

Hands

“As in this continuing process of consuming and being consumed, nothing endures.”

Sir Thomas Browne

At first, the sight of his hands on her body terrified her. Chefs' hands: skin raw, busted up and scarred from scalding pans and quick knives. Blunt fingers with dirty nails no matter how short they were cut. You can tell a lot, no you can tell *everything* about a man from his hands. That's what her mother always used to say.

Though like the chef's cheeks with three-day stubble that grew in a silver swirl scratching against the inside of her thighs, she grew to love his hands. She grew to love his hands because she quickly learned what they could do. Sitting on the cracked linoleum counter in her own ill-equipped kitchen, titling a glass of wine to her hungry mouth, she watched him chop in a blur and sauté and mix.

The chef was always feeding her. He pinched the skin of her waist between thumb and index finger, like a pig before her slaughter. “I need to fatten you up some,” he liked to say.

Pork chops slathered in golden gravy. Goose confit with crisp greasy skin. Pears poached in red wine. Rhubarb pie with a crisscross top. Butter, butter, butter. Champagne that tickled her throat. Violet onion jam. Slabs of steak with salt and pepper. Chocolate fondant that bled from the heart.

And of course, his thick, smooth cock. She'd take it in her mouth, a bit too roughly at first until she found her rhythm. When he wanted something else, he'd yank her away by the roots of her hair, pushing her down, her chin drilling into the wooden floorboards.

Though he fed her more than sex and food and wine: bullshit about who he was and where he was from and what he wanted and if he loved his wife. She wanted to believe that his wife loved him as little, if not less, than he claimed to love her. "My wife's the owner of the restaurant," he said. "That's how we met. Well, one of the ways we met. We're more business partners than anything else. Trust me."

But she quickly learned that everything—inside and outside the kitchen—was one of his magnificent creations. He had a calm, persuasive voice, yet he couldn't keep track of the lies he'd told her and more than once she'd stop eating and say, "Wait a minute, I thought you said..." One day he grew up in Boston's North End on pizza and meatballs and the next he was describing white Christmases as a boy in Colorado. His mother had died years ago and he sent her money each month. He couldn't stand being in the same room with his wife, yet didn't he go home to her every night?

She had first seen him at the farmer's market on Sunday morning. It was a hot, windless day. She wore her bikini under her shorts and t-shirt, planning to ride her bike to Baker Beach afterwards. She perused the stalls, taking full advantage of the free samples. She was searching for a hunk of gooey French cheese she'd ripen in the sun and a freshly baked baguette, which she'd break in half in order to shove into her backpack.

She noticed how tall and skinny he was, and the slight stoop in his back from all the time he spent hunched over a hot stove. His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows,

revealing arms colored by tattoos. Later, she would discover that his whole torso and back were camouflaged in wild pictures. As he slept, she inspected them like a map.

At the market, he fondled a deformed looking heirloom tomato as if it was the most beautiful thing on earth before biting into it and devouring it whole, like an apple. She zoned in on the ring finger of his left hand, as her eye was trained to do when she noticed an attractive man. He wasn't wearing a wedding band. Later, when she asked the chef why he didn't wear a ring, he said by way of explanation, "I've never had a job that didn't require me to roll up my sleeves."

Now, she sat at her wobbly kitchen table waiting, drinking a Belgium beer with a slice of orange shoved into the bottle's neck, a trick he had taught her. Wednesdays were special. During the three unaccountable hours he had between lunch and dinner prep, he'd race across town to be with her. Every minute together was pressurized. It was like having a giant egg timer ticking above their heads. Often, particularly in bed, she begged him to slow down.

She was sitting in the kitchen because the mousetraps in the living room were full. For years she had listened to the mice scurrying behind the walls at night, but could never bring herself to get rid of them, until the chef came along and set traps up around her apartment. She couldn't bear to touch, let alone look, at the traps; the way their little bodies contorted into unnatural shapes. The chef on the other hand wasn't phased one bit. "Maybe I should experiment with a new protein," he joked, waving the trap at her, "mouse à la orange."

Finally, after three beers, the chef stomped into the kitchen, cradling two brown paper bags full of groceries, which he gingerly lowered onto the countertops. Her

stomach growled loudly enough so that he said, with a trace of annoyance, “It’s for the restaurant. I had to do some last minute shopping. We’re booked solid for dinner.”

A respected critic had recently given the restaurant a very favorable review. It was just one block of copy, but it had done wonders for the business. She had torn the review from the newspaper, folded it into small squares and slipped it inside her wallet. The critic called the chef’s food “unexpectedly sensuous.” She would never say as much, though she couldn’t help but think she had something to do with it.

“Well, you could have called...I’ve been sitting here for hours, getting drunk by myself. And by the way, there are little monsters waiting for you in the living room.”

“Listen, every second I’m not at the restaurant, I spend with you. I got here as fast as I could. Trust me, if I could just disappear...” He stared distractedly at his watch.

“Forty-five, fifty minutes at the most.”

Fingertips smelling of garlic roamed her face and yanked at the corners of her mouth. The taste and temperature of his tongue. The clink of her sliver locket swaying from her neck every time he flipped her body. The smooth rhythm of him moving in and out of her, his forearms resting upon her slender, sun-kissed back.

Afterwards, as the chef showered, she slid out of bed, lit a cigarette on the stove and stood smoking by the dirty east-facing window. Across the street, the scaffolding and small dark men in bright white suits and caps had finally disappeared. They had chosen a cheery yellow color, light blue trim. She tried and tried but couldn’t remember the color the house had been before. For some reason, this agitated her. The sky was clear, not even a trace of fog to burn. She should have felt optimistic. The chef called out for her

from the bedroom. She dropped her cigarette into the sink where it extinguished with a sizzle.

He was sitting up in bed, systematically gnawing at his cuticles, as he often did after sex. He spat the dead skin onto the duvet.

“Do you love me?” she asked him, an urgency straining her voice.

He closed his eyes and yawned. “I could feast on you until the end of time.”

Hundreds of times she imagined going to the chef’s restaurant. Now she was doing it for real. The restaurant was by the waterfront, tucked down an alleyway with no view of the Bay. It was in a part of the city she barely went to, mostly because the restaurants and bars were not her crowd: high-strung high-tech millionaires under thirty who worked in the nearby high rises. What she loved about the chef was that unlike these men, he had nothing to prove. He was unapologetically raw, almost disgustingly so, a quality most would find repellant. It was why she had not wanted to ask him too many questions, at least in the beginning.

She took the 43 Bus, stinking of fried chicken and big Macs, all the way down Market Street. As she rode the bus, she rested her head on the cold window, gazing at her reflection through the clouds of her hot breath. Every time the bus lurched or drove over a bump, her head knocked uncomfortably against the glass, but she kept it there the entire ride.

The bus reached the end of its route. She stayed in her seat, letting the other passengers get off first, considering turning around with the driver and riding all the way back home. But then she caught a glimpse of herself in the darkened window and remembered how much effort she had put into getting ready. She had even blown dried her hair, put on makeup and a worn a dress that revealed her muscular, tanned sternum.

She had memorized the restaurant's address, repeating it like a mantra as she rode the bus. Though now everything seemed unreal and not to be trusted, even the bridge's lights twinkling on the Bay's darkened surface. She asked a middle-aged couple, walking arm in arm, if they knew where the restaurant was. They laughed, a bit pretentiously, saying that they had just come from there.

“You're in for a real treat,” the man said, winking at her.

“To die for...” the woman added.

She felt her face drop and scurried away without saying thank you. She walked south two blocks and turned down a small alleyway that smelt of piss. The menu was taped up in the window; she recognized the chef's taste. Red meats and thick sauces and buttery starches. She loitered outside, watching the world on the other side of the glass. A Tuesday night, she hadn't expected it to be so crowded. It was a romantic restaurant, distinctly feminine with its candlelight and little vases of carefully arranged flowers on each table. She had imagined something different; a cold, masculine industrial space—all sharp edges and glass.

Even more than the chef, she was desperate to catch a glimpse of the wife: a woman from a wealthy family in L.A. who the chef described as only capable of eating off white bone china.

“So it’s her money you like?”

“In the beginning...and hopefully more so in the end.”

The door of the restaurant swung open and out tumbled the warm smells of good food and conversation. A waiter in black pants and a black collared shirt came out, stepping to the side of the building, out of view from the customers. He pulled a cigarette from behind his ear and glanced at her.

“You waiting for a table? One of mine’s almost done, just finishing up their coffee now.” He took a drag of his cigarette and added, “Do I know you? You look familiar.”

She hadn’t thought to bring a shawl or sweater. It was colder in this part of the city because of the winds from the Bay. Her bare legs were freezing and yet suddenly she broke into a sweat. There would be little circles in her dress under her arms and the patch of hair between her legs would be damp and smelling of faintly of vinegar and soap.

“I know, I waited on you before, right?” the waiter said, taking a step closer to see her better in the light. He was doing a very bad job of picking her up. What she would have liked to say is, “The food you serve every night, the food all those people pay for, the only reason you have a job...Well, let me tell you, that food is for me. It’s served to me, sometimes in bed, by the chef himself.”

Instead she said, defensively, “I know the owner. I was just in the neighborhood and wanted to stop in to say hello, but I hadn’t thought it would be so busy...”

“Meredith? Tonight’s her night off.”

“No, the chef.”

“Oh, it’s his night off too. But they’ll be back tomorrow. They usually come in around ten. I’ll tell him you stopped by.”

As the days passed without any sign of the chef, her anger expanded and expanded, like the bread dough he kneaded with his knuckles and rolled into a greased bowl he covered with a checkered dishtowel and left on her kitchen table. Rising and swelling until he punched it down and baked it in the oven. She refused to leave her apartment because she feared she’d miss him if he came, for certainly he would come. Her cupboards and refrigerator quickly went bare. The traps were full.

She searched her cupboards and refrigerator, finding a frozen pizza buried under a large bag of ice she had once bought for making margaritas. She burned the roof of her mouth on the pizza’s hot bubbling cheese—a kind of salty plastic, she decided—though scarfed it down away. It was the act of putting something into her jilted mouth that comforted her.

The chef didn’t have a cell phone, which at first she had found charming and a testament to his disregard for his wife. Now it was the most selfish, infuriating thing in the world. She called the restaurant, leaving message after message for the chef with the host, whose friendly tone quickly cooled after her third call.

More than once a day, she stood under the hot shower until her skin turned marbled pink. She stared down at her naked body. Her stomach was now swollen from all the rich food, her breasts bigger. How could she be so full and feel so empty? As she watched the water swirl down the drain, she remembered what the chef had done to her with his hands. She opened her legs and tried doing it herself, but to her surprise, she

wasn't able to enter her body in that way, with a kind of skilled, brute force. He hadn't been afraid, she realized now, of going too far, of damaging her.

By the fourth day, the only food left was a rotten heirloom tomato the chef had placed lovingly on her windowsill to ripen. She sat at the kitchen table with a glass of cloudy tap water, watching the fruit flies swarm around the tomato. Her stomach screamed and ached in protest. Overcome with exhaustion, she dropped her head on the table, pressing her cheek against the rough wood, suddenly aware of the old breadcrumbs and salt crystals scattered on the surface. She closed her eyes and realized there was just one thing left to do: go back to the restaurant.

Rain pinged against the windows like arrows. The cabbie making small talk all the way. She closed her eyes and remained silent, focusing on the beating of her heart and whoosh of her blood.

She paid the driver and as she stepped out of the cab, she paused, considering ducking back inside the cab's black warmth and asking to be taken home. But then through the window, she caught a glimpse of who could only be the chef's wife: a woman in white with a long swan neck that glowed in the candlelight.

"Name?" the host asked.

She recognized his voice immediately. Midwest, Chicago by way of Ohio, she'd guess.

"I don't have one," she said primly, trying to disguise her voice. She stared him squarely in the eye as if daring him to refuse her.

"It's Friday night. As you can see, we're fully booked."

“Well, that’s a good sign, isn’t it?” She leaned across the podium and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “It’s just an online site, but we get over five thousand visitors a day. We’re not supposed to give you a head’s up, but we want to support the new places, the little guys. A review can make or break a business. Hopefully the chef will live up to his reputation...”

She ordered an expensive bottle of Syrah from the Russian River and one of everything on the menu, because that’s what she imagined restaurant critics did. The waitress placed each dish in front of her with precision, glancing up at the host, who hadn’t taken his eyes from her table, for approval. As the plates mounted, she was slowly gaining the attention of the diners around her. Surprisingly, the profusion of smells and food, swimming in muddy sauces and orange grease, repulsed her. She thought of the block of words hidden inside her wallet—*unexpectedly sensuous*—but when she looked at the food, all she saw were lies and betrayals.

Much more appealing than the food was the waitress’ perky tits and the way her black polyester pants stretched across the curve of her ass as she walked away. She was sure the chef was fucking her. “Is everything okay?” the waitress asked, smiling hesitantly and refilling her glass. “You’ve barely made a dent...”

She wanted to say: *Does he strangle you with his cock, forcing it so far down your throat you can’t breathe? Does he shove his entire hand inside of you as if stuffing a Thanksgiving turkey?* But instead she said, “It’s so beautiful, I’m afraid to eat it. I’m just trying to take everything in, to understand the chef’s choices. I’m sure he’s very busy, but I’d love to talk to him...and the owner...”

“Of course,” the waitress said. “I’ll see if they’re available.”

She filled her glass with wine and downed it, smiling brightly at the couple sitting next to her who had been watching her curiously and talking in whispers. Her face began to burn, as it always did when she drank too much. She knew what she wanted to say to the chef and his wife, but would she have the nerve?

And then she saw them walking out the kitchen door at the back of the restaurant. He followed closely behind her, just as she had expected. She couldn't help but think how good he looked in his starched white uniform, even though the front of his apron was stained with blood. Her entire body shook from nerves; she placed her wine glass on the table and sat on her hands.

The chef didn't see her until it was too late to turn around. When he was a few feet from her table, she made eye contact and smiled sheepishly. The color drained from his face, he looked as though he might be sick. He stared down at his shoelaces and began gnawing on his fingernails.

The wife, who was much less attractive close up, said, "Thank you for coming. We hope everything is delicious?" She glanced at the chef, waiting for him to say something charming, but he still had his head bowed. "When can we expect to see the review?"

"Well..." She slid her hands out from beneath her thighs, took a deep breath, lifted her napkin and grabbed the mouse by the tail. It had taken all of her nerve to ferry one of the dead little bodies from home. She dangled it in front of her. "I found this guy on the floor, by my chair. It ruined my appetite, to say the least." A wave of gasps rippled through the dining room and then it became very quiet; everyone stopped talking and

eating. The wife gasped and stepped backwards to the chef, who put his arms around her protectively.

“Luckily health and safety weren’t doing an inspection, but I advise you to take care of right away. A problem like this could ruin your business.”

“I don’t know what to say except sorry,” the wife said, her face flushed with embarrassment. “I hope this won’t influence your review. We had no idea...”

“Well, sometimes it’s easy to miss what’s going on right beneath your nose.” The chef coughed and gave her a murderous stare. “I’ll have to talk to my editor. Nothing like this has ever happened before.”

She dropped the mouse onto the table, finished her wine and grabbed her purse. Before walking through the door, she turned around to smile and bow at the chef, who stood alone in the middle of the room, clutching his hands to his sides.

THE END