, my dear friend, that's the problem. You're preparing your stew of good sentiments without even knowing where the knack, the underlying laws, the age-old customs or the refinement of knowledge come from. Be curious, my dear friend, before you refuse! You have to adventure a taste of everything!

Proud of my oratory prowess, I picked up the thread where I had left it.

'So, I said I needed a recipe: ingredients, quantities, techniques, time...

Suddenly, the door opened. Bird gave us an indignant look with his rocky accent and humming.

'Hey, you're going to scare away the customers! Old Featherhead thought it was strange the way you were fondling the meat. Come on, we'll get you somewhere warm.

It was about time. My miscreant savior was trembling, and I myself was starting to feel cramped. No one in the shop, not a soul outside. Bird led us through the back of the shop to his office.

'It's time to extract you, he began.

'You've got something up your sleeve!

'We need to go to the police station! interjected Infrapol.

'Who do you think I am, kid? Fluber? I've got pies to wrap, marinades to prepare, and deliveries to make! I'm the Bird! Not a carrier pigeon and certainly not a stork!

I tried to refocus him.

'What do you suggest, Bird?

'I have to make a delivery to La Sainte Sauvage. Let's take the opportunity to get you out of here and drop you off at your friend's place nearby, Satyre.

'What inspiration! A great idea, as good as your cold cuts!

'There's a snag, though. The tonsured are still on patrol. You won't be able to sit in the front, you'll have to hide in the back.'

5 - Road Tripes

We were indeed in a minivan, cramped, unable to stand, sitting face to face on the rear wheel housings. Fortunately, we were well surrounded with petit fours, pies, stuffed quails and many other delicacies which gave me strength with their rich perfumes.

All we could see was what the neon blue display on the refrigerator console was willing to show us : the racks with their treasured plateaus, Droopy's depressed face, mine rejoiced and our gentle sway through the turns and variations in speed. The space was even more confined than in our last fridge which meant I was getting inexorably closer to my big nanny.

'It's cold, he lamented.

'It's not a wine cellar, it's a refrigerator for petit fours.

At least my tall asparagus had something to wear this time.

'It won't be long, you'll survive.

'I don't feel well.

Goodness gracious, what a sissy I was carrying around!

'Look straight ahead.

'It doesn't change anything, it's pitch black!

'Just be patient for a few more minutes. We're just passing the fishmonger's. Soon we'll be on the ring road and then it'll be straight ahead.

His quick breathing confirmed his distress.

'Think of something nice! Imagine a postcard landscape passing you by.

'I can't do it.

The ravages of digital onanism! Incapable of imagining anything. Before, you had to use your imagination! Whereas now, you just used your fingers.

'Of course you can! Look beyond these walls at this land of plenty where the hills, even the steep ones, have the curves of the local girls; where the corn grows like the gold of the Aztecs; where the hills, with their gentle pastures, nourish potential steaks, then at dawn bow down to better accommodate the sun. The vermilion hedgerows blossom with blackberries, firm as starry nights, with the flavor of afternoons of dizzying heat.

'Why did you do that?

'Do what? I asked very innocently.

'Make those people eat unknowingly food they are not allowed to consume.

I detected a certain tension in his voice. Although I couldn't see his dilated pupils, I sensed the deceitful reproach, the kind that is so underlying that its instigator no longer even realizes it.

'Oh, is that what you think?

'That's what's going around on the web.

'And you swallow all that insipid nonsense without tasting before? Without even chewing?

'I have a critical eye.

'And a numbed out palate. I'd avoid thinking I'm so clever, young darling. There are more toxic products in your sources of information than in a frozen burger. The mind, like the body, can certainly pride itself on an impressive capacity when it comes to sorting waste, whether it be arguments or food, but sooner or later, certain inanities make their way through the intestinal pores, as they do through neuronal nerve endings.

'Hard to swallow when it's as big as your "exploit".

'My achievement, in this case, was slightly distorted by the digital megaphone.

'Did you do it or not?

'My dear friend, this is where you are mistaken about your ability to filter. You are asking the question as you have heard it, which leaves you in the comfortable position of only having to demand the one viable answer and in the most virtuous way. However, in the case you are referring to with a certain reproachful tone, which does not bode well for your willingness to protect me, there is another question you should be asking yourself.

'With all due respect, that's an easy answer.

'Forgive me! It is above all conceiving the right question that is difficult, in that it requires you to warm up your boiler. Faced with an assertion like yours - that I have led poor wretches astray - what other possibilities are there? Dozens. But you still have to take the time to look for them. So many choices that you find yourself in a bad position, incapable, without the time, and above all, without the motivation to discover them. And why tire yourself out, anyway? These unverified certainties give you a quick little pleasure like a piece of fat or a mental sweetener: a real balsam for the unfortunate predilection of your

painless generation. Whereas what I invite you to do, quite simply, is to take the time to go to the garden and cut a few sprigs of thyme.

My silence of weariness pushed him to open up.

'So tell me, then. What is the question?

'The questions you must ask yourself are simple: is the recipe up to date, where does my product come from, have I transformed it to the point of making it unrecognizable, in appearance or taste? Start from there and everything will become clear.

He couldn't hold back a breath of exasperation.

'None of this makes sense.

'Of course it means something! Take pepper. Why do so many recipes keep inviting the reader to pepper stews and broths, even though it makes them bitter?

I could see he was at a loss in the face of the force of my reasoning.

'No idea, he admitted.

'Well, I'll tell you what, my friend: neither do I. Maybe it's for the rhythm: saying « salt and pepper», is always more appetizing than simply « salt » ! It's a bit like Laurel without Hardy! But no one asks why, and the same mistake is carried on from one generation to the other. Recipes need to be updated but often they simply perpetrate the same outdated habits.

'People like what gets lost in history.

'Correction, they love what gets lost in time! And what matters is not the text, it's the spirit, unless you deliberately want to make a bad dish.

Assuming the clarity of my wit, I continued.

'Then, if you start from a frozen product by claiming that it has always been that way, the rest of your reasoning is likely to be very indigestible.

'I never know if you're serious, he lamented.

'That's surprising. My entire reasoning is one of irreproachable logic : there is the product, its transformation and the conversation.

'Sorry, but I find all that, as you would say, simply rambling.

Finally, he was beginning to show a little sincerity.

'Give yourself time to taste and decide. That's why I love meals. We taste dishes and ideas while giving ourselves time to let them sink in, without judging their value on a knee-jerk basis. This is what is known as cerebral digestion. You have to chew each word, drink in each intonation, and let the more discreet functions of the soul or stomach

take hold of them. Sometimes, it is not until the next day, after the digestion of sleep, that you can render your verdict.

'Mr. Grimoire, you can invent any kind of reasoning you like, the fact is that certain foods are forbidden.

'Are you so sure?

'It's obvious. It's always been the case.

'Is that your only frozen argument? What if it all turns out to be a matter of interpretation? Or a recent extravagance?

'With all due respect, Mr. Grimoire, you're delusional. You're questioning the beliefs of hundreds of millions of people on a whim.

'In that case, tell me, young man, how many of this vast multitude have taken the time to delve into the ancient texts and form their own opinion?

My young friend frowned. Was he entertaining some fresh doubts or was he digging into his certainties?

'Always start with the seed,' I continued. 'That's where everything originates. The seminal question, in this case, is whether indeed so much is forbidden and in all instances.

'People aren't idiots.

'You're half right. It's the other half that worries me. Besides, they're lazy. And since Man is a cooker before being cookable, he will always cook what best suits the story he is telling himself. That's why there is a plethora of nonsense on offer in the supermarket. They're ready-made! I'll tell you, idiocies are in demand! And the supply is not to be outdone in offering ingredients and prefabricated products likely to satisfy these aspirations of selfhood. Long live the market for nonsense! Long live the profits of credulity! But let's not be fooled! These foods are all based on the same three satanic ingredients! Envy, indignation and contempt!

Before launching a new sally, I examined Intrapot who looked like a curled-up woodlouse

'In fact, you are just as hard stubborn and red as the bricks in this region! Why don't you give in a bit to the arguments that you feel are threatening, for once. Sure, they intimidate, like the currents on the shore of the ocean. They pull you away from the reassuring land, but sooner or later, they let go and you can safely return to the beach, though different. But beware if you swim against them! You'll exhaust yourself and drown!

'I don't feel well. I want to get out. Stop!

'Can't you see, young man, I don't have the steering wheel in hand! And for mercy's sake, remember: you are surrounded by the Bird's delicacies specially made for La Sainte Sauvage! The only specialty made outside the house, with his very label, no less!

I had hoped the monotonous hum of the four-lane highway would help him digest my subversive ideas, but my goose stuffing approach to this youngling didn't seem to be pushing the right direction. I couldn't bear to imagine the van door opening on guacamole terrines.

I tried to distract him from his nausea.

'You don't agree with my reasoning, do you? That doesn't surprise me at all. It's a bit like eating sea urchins for the first time, it's hard to swallow!

He couldn't discern my ironic smile.

'You've given your opinion.

'What about yours, what would it be?

'I'm on duty, opinions have no place in this context.

'I insist. I won't tell anyone.

He hesitated.

'Rest assured, I continued. This new Faraday cage will prevent both my exotic ideas and your terrible confessions from getting out. What happens in the van stays in the van. Go on, give me a whiff of your insight!

'I think you lack respect for religious beliefs as well as freedom of conscience.

'What an idea! On the contrary, my friend! Everyone is free to make their own stew! However, I believe that without gastroneural criticism, there can be no real spiritual cuisine that holds! The greatest respect is irreverence that disarms flattery. The first duty is to confront your beliefs just like your dishes! One has no meaning without the other. Moreover, in this case, please note that I am criticizing the recipe and its lecture and not the chefs, and even less the diners. And then, there can be no great cuisine without great criticism!

'I don't see the connection, Intramop said angrily.

'It's fundamental, of course! Our whole civilization is based on this dissociation, separating the kitchen from the dining room! Gastronomy would be nothing without the separation of the powers of the chef and the critic! It's on the same scale as the pope and the king!

Clearly, my sour-mill of kind ideas was struggling to discern the depth of my dialectic. I tried to provide him with a little light, if not heat.

'To sum it up, I concluded, while I agree with you that food influences our psyche, I find it hard to understand how ancient and mould laden proscriptions can influence true faith.

'It's just disrespectful.

'Yes, I know, it's blasphemy. We mustn't question anything, we mustn't doubt anything! Our ancestors paid dearly for the right to eat farandoles, let's not deprive ourselves of them. But hear my reasoning, you'll see. Once you've had your fill of pork, I'll shut up.

In the face of his silence, I continued.

'Firstly, although health services have been around for a long time, even since the Middle Ages, can we seriously apply, without discernment and without updating, rules from a time with very different conditions? Imagine if we kept all the spoken rules from a thousand years ago! I would already be at the stake by now!

Silence.

'Secondly, the current trend does not bode well for airlines.

'What's the connection?

'Walloping withered spring onions! Imagine the day when a new religion bans chicken! In the current escalation, it is a plausible hypothesis!

'I don't see what the problem is.

'To begin with, flying. What will airlines do? Have you even thought about that? They'll feel like featherless peacocks, only able to offer a ridiculous choice between pasta and lentils. Because everything else apart from pangolins has already been banned! Can you see yourself, squashed between two other unrepentant air travelers, slicing pangolin scales with your wooden knife! No, of course not!

I nodded my head.

'Come to think of it, we really messed it all up!

'What do you mean?

'We have the delight of so many other meat sources at our finger tips, and we end up with chicken, and not even Bresse chicken, simply breast chicken, in its most diluted, uniform, insipid manifestation!

'So what?

'Chicken, apart from the aforementioned, has almost no taste: it is deprived tastelessness compared to pork, an uncultured pea brain deprived of any delicious fat; it is a translucent pane of glass compared to a Gauguin! In fact, if I take the argument to its logical conclusion, chicken is the champion of our hygienist, puritanical and preposterous

utopia! Even though it was raised in its own droppings! If there is one animal on earth that is dangerous, it is this feathered dinosaur! The next extinction will probably come from this idiotic bird! Seriously! Have you ever met a chicken that recognizes you? Never! They are hopelessly stupid! Real potential führers, Phalangists of the Fart, Che Carbonaras of art! Whereas a pig sees in you, in the depth of your soul! It knows who comes to feed it! It knows when it is going to be slaughtered! When it senses the approach of the knife, it takes on the appearance of a Socrates or a Seneca choosing its destiny! And if you know how to read the fat, you will even see that the pig has an interplanetary reach! Yes, yes! Cut a slice of the belly and you will see the clouds of Jupiter and its cyclones!

'You don't belong in a kitchen, you belong in an asy...!

Poor nitwit. Born without the second degree humor gene. I tried to reassure him.

'I'm exaggerating a little.

'Why Gauguin?

'No idea, it's the first one that came to mind. I could have invoked a Ming vase or a fine calligraphy instead.

'No, that's fine.

'Anyway. Next, it will be fries, maybe even Brussels sprouts they'll ban!

'Not a great loss.

'You see, Kevin, I can accept all the consciences in the world as long as they sit down at the table and agree to share the same bread. But to my great regret, even the latter is the subject of condemnation.

'You can't doubt that, Mr. Grimoire.

'I'm not questioning it. It's just that all these incursions generate doubts that challenge the foundations of my own convictions. That individuals should censor themselves over delicious, refined, succulent food while at the same gorging on... let's see, how would the venerable Master Coffe put it...well, I just can't understand.

The subject was close to my heart, so close I could feel it beating. I tried to calm down.

'That's it. I am a believer in reason. Even if at times I sneak around it, I do not deny it's presence: my feelings remain faithful to reason.

He didn't seem convinced by this last argument. I pursued.

'In the end, all I want is to share a good meal, but the world seems inclined to refuse my invitation, at all costs.

'Nobody is refusing anything. It's just that people have convictions, they have different cultures.

'Ah, the height of choice, a plethora of refuges, multitudes of unsuspected citadels rising up out of a virtue nourished by stagnant sabotage. What a thing to say! It is precisely the great challenge of our time!

'Why?

'There was a time when Scarcity sorted out the imperatives and Necessity questioned all sulking whims with its unstoppable itching. Back then, the indisputable and unrefutable cocoons of modern times would have been torn apart by words not yet subject to injunctions of gentleness. Only the opulent could claim the luxury of isolating themselves in their ramblings. Today, it is a haven that the majority can abuse. How can we remedy this without resorting to scarcity? Through the Holy discipline of the table, perhaps? Cultures, meanwhile, are a lame excuse. And if I were to declare, today, the law by an uncreated custom of stoning the ugly with rotten parsnips, how praiseworthy you would say! Is culture not something that is shaped, that leaves room, like a language, for other responses? Are we condemned, as soon as we leave the forge of deep-seated reflexes, to indulge in them without reflection or resistance? What a poor prospect for humanity to have to give up the idea of transforming food and its view to noble transcendence! Finally, does seniority serve as a guide for the mind? Must we wait until we are a venerable thousand years old to be entitled to folly, for the sole purpose of avoiding criticism?

'These are convictions that have been built up over the ages!

'In that case, my friend, Gastronomy could also lay claim to such a blessing!

'That's absurd! It's just food, nourishment and local recipes! Your fable makes no sense. Stories about cooking and grub are not spiritual; you have no history, no prophet, no texts!

'Blasphemer! Ignoramus! Philistine! On the contrary, the dinner that comes to us today is the expression of thousands of years of evolution, beginning with Ulysses and the Greeks, carried by the Messiah, Athenaeus, Lucullus, enriched by the monks, erected as a cathedral by Gutenberg, polished by Erasmus, engraved by Rabelais, gilded by Vatel, reflected on by Voltaire, liberated by Grimod, glossed over by Brillat, then sealed in the 19th century by a thousand joyously apocryphal texts. If you give yourself entirely to the idea, this

expression of such a vast and eloquent humanity, disseminated by the 20th century, will become, if our Saints so wish, and under the arch of 21st century world harmony, universal! Gastronomy is an edifice of time, built on centuries and centuries of investigation, curiosity and struggle! To sit down at a table in this noble country is to take your place at the top of a temple of thirty storeys, each guardian of a century of knowledge!

'You're delusional. Eating is eating and everyone is free! You are free to talk nonsense and I am free to eat as I see fit.

'My friend, you're really putting me in a corner. Are we really condemned? Are we facing the immensity of the future with a single option, that of having to accept the proliferation at our tables of vain self-importance, each manifestation displaying a supposed cultural wealth, always misunderstood, like an Arcimboldo ersatz? What a decline!

The vehicle stopped. The door opened to flood us with bright light.

6 - Satyre & Diane

As the blinding light cleared, a small village street appeared, with pavements manicured in the latest fashion, neat with its candy pink cobblestones, relegating the revolutionary grey road bricks to history.

On the Pathway of the Shell, the village could boast of being home to my friend Satyre's discreet and pleasant residence on one side and a renowned haute cuisine establishment, La Sainte Sauvage, on the other. This little village was located on the heights of the first hills announcing the land of Cocagne, whose border was not far away. Satyre and La Sainte Sauvage stood guard over the pass like two sphinxes, one asking the question, the other striking down anyone who did not answer the riddle. Fortunately, it was not Satyre who asked the question, because everyone would have been slayed with his accent. If Popol's intonations required only a butter knife to cut through the exotic variations, Satyre's, carved in the rock of the other hemisphere, required that of a butcher, when speaking the local language. But he made the effort. He seemed to put even more effort into it since his induction into the confederation of Festives Without Borders, a noble gathering of joyous *gastrolaters*, epicureans of all origins, constantly flirting with the limbo of drunkenness but above all, bathed in joie de vivre and multiple idioms.

After spending his life feeding others by providing that invisible part that any self-respecting intellectual ignores, namely logistics, a light one day shone upon him - in what form we can only guess - which transformed him. From then on, he became a great deacon of *carpe diem*, savoring each day as if it were his last, alert to the very depths of his gut at the slightest tremor of joy and to every nuance of his surroundings. The fervor of his alcoholic ablutions was matched only by his attentiveness to others, his thoughtfulness drawn from his antipodean homeland, where the harshness of new territories teaches solidarity before envy.

A voice with a gentle gravelly quality, free of the frills of an overrated regionalism, greeted us.

'Hello, my friends! What a nice surprise. What good wine brings you?

Diane, his wife, greeted me with a big smile and a kiss.

'The grapes of wrath, old friend. A bad bunch of sour pimples seems to want to thwart my universal hopes. Can you welcome us while Gut Advisor untangles this uncanny situation?

'I haven't understood a word you've said, but of course. Come in! L'Oiseau, will you have a drink with us?

'No time, I've got my terrines to deliver to the Sainte. You know the boss.

'Oh Fuck!

I admired Satyre. He wrapped vulgarity in such a gentle tone, overflowing with life, carved by the years, that one would have confused it with the pineau softened flesh of a crispy tourte accompanied by a white limestone tasting Chenin.

We entered the residence, a house right on the main street, excessively busy he repeated to me, but without a car in sight.

My story was brief. A few nano-indignations, an unbridled digital megaphone, a hodgepodge of ayatollahs worthy of a Torquemada at the height of his career and a car chase powered by vegetable V8, an explosive fuel of *biosufficiency*, all by lymphatic fats.

'Fuckin' Animals! All those lazy plumb-brains!

'Don't be so hard on animals, it's not their fault.

Words are like ingredients. While some manage to make a vegetable or a fruit unappetizing, others manage to give an ordinary food unexpected sweetness. It was the same with the Satyre, who offered a form of redemption to anglophone monotony, as if these words had rediscovered their original soul.

'Did you know, he told me, that the *fion* is also art!

I couldn't tell from his accent whether he was talking about art or about the pig, whether he was talking about bacon or about the rump. But he was passionate about the French language and he would pore over etymological dictionaries with as much enthusiasm as his bottles of red wine.

We were welcomed by leather sofas and the subdued lighting blessed our close felicity. He served us his wine in stemless glasses. A heresy in my view, but I had long since given up throwing anything other at the stake than succulent roasts.

'Still serving your wine in bubble-butts, are you! I said.

'That way, even when drunk, the glass can't fall, he replied, stinging me with his mocking gaze.

His kiwi accent suited him perfectly. He exuded a happy, greedy earthiness, seeking out everything good to sink his teeth into, as if there were no tomorrow. The only restraint he displayed was to moderate his energy so that the party would last as long as possible. My luck, or my misfortune, was to have met him so late in life. A few decades earlier and we would have drained the Minervois. Already at this late hour of our lives, we danced until the last glimmer of our age, staggering and happy to have been able to escape the narrow space of our ordinary restraints.

Diane sat down next to me. She was tall, perhaps because of her presence: she looked like the Castafiore converted to laughter and whisky. She took advantage of the fact that my penguin had slipped away to gossip.

'He looks gratinated, that joy-cooker of yours!

She too had an accent, but tainted with the joy that comes from having spent years traveling the world and especially time spent in the Eternal City. Moreover, her long stay in the shade of the umbrella pines had given her a rare in-depth view of the other main contender for the title of best cuisine, Transalpia. She even laid claim to the position of high priestess of the plate - she did indeed cook divinely well - conferring authority to determine the champion. However, although these two countries, both of which are well-known for their fine dining, were leading the way, and even though I had a particular affection for them, the fact remained that I aspired to extend my table Esperanto beyond these borders to make all of humanity servants of the Great Table.

'Don't mention it, I replied, almost wistfully. He sounds like me at that age: serious, uptight, vindictive and narrow-minded.

Bobygard returned. I didn't have time to elaborate on this carcass with fibers too tense to draw the slightest amount of flavor. I simply completed my impression.

'A few decades of aging and it will be more tender, fit for consumption.

Boby looked at me questioningly.

'I'm talking about the wine, I said. Satyre likes them young, preferably beardless.

My bodyguard masked a grimace.

'I think I'll call you BDG.

'Why is that?'

'It's always shorter than 'bodyguard.

He shrugged his shoulders, as if disillusioned by my pre-senile childishness.

'It's still three syllables, he clarified with great wisdom. Proud to have shut me up, he continued.

'They can't send a patrol until later tonight. We'll have to wait a few more hours.

'Fantastic! exclaimed Satyre. I'll call the Sainte Sauvage this very instant and tell them to add two.

I didn't want to dampen Satyre's enthusiasm by expressing my reservations about Mr. Refrigerator sharing dinner with us. It was an understatement to say that the higher authorities had not sent me the cream of the crop, but rather the whey. A meal is always a composition that those seated at the table bring to life. In this case, I feared that our Mr. Freeze would cast a chill over the gastronomical ambiance.

But I thought to myself, if we are to laugh or to cry, it will be for posterity and with a witness.

'Three! I corrected. I'll tell Aiölit to join us.

BDG didn't understand. I filled in the blanks.

'We're going to a restaurant. A good one, too. It'll be a change for you.

He seemed taken aback, as if this scenario had never been taught in his lifesaving classes.

'It's just that...

'Come on! What's wrong?

I felt like I was inviting a nun to a brothel. Assuming the reason for his hesitation, I reassured him.

'We're inviting you, it's the least we can do. And if your friends arrive before the end of the meal, they can join us.

'In three hours? We'll be long finished.

'Are you joking? We'll be just starting on the main course!

With just enough time to philosophize about the existential questions of the aperitif and its values, Diane had freshened up, my Aiölit was about to arrive, and Satyre was eyeing up a new glass of wine. Mr. Freezy, for his part, looked as dejected as a three-week-old zucchini at the bottom of the vegetable drawer.

My argument asserted that the foundation of civilization lay in the presence of wine, the only beverage with the right strength to allow for a sustained spiritual otherness, long enough to access a contradictory

dimension, an ontological ivresse worthy of allowing us to live in an evolving community; that brandies at the start of a meal, despite all their elevating virtues, too quickly clouded the spirit of joy; that beer, with its bitterness, puffed up the palate and weighed down the plate with its plump nature.

Satyre looked at me with a curious determination.

'You're fuckin' right! And that's why I drink my red wine out of a whiskey glass!

'What does ontological mean? BDG asked me.

'I haven't the faintest idea. For forty years I have been regularly returning to the dictionary, carefully reading the definition and closing those pages again with the same vacuity in my gaze. It is elusive, like Gastronomy. In fact, it is a kind of epular aspiration, a quest for the divine portal that passes through the table. It sounds nice in any event.

On the way to our prandial mass, BDG took the opportunity to take me aside.

'In order to ensure your safety, Mr. Grimoire, we really need you to tell us where and when this meal for which you are being threatened is to take place.

I turned around to see if Satyre had heard. He was walking with a phlegm that only an adventurer of docks and seas would know how to deploy, too far away to hear.

Turning back to Mr. Bob, I hesitated between the impatience of boredom and the desire to have fun. I leaned towards the only solution worthy of the situation.

'Even if you were from the intelligence services, I wouldn't reveal anything.

The maître de salle led us to our table. Aiolit, my better half, also known as la Grande, had just arrived; I had just enough time to discreetly express my affection for her with a fleeting kiss.

Mr. Bully sat down without even waiting, without consulting us, not even with a glance. Diane and la Grande hadn't sat down yet. He didn't notice my sideways glance or my clenched teeth. I reminded myself that we were on a fault line, two tectonic plates, two radically different perceptions of the world: that of the Milky Way where everything is beautiful and luminous, in perfect and lactose-free harmony, and facing it that of the raw cheese path transformed by work, bacteria and the effort of manners. Gallantry was a thing of the past; and since no one remembered it anymore, that black hole called

history, where we came from, no longer did anyone appreciate this very special way of giving thanks for what we men had so little of, the divine elegance of a woman. Nowadays, we were all supposed to be the same, even in our ugliness and brutality.

Not a single table available, business was good. I was pleased about that, even if I didn't fully share the devotional practices of the protagonists present, despite the efforts of the mistress of ceremonies, our head chef Valérie, to elevate with her art the souls who venture into her domain. Two or three zealots caught in excessively expressive rapture; a couple of flipflop goers who thought they were Red Factions in Davos; a couple of slouches who forgot that good taste also applies to manners; and a duel of the narcissus between two tables, clearly not understanding that their wallets would not be enough to determine the winner. As with the stemless glass, I had long since resigned myself to not taking my faith as a doctrine: it's a personal question that is dealt with in the shower, in communion with our solitude. But it cost me!

I contemplated the decor. A setting as I liked them, like a dish, without frills, offering depth in the arrangement and not in the mixture or juxtaposition. Local red brick, a few sculptures, their curves providing a diversion from the straight lines of the walls and the rectitude of the pillars, the play of chiaroscuro superimposing the volumes without them suffocating us or sucking us in with a vain emptiness.

'Aïolit, meet Kevin, bodyguard for your aged and bodied guard.

'It's been a long time since you've uncorked your body, my silly Otter. Don't expect to see it improve! she smiled.

'My soul will take body exposed to your oxygen, my desired one!

'My derision suits you so well.

'Oh, what's all this smooching? Satyre protested. Let's order, I feel like Rabelais in this temple of Cocagne!

'Nay, my friend! I interjected. We may be at the gates of the land of opulence, but this stopover is hardly the temple, unless it's a den of slackers, which it is not.

The varnish of the aperitif enlivened Satyre's sharp gaze.

'Explain yourself, dear friend.

'The land of Cocagne, whether it is here, in Coquistan, in Transalpia or elsewhere, is only a land of plenty, like the one from which our priest of good morals, here present, comes.

Popol rebelled.

'It is a place where you can pick to your heart's content, where fruit hangs everywhere, without any sweat needed to transform the material; not even a footstool to stand on; where one deigns to consider the branch and its chestnut only if it bends or falls to one's feet. The concern of this temple, on the contrary, is to complete the divine work! There are enigmas hidden in this generous nature that are up to us to find. The Cocagnais under his tree is a lazy being, as Brueghel, a singular witness of faith, testifies. Nature, under these vaults here, is quite different: it is imbued with a quest, a journey far from a siesta under the fig tree. Its ambition is the sublimation of matter, to allow it to express itself fully, in a more becoming light or enhanced by flattering company; our priests of saucepans seek and arrange, their supreme concern being a furtive paroxysm, beyond which the flavors deteriorate. It's about touching the summit, an eternal reminder of our fleeting presence.

'Let's hope that was the climax of your tirade, my Otter, because we'd like to order.

I reveled in the little jabs la Grande gave me, eternal reminders to come back down to earth.

Diane, who had seen a lot of the world and considered our pasta eaters to be the true masters of the art of cooking, always took pleasure in looking for the flaw in my provocative ramblings.

'You're very simplistic, I find!

I stared at Diane with a Shakespearean air.

'You, venerated priestess of the good flesh, rare witness to the variety of customs in their intimacy; you more than anyone should know that there are three eaters: the one who denies the material, the one who sublimates it and the one who deforms it. While the first leaves the cooking to the divine and even, if possible, the dishes, the second rolls up her sleeves to discover and increase the divine essence tenfold. The third, of which Kevin is a part, sees itself as equal to God rebuilding a perfect city, without flesh or pain.

'Nothing less! she exclaimed.

'But, while the bovine curse will befall the former, the intestinal curse will befall the latter, because through adulteration, there is nothing left and above all, there is no longer the matrix nor coherence. Without the matrix, it is the impoverishment of works. Be warned, the deconstruction of the calf is at work. What will happen? The reckless

and shameful degradation of the beauty of the world. Limitless pride in projecting oneself as a celestial substitute.

'That's so fucking interesting!

The missal holder was waiting, pen in hand, to take the order. I invited Diane to begin.

Sagouin took the lead.

'The beef, without the sauce, with a diet lemonade.

Our Maroufle had just served our friend a fish tail. Without even realizing it. Satyre scrutinized me, waiting to see if I would turn purple or red. A kick to the shin made me lean towards red. La Grande, proud of her discretion, smiled at me as she spoke, pre-empting the bucket of bile I was about to distill.

'Your friend is very nice, where did you find him? asked Aiolit. 'In the pasteurized section?

'Under the Candide brand, I grumbled.

Diane, amused but not at all surprised, much less offended, ordered. La Grande continued, followed by Satyre. I finished with the wine selection and a final clarification.

'To top it off, you will give the gentleman here his well-deserved sauce and replace his glucose sachet with water. He may or may not wet his lips, but none of that at our table.

Intrafreak was indignant.

'By what right do you interfere in my personal choices?

Exasperated, I looked him straight in the eyes.

'And you, Mr. Boileau, by what right do you deny this sacrosanct communion that is ours tonight, at this table? By what right do you presume to remake the world in your image? By what right do you allow yourself to insult the chef's composition by deciding on whatever whim that the sauce does not suit you? Do you go into museums to redo the Impressionist paintings, on the pretext that you don't like their lack of precision? Are you the kind of person who cuts the wings off statues, on the pretext that angels don't fly and that it upsets your little brain? The dictatorship of the minority has no place at this table!

A second pain in my shin made me turn around. La Grande was smiling anew. Popall took the opportunity to get up.

'I'm going to wash my hands.

'Don't forget the bleach!

Satyre laughed. Diane shook her head.

'You're going strong, but what fun we're having.

I rebelled.

'The survival of civilization is at stake!

'You're exaggerating!' replied Diane with that shameless schoolmistress tone that delighted me.

'Barely.

'We could make an exception, continued Satyre, imbued with that spirit of harmony that was coming out of my eyes. Typical of that streak that has reigned over half the earth and which now explained that everyone can do as they please. There was nothing more dangerous for the Salvation of Gastronomy than to allow everyone the freedom to come and sit at the table when and how they want!

'Out of the question! I declared. As soon as we open the breach, these parasites rush in and gobble up all the decorum we have left. These heresies are like gangrene. No tolerance for the intolerant!

Diane, the devil's advocate like no other, did not give in to my battering rams.

'What do you think you are doing to his freedom?

'What freedom? To stay on his island? To enjoy our divine company without any delicacy in return?

Popol returned. I continued.

'Because that's what's at stake. Choosing. To devour the same dish until the end of time or to discover new horizons every day? To be a lump of rough marble with finer shapes tomorrow than today? Or with the same meaningless curves in forty years' time? If that's the case, let's speed up global warming! Let's get it over with, now! Puff out your bowels, Oh sweet Marguerite and all you other cows of the earth! Pump out all the methane you want, to your heart's content! There's nothing left to save!

'But there are only two dishes on this menu! Satyre sneered with a provocative smile. It's hardly what I would call a choice. Everywhere else in the world, there is a plethora of choice!

I couldn't determine whether he meant the actual menu between his hands, with indeed only two choices per course, or my options for our worldwide destiny.

'You're right. Let's choose to sacrifice the spirit of freshness on the altar of frozen food! Let's choose from a lot of clones rather than enjoy something sublime! No, I'll say it: too much choice kills choice. Believe me, I've already tried it, a long time ago on Binder! Those scrolling

menus make you stupid: there's no binding element, just repetition and faded flavors!

'By frozen, do you mean they were frigid? ventured Satyre.

'Far from it, my friend. But breaded, fried, fish or deep fried cutlets are all the same thing! Still chicken! What I need is a good guinea fowl! I said, turning to Aiolit. Isn't that right, my beautiful quail, muse of my pen?

This time, my love shin expected it. I promised myself I would offer her shoes with soft tips.

The pinch dissipated, a swig swallowed, I went on, with a vengeance.

'No, I'm telling you: too much freedom kills freedom! Too much choice knocks us out! We got rid of those long, manducatory indexes where the plethora of choice requires numbers! It's been a couple of hundred years since those little mandarin menus frolicking in profusion. Besides, you should know, that's your job, Satyre: it's logistics! Quality, time, quantity, you have to choose! I'll go even further, it's quantum! The more you have on one side, the less you have on the other! More choice, less quality. It's that simple! No, back to the essentials. Freedom of conscience, communion of practices, navigating in the immensity of communicating vessels!

La Grande said nothing. My flights of fancy left her unmoved; she preferred lightness. Her character reminded me of the words of a 17th-century aristocrat: anything, war if necessary, but spare me from boredom.

But I was on a roll, so I continued.

'It reminds me of the Aussies I had to drag along to a business lunch. They explained to me that it was becoming difficult on their island to invite people over, because at every occasion, they had to inquire about the exceptions, allergies and other desires and whims of each guest. The result? Meals that are neither done nor to be made, a culinary patchwork where one politely inquires without being able to express one's opinion because one does not share the same dish. The conversation becomes just as compartmentalized. Their tables are real bocages, in short. They then asked me how we work it out here in Coquistan, with this type of guest. To which I laughed heartily, replying that we had the perfect solution.

'And what is it?

'We don't invite them!

Diane played the falsely shocked prude. Satyre shook his head, torn between his distant roots and his newfound confession without yet being able to fully surrender to it. La Grande added her zest after swallowing the bottom of her glass in one gulp.

'Absolutely! Down with the infidels of the table, out with the culinary sluggards, to the dungeons with the moribund dishes!

My ideal woman made fun of the zealot in me. At every meal, I thanked the divine world for granting me the arms and gaze of my paragon of elegance and lightness. She illuminates with her presence and intoxicates me with her words. With Popol to entertain us, dishes constructed like riddles and this wine with a color as earthy as the skirt of Mimi the sausage lady, I felt that the evening would be very pleasant.

This foretold happiness inspired me.

'Do you think it's possible to construct a meal with the logic of a Sudoku?

'Where on earth did you get that idea, my little calf's head? asked la Grande.

'The enigma of the aromas and flavors found in a dish. To take the exercise a step further, it would involve using the same nine ingredients, arranged in different ways in the nine dishes served.

'Nine dishes! exclaimed Satyre. We'll be here all night!

'That would go against the great tradition of separation, of sweet and savory,' said Diane.

I was about to reply when loud voices were heard from the hallway. Intranat jumped to his feet. Through the restaurant window, several heads with sour expressions scanned the room.

'We have to leave! he exclaimed.

'We're only at the appetizers! I lamented.

'Now! They've found us!

I gave my queen of hostesses a fleeting kiss before slipping out through the kitchen door. My heart broke as I crossed this laboratory of culinary epics. A tear came to my eye as I looked at those caring hands, whipping, measuring, preparing. I saluted my revered artisans, these companions of the culinary arts, these faithful heirs of the cathedrals. I congratulated them on their devotion to this cult that has no equal. I burned with a keen desire to examine every pot and every container, but time was of the essence. I crossed paths with Valérie the Saint, vexed and confused. I kissed her hand in gratitude, speechless as if in a final farewell.

'Hurry up!

Sourhead was growing impatient with my tragic-o-comic farewell. Through the service door we came onto a dark street.

'This way, I whispered.

I knew the place. The forest a few streets away could accommodate us. It was the only solution. Only among the trees, in this antithesis of the digital world, could we find temporary respite.

7 - Nocturnal Flight

'Give me your phone!

I already had enough to deal with my own incompetence without having to worry about other people's. But this was something almost as serious as cooking a steak.

"How do you think they found us!

Popol wasn't ready to imagine betrayal. He couldn't yet comprehend the Machiavellian nature of the world, let alone the blindness that would drive these protectors of the new world order to become informers, or even double agents. He had recited his geopolitical stories without thinking. But this relentlessness made me see something even worse: a geopolitical issue!

'There must be an explanation, he tried. Maybe someone saw us getting out of the van or going to the restaurant.

'Open your eyes, Tinkerbell!

There I was, addressing him informally. I resented my familiarity.

'And don't call me that, please. I'm Officer Boileau.

I snatched his phone and crushed it on the ground with my heel.

'Bunny fuzz! You're crazy!

It's in anger that our origins resurface. The last time I had heard that curse was in that remote region of central Novistan, in the province of Manitobé. Not far from the other side of the globe but definitely not enough to turn you head over heels. Flat and void immensity and a lot of wheat.

I lashed out.

'The world's upside down! I'm the one being chased like a rabbit, and I'm supposed to be crazy? You're the one who doesn't understand that you've compromised yourself, and I'm still the crazy one? Let me tell you something, my friend: the crazy ones are out there, after us, and you're the blind man who claims to be guiding me.

'Me, blind?

'Absolutely, with your ideals and your kindness and your so-called tolerance! You are proof that history is not linear and that the memory of Calas is fading! You are the generation of supreme virtue that is so bored that it ends up flagellating itself a little and, above all, flagellating those who resemble it to distract itself and make up for its idleness!

I had just hit a nerve. Interbutt exploded.

'Darn you piss me off!

'And vulgar, too.

'You wouldn't be able to do what I do!

'Which is?

An owl hooted nearby, as if asking us to lower our voices.

'Protect someone like you! You're arrogant, smug, haughty, and contemptuous. You elevate blanchette to the status of a deity while trampling on the beliefs of all believers on earth. You're the rearguard of an outdated, dusty, dying generation. With your manners and politeness, you only despise those who do not do as you do. You cannot stand that people do not eat as you do, that they do not cook as you do, that they do not hold their forks as you do. I have to swallow all that, say nothing, and protect you! You would never be capable of that! You despise the poor, the ignorant, the ill-mannered, as you so aptly put it. For you, if you don't know how to hold your fork with your ass, you've achieved nothing in life!

I approached him calmly, staring at his features in the silvery moonlight.

'You don't understand anything, Officer Boileau. To respond to your spotty rant, you are exactly like those who persecute us. You gargle with indignation: you swallow so much of it that you are incapable of digesting a tenth of all your whining. You have lost the meaning of language to the point where you no longer know how to savor words, and you are so sanitized that you have destroyed any free zone between the drinkable and the undrinkable. Your puritanism gives you hives to the point where you scratch others because it irritates you so much! To excuse your own contrite and sick conscience, you are willing to forgive all the nonsense in the world. I am the last knight of a thousand-year-old legacy, and you and your kind, all you can do is throw that legacy to the wolves because you lack the courage to accept who you are. At a time when we need more things to unite us, you worship everything that divides us. While I want to bring people together around a table, you and your kind seek only to lock them away in individual feeding pods!

'You, a knight? What a joke! You are a Don Quixote riding a pig, boasting of a greatness that is past, oppressive, and unjust. And I'll tell you what. You too are a pig, rolling around in your food overflowing

with fermentation, rot, and stale recipes: it's dirty, it stinks, just like you, just like your ideas! Everything about you is piggish!

I climbed onto a fallen tree trunk and, with Cornelian passion, recited my dithyramb to the inhabitants of the night.

'Well, dear Poncho, I'll take that as a compliment! For the pig is the measure of all things! And it precisely is measure that we lack today. We need more measure still to expose the inanities and petrify the nonsense in translucent jellies; let the absurd be visible, let us devour it with gusto, let us feast on having bitten into the infamous de-demonized. The pig is our yardstick! Because it remains the only thing we can all agree on! And I'll go even further. If you haven't yet come to terms with the pig's destiny, it's because you haven't yet come to terms with your own!

Still on the trunk, I came back to him and crouched down to his height.

'I'm dirty, you say, like him? Good for me, the mud protects me! My ideas disgust you? Never mind! That says a lot about your cerebral immunity, raised in a cocoon of sterile concepts born on a continent incontinent with whining, summoning the whole world to stop jostling it with its own struggles. You call me backward because I promote the unique and noble art of Gastronomy? Know this, Joyous Poncho of the Plancha, Gastronomy is the daughter of the Revolution and, as such, is *avant-garde*! For she is the perfect synthesis of history and the future! An extraordinary communion between matter and hope! A most divine balance that is being assaulted by earthbound people on all sides, some rejecting beauty, others, also; some wallowing in the past, others in the future, without ever attempting to adjust their puny sensibilities! What the hell! Look around you! We no longer eat offal! And since, everything has gone down the drain. First and foremost, courage!

'What courage are you talking about?

Rising to my feet, invoking the grandeur of the night, I opened my eyes wide to the attentive stars.

'The courage of laughter, guts, and brains, of course! The courage to give in to temptation! The courage to desire without succumbing! The courage to let the boldest go further, for our greater glory! In short, the courage to be willing, the ambition of great meals! What would we be if Talleyrand had ordered Carême to sculpt shacks instead of palaces, for fear of offending or hurting some diplomat too embittered

by not having such great chefs? Yet Carême, a commoner, abandoned at the age of 12 was canonized as the cook of kings and the king of cooks! Is this not one of humanity's greatest successes? One of the most illustrious achievements? The first in history, perhaps! After sixty centuries of rigid caste divisions? Come to think of it, in Novistan, you are just as Marxist as anywhere else! Marxism of good taste, a class struggle, leveling through ugliness. Any temptation toward aesthetics is suspect. Any hint of grace is hunted down! In fact, that's where you and the archaic ones meet: your inability to expose yourselves to risk, your fear of temptation, your blatant insecurity in the face of beauty, unable to accept it, praise it, let alone celebrate it. You're all jealous! Reincarnations of McCarthy!

Jumping down, I returned to my dazed babysitter.

'You're comfortably settled in a loft at the top of a thirty-century-old tower, one of the most illustrious castles, constantly being remodelled, just gorging yourselves, stuffing your brains with nonsense all day long without taking the time to digest, let alone open a book to understand what your foundations are based on. Instead, you feed on basic instincts like you would feed on junk food.

'That's not true. We did our job of deconstruction!

'And now look at the Frankensteins running wild! You're as broken down as instant coffee, unpalatable without a good dose of reconstituted milk and refined sugar.

'Why are other countries following our example then? Why are we a model for the planet?

'For the same reasons that what is copied around the world is not gastronomy, but cooking, the gesture without the meaning. What your antics lack, what our followers will leave behind, is the spirit of gastronomy, without which all that remains is matter, a series of dubious reconstructions that fall apart without the reinforcement of illusions and other pill-box scaffolding. For while the techniques of cooking are being adopted everywhere, the spirit of freedom that should accompany them is far from having conquered the rest of the world. You think that everyone will accept your vision, but I know that it is only your technologies that are stirring things up, not the idea. It is in this that you are blind conquerors.

'With your damn meals, you're the oppressor, trying to impose your disgusting dishes that no one wants!

With that last remark, I gave him a hard slap across the face. For a split second, I thought he might hit me back. But he was well disciplined.

'I hope I've disabled your implant, Officer Kevin. Otherwise, I'll have to do it again, as you won't dare deactivate it yourself.

These communication implants always sent a chill down my spine. Under the guise of healing us or increasing our brain capacity tenfold, we had blown up the last barrier between instinct and speech. With these subcutaneous tracking devices, the vestibule that allowed us to distinguish raw stone from polished speech was gone.

He rubbed his temple before shouting hoarsely.

'I'll drop you off at the first police station, and then I'm done with you! I'm not looking after you anymore!

I wasn't paying attention anymore. I found my bearings in the night by the distant hills, visible through the foliage of the trees. Mentally sketching out the route I needed to take, I set off to rejoin the road to Santiago.

'Where are you going?

"Do what you want, Plumpkin head, I know what I have to do to avoid getting torn to pieces.

The night was not long. With Gremlin shaken to the core, I couldn't rest assured that his professional devotion would hold up. After all, he too seemed to want to save the world. What nonsense! As tasteless as overcooked lentils. Formless and mushy! A real illness that turns stupid after a few days.

It was a descent. Not into hell, we had already been there under the arcades of the chemical compound dealers before arriving at the Bird's place, but into the plain of the Suave.

The moon was shining, timidly lighting our way. They had set up a base up there, a kind of outpost from which to conquer the universe. I pitied them, those poor Selenites, condemned to drink watered-down stew. With freshness already hard to find here on Earth, what hope could there be on that vast ball of dust? The selection criteria for staying there must have been inhumane: drinking instant wine rehydrated with filtered urine, stuffing yourself with cheese sterilized by cosmic rays, and spending months on a straw drip of concentrated pasta or corned beef. Not for me! They even said that in zero gravity, you lost your sense of taste. But what hope can there be without

taste? The moon lit us up, indeed, but like a false hope. But fortunately, back on firm ground here, we weren't heading in that direction.

As the forest faded away, it highlighted the lines of the long hills in the distance, heralding the heart of the land of plenty, the land of Coccagne, or at least one of the contenders for that title.

A bison ranch lay not far away. The urge to bring my virtuous hunter there was strong. Cross a field, without warning him too much, invite him to continue while I tied my shoelace. Quite a plan. Damn scruples. The night sprint would have to wait.

But this situation would quickly become untenable. As much as we may think that everyone is out to get us, on rare occasions, that is indeed the case. I had hit the jackpot with Intragrind, despite himself. Or was it intentional, this ability to stir things up? Some people have such a thick veil over their unconscious that they have no idea what's going on inside. Scratching away at the varnish, I wondered whether it wasn't a hooded lost beneath, in his inner bubble, in his opaque and indecipherable shell! Boileau le Whelk, a zealot despite himself. A potential Judas, a turncoat who didn't even realize he had changed sides and that poor Anthelme, trapped by the White Blight, was destined to skewered and roasted.

And then this weariness overtaking me. A whole life to get to this point. The reflection of myself and all the ground I had covered, only to have to cover it all once again. This night mirroring the day, this Moebius strip of the table where I see myself catching up with myself. All this for what, caught with the protagonist and witness of my epic adventure being this self-satisfied crackpot, this unpolished scribe.

Ah! Forgive me, Saint-Brillat, I muttered. I doubt you and our noble mission. It's true that our baptism is late, that the initiation is long: I should never forget that. But look at the raw material I've been given! Look at what God has achieved with clay! What can we hope for with papier-mâché?

And what exactly am I supposed to do with my hyper-connected gland? Even his underwear must be full of chips and antennas! I wasn't going to comb through every last one of them!

A few silvery reflections in the distance signaled Isle-upon-Suave, guardian of the gates to the land of plenty. The bell tower of the collegiate church overlooking the market bore the light of Gastronomy like the Statue of Liberty bears her flame.

'I'm going to sleep. We'll decide what to do tomorrow.

End of Chapter 7 - Next chapter May 23rd!

Digital version for Biztronomy