

A MATTER OF TASTE

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Mediocrity lives in a crowded house. Perfection dwells alone. For Addison Solebury, life was lonely at the top. Even in the upper reaches of gastronomy his tastes were so lofty that no restaurant in the world could hope for his continued custom. In the main, he prepared his own meals, a process of considerable labor and research that only added zest to anticipation, feasts so rarefied in their reflection of taste that few could share, let alone cater them.

His standards were arcane but not inflexible. On an off night he could squeak by with properly aged filet mignon and vin ordinaire, but for the most part, Solebury's antipathy to the ordinary was visceral and had been all his life. He turned even paler than normal at the sight of margarine, fled a block out of his way to avoid the effluvium of pizza, and often woke whimpering from nightmares of canned tomato soup.

Food—his ecstatic, almost sexual vision of it—was an art he could not see coarsened; therefore, integrity exacted its price. The absence of sharing, of a woman, was the minor mode of Solebury's male lament. After all, not even the nightingale sang for the hell of it, but Solebury, through overspecialization, labored and dined for the most part alone. Time and again, he girded himself and went woman hunting, but with his intolerance of the mundane, his quest was akin to a majestic elk bugling for a mate in the city pound.

For most city singles, Christmas is the loneliest time; for Addison, despair set in like indigestion in mid-October and peaked perversely on Halloween, which day fate had chosen to bring him into the coarse-feeding world. He had spent too many lonely birthdays.

Many were called, none were chosen. He despaired of finding a woman of similar refinement. Even those for whom Solebury had the highest hopes revealed a gullet of clay. His fragile expectations would inevitably dampen as she attacked her salad, flickered as she swallowed garlic escarole with vulgar relish, guttered with the entree, and died over brandy and cheese. Failure upon failure, until the coming of Pristine Solent.

From the fast tentative conversation in the library reference room where he worked, Solebury felt right about Pristine. When he peered over her shoulder, he found her scanning just those sources he ferreted out in his pursuit of perfection. An exploratory dinner was even more promising. Craftily, he suggested the Four Seasons and was heartened when Pristine answered her door in sensible clothes rather than the coronation gown an ordinary woman might have worn for the occasion. Clothes were not important. The key, the subtle clue to the unerring rightness of his choice was in the way Pristine addressed herself to food. Looks counted for something, to be sure. Pristine was short and robust, with a pale but infinitely well-nourished complexion, a square face with faintly critical brows, and a wide, ready smile that displayed 90 percent of her perfect teeth. For his own appearance, she seemed tacitly to approve of him; pallid as herself with a clear skin, perhaps a small roll of flesh around his fortyish middle that only attested to many years of choosy but ample diet.

But her address to the food—ah, that was exquisite. Her fork balanced in a firm hand, Pristine studied the entree, turned it this way and that in the manner of an inquisitive coroner, then, resigned that the chef could come no closer to her ideals, speared, chewed, and reluctantly swallowed. Solebury's lips parted in silent admiration. He dared to hope.

"The best is none too good, is it?" he winked at her, then applied the test. Would she join him soon in a dinner of his own preparation? "I'm something of an expert on dining. In a small way."

“Small way” was the code phrase that separated cognoscenti from the uninitiated. He was instantly gratified.

“Why don’t we?” Pristine touched her white hand to his, strong fingers curving intimately to touch his callused palm. She wrinkled her upturned nose at him. “It sounds memorable.”

Solebury leaned forward and their eyes met over the forgotten trout almandine. “I think it could be. You know what it means to meet someone you can truly share with?”

“Yes, yes. I know.” Pristine stroked the back of his slightly trembling hand. “So seldom. So rare. And *just* the right time of year.”

A bubble of happiness swelled in Solebury’s chest. “You’re very beautiful.”

“I feel beautiful tonight,” said Pristine Solent.

They got out of the taxi a few blocks before her apartment, not wanting the evening to end, holding hands, heads close together. Solebury kissed her with clumsy ardor at her outside door. Pristine swayed into him, then threw back her head to the night sky with a little mew of contentment.

“What an evening. Oh, Addison, I hope there’ll be a moon next time. I’m so damned romantic about these things. And a moon is part of it.”

“It is. So important.” Solebury positively quivered with joy.

“And what is a romantic dinner without moonlight?” Pristine squeezed his hand. “G’night.”

If there was a sidewalk under him, Solebury didn’t feel it. He floated to the corner and let three cabs approach, slow tentatively, and pass on before remembering he wanted one.

Like Lancelot, Solebury’s love quest lay through great deeds. Such a dinner could not be conjured for the next evening or even within a week. Pristine would consider that careless. This called for his full mastery. Since the bone of genius is discipline, Solebury went back to basics, to research.

His own office, the library reference room, was his usual start. All the dailies were searched, torrents of fine print skimmed for the form of his menu. All professionals had their secrets; Solebury’s lay in his insistence on a slightly pungent spice overlooked by all but a few masters and not commonly used for centuries. Only one establishment, Whittaker’s, still used it in their prepared seasonings. Just a tiny dollop, but to Solebury it was *sine qua non*, adding an overtaste delicate as it was incomparable.

At length his entree was found. In a rising fever of concentration, Solebury turned his attention to the treacherous but crucial matter of wine.

Only a tyro considered geriatric vintages automatically best. Like any living thing, the grape had its youth, prime and declining age. Of recent years he gave serious consideration to only one: ’92 of course—but ’92 what? Even within the confines dictated by a white-meat entree, there were nuances of choice. Some masters—and Pristine could well be one—preferred a demi-sec where he would choose a drier variety. A blunder here, one false step, could shadow Pristine’s judgment. She’d be kind, but Solebury would feel a door closing behind her charity, and successive evenings would find her otherwise engaged.

He let instinct guide him, recalling a champagne he’d chosen not two months back, a superb Chardonnay brut. His usual shop produced one remaining bottle at a larcenous price, but Solebury’s heart sang as he hurried home. He knew all this was preamble, part of the labor of love. A great deal of delving remained.

One more choice awaited him: the time, more of a gamble than all the rest. Pristine wanted a moon, but though Solebury scanned the paper and the skies, one promised nothing and the other remained perversely overcast. At last came an evening when the early autumn moon entered like a diva from a proscenium of fleecy cumulus clouds. Solebury turned from his window and reached for the phone, at once stabbed to the heart and uplifted by Pristine's throaty greeting.

"Hello, Addison. I was just thinking about you."

He choked on his ecstasy. "You were?"

"Must be ESP. I was looking at the moon and thinking tonight might be—" "Yes. Perfect. That's why I called. You wanted a romantic moon. Shall we dine? Something very special?"

"In a small way. Love to," Pristine whispered over the wire. "I'm famished for something special. If not Christmas, at least it's Halloween."

A world of promise throbbed in her honeyed contralto.

Solebury always dined late. Pristine was not surprised by the hour or the address, neither that fashionable.

"It's a perfect time, Addison. I'm never hungry much earlier than that. I'll be there."

Solebury hung up in a soft rush of joy. Here was a mate for all reasons.

Humming with busy pleasure, Solebury twirled the '92 down into the waiting ice. Even now, before Pristine arrived, there was spadework. He miscalculated slightly and was only half ready with final preparations when she appeared. If her first dinner costume had been sensible, her clothing tonight was downright utilitarian—jeans and boots and a windbreaker against the cool. She gave Solebury a cheerful little peck and surveyed his labors.

"Can I help?" she asked politely.

"Oh no, really. There's just a little further—"

"No, let me. You've already worked so hard."

It flattered Solebury to see Pristine pitch in. She was very sturdy, but no dining of this caliber was ever accomplished without hard physical labor. At length Pristine paused, wiping her brow with the back of one white hand, and drew the champagne from its bucket to browse the label with admiration.

"Lovely year, Addison." She turned again briefly to the last shovel work, then stepped aside for her host. "You'll want to open up and carve."

"Of course. You are a dear, Pristine." Descending into the grave, Solebury wielded his implement with a practiced economy of movement. Three deft snaps with the crowbar broke the casket seals. With a gustatory flourish, he threw it open for her approval.

"Bon appetite, darling."

He hovered, waiting under the October moon for the sunbeam of her approval, but he saw only a frown of disappointment.

"Beautifully aged," he assayed against her silence. "Buried Thursday."

Pristine sat down on the freshly turned earth. “Oh, Addison. Oh, dear . . .”

“What—what’s wrong?”

“Everything!” she wailed.

He felt a premonitory chill. “But he’s perfect. Buried from Whittaker’s last Thursday. I use them exclusively, the only undertakers who still use myrrh in their preparation. You must know that.”

Pristine’s disappointment turned brittle. “Of course I know that. There is Whittaker’s and only Whittaker’s. But as you see, the entree is hardly Caucasian.”

True, the entree was decidedly dark. There was no mention of that in the obituary. He’d assumed white meat; a minor variant and trivial. Solebury vaulted out of the grave to sit facing Pristine like a teacher. “Pristine, it doesn’t really matter. Expertise is one thing, ivory tower another.”

“Doesn’t matter?” Pristine corrected him like an errant child. “Surely you know non-Caucasian flesh doesn’t take the myrrh flavor well at all. It cancels it out.”

“I beg to disagree.” Solebury’s pride was at stake, and she was dead wrong. “A difference, yes. A subtle piquance, if you will, but hardly canceled.”

“Even if that were true,” Pristine countered in a voice cool as the churchyard dark, “it completely negates champagne.”

Solebury began to feel a bit waspish despite himself. “Oh, really! The principle is the same as dark meat on fowl. I took days choosing that champagne. I am not an amateur.”

But her pretty head wagged back and forth through his protestations. “Cold Duck, Mister Solebury. Nothing else.”

He went falsetto at the sacrilege. “Cold Duck? It’s so bloody common!”

“But,” Pristine riposted with a raised forefinger, “the uncommon choice.” Her assertiveness quavered and broke. “I’m sorry, Addison, but I—”

“Oh, please, Pristine. I worked so hard.”

“I know, but it’s all so wrong.”

“Please stay. I adore you.”

“Oh, go to hell. Go to McDonald’s—no. No, please, dear Addison, I didn’t mean that. That was filthy. Just—” Her voice caught and shattered on a sob. “Just that I was looking for someone to share with. It’s so lonely being the best. And I thought you . . .”

“I am, Pristine, darling. We could share so much.”

“No, not with differences as wide as these. Don’t say anything, just goodbye. I’m leaving. I won’t look back. Don’t call me. Oh, my dear Addison. You were so close to perfection.”

Solebury choked out something in farewell and admission of his sins, following Pristine with eyes of tragedy as she receded forlornly through the cemetery gate. He slumped down on the turned earth, working without relish at the champagne cork. The pop was hollow as his hopes.

“So close to perfection,” she had said. All right. He raised the glass to his better, though it cost him a love to learn. Life was still lonely near the top. The moon went down and the wind before dawn was desolate.

He could barely pick at supper.