

JAMES MEYER

# Guests

JONATHAN GRASPED THE TOMATO—coddled it in his hands, sniffed it, eyed it suspiciously. He pressed it with his finger. He had read in one of his books that a cook, a cook worthy of the name, did not hesitate to touch the food she meant to prepare. Only then could she know that a filet of sole had been properly poached, that a steak was medium rare, that an avocado was not yet ripe. Tomatoes did not yield their secrets to touch. They could have too many seeds or a mealy texture. They could look delicious—and taste like water. Jonathan sought a state of certainty. Tomatoes, so early in the season, were uncertain. He put the fruit back gingerly.

The first course was the hardest. A weak opening act and you could forget the rest of it. It had become the thing among the people they knew to omit the starter and jump straight to the main event—to serve a fish soup with fresh bread and cheese and tossed greens, or a pullet simmered with aromatic vegetables in wine. It had become the thing to put everything out at once, “family style.” The all-in-one meal: what sort of dinner was that? Dessert, dessert worthy of the name, was also on the wane. A dubious invention, the fruit salad, had taken its place. The other night Glenn, a gym friend of Richard’s, appeared with an orange plastic bowl.

“It’s that time of year!”

The other guests clucked knowingly. A quick glance revealed the raspberries were soggy, the melon under-ripe—a miserable combination. Jonathan stole into the kitchen on his way to the toilet. Peering into the trash can he noted a jumble of plastic tubs. The labels revealed the fruit’s ignominious origin.

“Supermarket!” he whispered in Richard’s ear, taking his seat.

The others contentedly ate their portions to Jonathan’s dismay. They weren’t being polite; they were relieved. The last chill had left Chicago, and the lakeshore was crowded with roller-bladers and joggers with taut stomachs. May was one’s last chance to make up for winter’s sloth—soon it was July and they must lay out on Hollywood Beach.

It was a balancing act, the pleasures of the table and the pressure to stay thin. Jonathan had watched the graceful figures of his school friends thicken and bloat, and so in the early days after he met Richard he decided he must maintain a thirty-one inch waist at all costs. It was then that he began to “feel fat,” and coincidentally gave up his search for a job. At Richard’s urg-

ing he conceived a daily menu so healthful you couldn't miss. They adhered to it rigorously. Breakfast was steel-cut oats with non-fat milk or all-white omelets if Jonathan were awake to make them. Lunch was salt-free cottage cheese with fruit, or tofu and broccoli tossed in a wasabi vinaigrette, or chicken breasts grilled in lemon and olive oil. Afternoon snacks were forbidden. So they sipped Creatine shakes late in the day (Richard during his drive up the lake, strapped into his black BMW sedan, cell microphone at his lips) before meeting at the gym, where Richard supervised Jonathan's workout, dictating whether he must attempt curls today, or squats tomorrow. They counted one another's sit-ups. During the ride home they consumed bananas for "recovery."

The central idea of dinner was protein. Monday was tuna, Tuesday poached salmon, Wednesday halibut, Thursday skinless chicken breast, Friday cod, Saturday stir-fry, Sunday roast pork soaked in brine—so it was in the early days. As Jonathan tired of this menu he rotated which meat went with which day according to a schedule Richard never quite grasped. (There were weeks when tuna appeared twice on their plates, and other weeks not at all.) They ate their vegetables—broccoli, fresh spinach, cauliflower—steamed. Weekends were less strict. Richard ordered the odd cheeseburger, Jonathan his Vodkatinis. Yet even during these off-days they avoided simple carbohydrates, which they viewed as a sort of poison. It was a household rule that potatoes never crossed their threshold except on Thanksgiving Day.

The diet lasted three years. Jonathan and Richard were a team then; they appeared (it astonished him to think of it now) shirtless and waxed in Lake Michigan on the cover of the local men's magazine, the summer's "hot couple." And then he let go. Every day was an off-day. He went to the gym less and less frequently. He snacked on popcorn and cookies and "personal bite" scones; he made fluffy yellow omelets burbling with pats of Gruyère. He whittled away the afternoons at the chain bookstores at the corner of Broadway and Diversey, immersing himself in the latest political memoirs and star magazines and internet blogs. He still cooked healthful meals those evenings they dined at home, when they watched DVD's in the TV room and Richard looked over papers and paid the bills. But those nights when Richard had dinner out Jonathan moved between the bars on Halsted Street, where he sipped tumblers of Belvedere with people he referred to as "bar friends." He came home to find Richard in bed, his pillow covering his face.

He woke up the next morning at ten-thirty (Richard having long since departed for work); it was another day. It was as if they'd planned it that way—the different schedules. There was a complicity between them, a strange intimacy. They shared the secret of lovers who having ceased to sleep

together, for reasons neither can put his finger on, or would rather not think about, still envision themselves, for reasons of history or habit, familial or financial ties, as a couple—and go to great trouble to present themselves as such.

Eventually, *letting go* was no longer a phase: it had become a mode of being. His belt pressed against his stomach, he abandoned his thirty-ones for thirty-threes. Staring into the mirror one morning as he drew a razor across his throat, he noticed the faint outline of a double chin.

It was after he let go that he became fascinated with the world of gourmet cooking. He read recipes and watched Food TV. He worked his way through Volume I of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, despite Richard's complaints that the dishes were too rich. He took a soufflé class, a bread class, and a class in basic techniques. He attended a pasta seminar for Americans in a villa on the outskirts of Florence. As his confidence grew, and they began to invite people over, Richard became increasingly involved. Though he was not prepared to introduce his colleagues to his boyfriend, much less invite them to their home (his boss having once made a joke about "fags" that left him unnerved for weeks) he could see the benefits of entertaining a different kind of guest. It didn't hurt that Jonathan had a talent for cooking. Having people over was a way to get to know them, to make them feel slightly obliged without *feeling* obliged. Richard arranged the people they knew in a mental hierarchy of attraction, a scale of utility. He quickly assessed whether a person was worth his trouble, and Jonathan often wondered how long it would be before Richard decided that he, that Jonathan, was bad baggage, past his prime. Yet he marveled at the perks that came their way as a result of Richard's unabashedness. Richard was always seeking advice—knowledge and connections and the occasional gift; their dinners offered a friendly situation where these tidbits could be procured. He waited until this someone was captive at their table, savoring one of Jonathan's little triumphs—such as a mouthful of salmon mousse—and then asked what it was that he wanted to know. There was the doctor who could write scripts for them without charge, the fashion executive who gave them discounts on Zegna suits, the chocolate seller who appeared at their parties with boxes of truffles (who admittedly occupied a lower notch on Richard's scale), the curator who steered them to the better galleries in New York, and told them which exhibitions to see; then those few individuals who occupied the summit of his imagination, such as a pink-faced money manager named Mitchell cultivated less for his financial tips (though he was none too shy to ask for them) than with Richard's nephew Dylan in mind.

They were washing up after a buoyant evening (the last couple had departed well after midnight.) As was their custom after each event they dis-

cussed the menu at length, dissected each guest.

"I'm so over Mitchell."

"You really are a trooper."

Richard patted Jonathan on the back.

"He barely touched the pears!"

Mitchell has high standards, Richard wanted to say, he can afford to eat anywhere. He didn't have the heart to tell Jonathan that his poached pears with custard sauce, of which Jonathan was especially proud, were too filling, and a bit dated, for someone accustomed to lighter, more contemporary confections.

Jonathan declared he would never cook for Mitchell Rose again.

"He's not a bad guy."

"Please."

"He gave, I think, a million to Stanford," Richard marveled. "He said it was a lot of money for him, but *gosh*. Dylan's going to be a senior next year. I thought—"

"I get it," Jonathan said. "You're really something."

It was in their interest to throw these little dinners, in *their* interest, for these events gave Jonathan a purpose, they gave him something to do. Richard covered it all—the renovation of their Formica kitchen into a granite-topped mausoleum, the mini-cellar upstairs and the full cellar downstairs, all their junkets to restaurants across the country and abroad, where they did not hesitate to introduce themselves to this or that chef, whose latest book they happened to have brought along (Jonathan supplied the pen.) Their cookbooks were signed:

*To Jonathan and Richard, With best wishes—*

They became known as people who knew about food, people who knew how to live. You were sure to eat well at Jonathan and Richard's, it was said, sure to meet other men "on the way up" (as Richard described their visitors: who knew where the meeting of this and that friend could lead?), sure to find yourself in the middle of an attractive circle, beginning with the host himself, who at thirty-seven possessed a square jaw, a trim waist, and a forty-two inch chest. Richard had not let go.

Jonathan took these parties extremely seriously. He planned each menu weeks in advance, trying out every recipe at least twice before serving it as his teachers instructed. Making the rounds of his favorite grocers, he loaded his shopping cart with costly supplies: *sel de mer* from Normandy, twenty-five dollar Tuscan vinegars, first-press olive oil, the odd jars of truffles. His greatest mania was for fresh produce and meats.

"Is it fresh?" he pressed.

"They came in this morning—"

“Are you *sure*?”

During the milder months he woke up early on the weekends, arriving at the greenmarket by seven-thirty in the morning before the choicest items disappeared. There he found the sweetest English peas, the most flavorful lettuces, the choicest zucchini blossoms. He befriended a fisherman from the Upper Peninsula, who sold Lake Superior whitefish and trout pulled from remote streams. During the summer, when they did not follow their friends to Provincetown, Jonathan returned from the greenmarket with fistfuls of rosemary and basil and cartons of heirloom tomatoes. He proudly unpacked these treasures as Richard watched, inhaling the scent of each item one by one—Jonathan was extremely sensitive to smell—and it was momentarily good between them.

His first idea, *Insalata Caprese* of tomatoes and fresh basil—to be followed by handmade ravioli in lavender butter—had been dashed.

He arrived at the meat counter. “Is the chicken fresh?”

“Right off the truck.” The butcher answered in a weary tone that implied he was often asked this question.

“Is the chicken organic? Free-range?”

The butcher hesitated. “It’s All Natural.”

His lips pursed; he didn’t trust “All Natural.” All Natural evoked unpleasant images of hormones, of antibiotic shots, of chickens confined in filthy little cages. He deliberated—calculated—imagined a new course of action. Then he asked for six pounds, and the giblets and neck too. There: He would make *coq au vin*. The important guest would not be impressed, but it was a dish Jonathan knew, it was a crowd pleaser, and most important, it was hard to botch. He paid (“Paper or plastic?” the cashier asked indifferently) and loaded up the car. He drove up a large avenue and turned right onto another street that led toward the lake. Pulling into an alley, he parked behind a building—one of those brick piles of a certain vintage that line Chicago’s streets. He carried the grocery bags up the service stairwell to the back porch, a hodge-podge arrangement of chairs, potted plants, and garbage buckets, where in warm weather he and Richard occasionally lingered over brunch reading the newspaper, one of the few rituals left from the early days.

He washed the chicken parts, patted them dry, and browned them in a French iron pot. The handle was in the shape of a rooster. He removed the specks of dirt from the mushrooms he’d carefully chosen (tops closed, no gills), sliced and sautéed them. He blanched the pearl onions and pierced the bottoms for braising. He poured himself a glass of Pinot, the first of the evening.

Jonathan was forty-one. Until his mid-thirties he’d lived in the future tense; more and more his thoughts were conjugated in the past conditional,

the tense of foreclosure, of could have and should have and might have. Academia was his initial salvation. Admitted to the history PhD program at the university, he realized, in the second semester, that he lacked the temperament to continue, the resolve of the true academic. He had trouble completing his seminar papers, he studied German listlessly, he passed his exams without distinction. A benevolent advisor covered for him and he advanced to candidacy, only to dawdle on the dissertation, a study of gay people in Chicago between the wars. His research occupied several boxes which he carted from apartment to apartment, from closet to closet. He avoided the history department, and then the library, and then the university entirely. He moved to a different part of town. He responded to his advisor's emails slowly, and then not at all.

His fellowship expired; he lived on the remainder of his stipend and then on credit. He went out, and stayed out. He visited the gym daily. He treated himself to luxuries he couldn't afford—European jeans, haircuts at a Rush Street salon (he tipped extravagantly), clingy cotton tops and low-rider pants. Looking good was what mattered, and Jonathan certainly appeared the picture of health. There was no trace of the virus (contracted after everyone "knew better"), no indication that he had it, no hollowed-out cheeks or dried-out skin, thanks to the miracle pills he consumed at various points of the day, in the nearest bathroom, the door closed.

His parents, who still lived in the small town in Michigan where he grew up, could not support him; he considered his prospects. He looked into library science and decided he didn't want to be a librarian. He enrolled in massage therapy school and wondered what he was doing there. He contemplated becoming a paralegal. He became a barista at a coffee shop that had become celebrated nationally for its shade-grown organic beans. Vaguely gratified when he was named Employee of the Month (his framed portrait hung over the milk and sugar station), he wearied of making skinny *lattes* and crushed ice drinks for girls on their cell phones and for older men who lingered at their laptops, hoping to catch his eye. He ended up waiting tables at a pan-Asian restaurant uptown. The brick walls and black lacquered furniture and square plates and low-fat menu appealed to a gay clientele.

There was a storm—one of many that January. The plows had yet to appear, and the streets and sidewalks were awash in wet snow. Two young men, a couple it seemed, sat down next to the front window. Orange snowflakes fell beneath the sulfurous street lamps visible through the large pane of glass. Jonathan stood at the kitchen door with Shaun discussing the few diners who had ventured out. Shaun was bald and older. The dry skin of his forearms was dappled with gray hair. His perfunctory manner implied that he had been waiting tables for a very long time. No matter how hard

he worked, how many little jokes he made, he never earned more than a respectable fifteen percent. The young waiters received twenty percent simply by showing up—and twenty-five percent if they flirted with the customers.

“That couple isn’t one,” he said sharply. “Look at the way they keep looking at us, at you (of course!), the Clark Kent one (of course!) (It’s so typical.)”

And in fact the men did seem interested in the comings and goings of the waiters. Their eyes drifted to the door at the back that swung open and shut, that revealed the kitchen behind it, the door through which Jonathan and Shaun sallied with bowls of Phô and plates of Kim Chi. Afterwards Jonathan found a large tip and forgot about the night of the great snow storm, for every day and every evening since he left graduate school felt more or less the same. A few weeks later one of the diners came alone to the restaurant and struck up a conversation. He was a consultant, he said. He lived near the lake.



Jay Orecki, three-star chef, handed his jacket to Richard. He stood in the vestibule looking at the family photographs—the famous magazine cover of Jonathan and Richard half-nude in the lake, or wearing coats and ties under the awning at Taillevant—and recalled how it was he met them.

He was in the kitchen at Étoile plating entrées.

“Those boys really *like* your food,” Tod said.

Jay Orecki peeked through the porthole door into the dining room. He had never noticed them before—the one blue-blazered, groomed, the other disheveled, serious. They were sampling small plates at the bar. They appeared to linger over each dish.

Another evening found them at Table 14, a prized cul-de-sac near the entrance. This will be their spot, their “home away from home,” as Richard will put it.

“Those cute guys,” Tod remarked. “They’d really like to meet you.”

He never made it to the dining room that evening.

A few weeks later:

“They’re *back!*”

Jay Orecki frowned.

“They tip really well.”

It was important to keep Tod happy. The kitchen was in order, and so Jay Orecki decided he would make the rounds tonight. He walked through the porthole door, an impressive sight in his white monogrammed apron.

How are you, he asked Table 5 solicitously. Thanks so much for coming,

he greeted Table 10. That's kind of you to say, he responded to a couple who heaped praise on his quince infused lamb. He arrived at Table 14. Richard and Jonathan stood up ceremoniously.

"We're *such* fans—"

"Glad you liked everything. Thanks for coming."

He hoped he'd never see them again.

This was not to be. They returned, and returned with greater regularity, after Étoile received three stars in the *New York Times*. He peered through the porthole window. He was interested in them—Richard was rather good-looking, he had to admit—and annoyed by his interest. Who were these boys after all? The one some kind of consultant, the other—who knew what he did? They were a little bit ridiculous, those two. A bit of a bother. Those evenings when they came to dine ruffled him slightly. He could sense their anxious eyes trained on the porthole door, waiting for him to appear.

They hoped, they told Tod, they very much hoped that Jay would do them the honor of dropping by their table before the night was over; it would mean so much to them. He instructed Tod to say he was out of town—which Tod reluctantly agreed to do—and soon enough Richard understood. He now made it a practice of calling ahead to confirm that Mr. Orecki would indeed be at the stove that evening. There was no point traveling half across town if Chef wasn't in, he remarked to the owner, Margaret. There were so many fine restaurants in Chicago now—Blackbird, Spiaggia, Tru. (Étoile was special of course.) Margaret recounted the conversation, and Jay Orecki was strongly encouraged to send extra *amuse-bouche* and complimentary desserts to Table 14, delivered by a grateful Tod, whose tip reflected the diners' sentiments. They were eager to receive these tokens of distinction, these signs of his affection. They assumed these gifts were from him, from Jay Orecki, *Food and Wine's* "Best New Chef (Midwest)." It was all well and good to be noticed by Margaret, who they admired, who was "the genius" behind the restaurant, Jonathan noted. But Jay was the star. And they meant to reciprocate his kindnesses.

The invitation was studiedly brief (how, he wondered, did Richard get his email address?):

*We're having a few friends over Friday. We'd love it if you could join us—*

*7:30? Let us know—*

XX

*Richard*

There was no way he could accept, of course. They were the wrong sort of fans—people who collect chefs, best kept at a distance. They wanted to talk food when he lived and breathed food, wanted to talk about anything but food. He can't come, he said apologetically (his starched apron pressed



against their starched tablecloth), not this week, not this month, much as he'd love to. It was so hard to get away from the restaurant, from all his commitments. The coming weeks were brutal: an event in L.A., another in Minneapolis, a television appearance on the morning news. A recipe was due at the *Tribune*. He hoped they would understand.

He found himself, some weeks later, at a black-tie fundraiser for the Historical Society, to which he'd donated his signature chocolate ganache torte. This he would serve personally—he could not trust anyone else to oversee the slicing of this treat, the drizzling of the coulis, and—he was not ashamed to admit—he looked forward to this sort of event, which provided a fine opportunity for making connections, for meeting men. He imagined *they* might be there—Jonathan had said he was some sort of historian, had professed an interest in architectural preservation. Wrapping up the precious cakes and climbing into his car, he mentally prepared himself for the encounter. He would, he imagined, say a perfunctory *Hi how are you*—he repeated this to himself in the driver's mirror—and turning to another guest, engage this person in a protracted conversation; and then another. Now they really would understand. It was better that way. Better they know. Feeling his coolness, they'd come to the restaurant less—Margaret could not blame him for *that*—and then eventually, hopefully, not at all.

“Jay!”

He felt a hand on his shoulder, then a hand on his other shoulder.

“Jay's the best chef in the city,” Jonathan announced to another friend, who looked at Jay Orecki with interest.

They had claimed him as their own.

“The *Times*—“

“Would you happen to be free next Saturday?”

He said he thought he would be away. Something about the *Today* show. Richard pouted. He understood.

Then—was it Jonathan's praise? The warmth of Richard's grip? The desire to go out, to see, to meet? Actually, Jay Orecki said, he would be around next Saturday, that would be lovely. What could he bring? He was tired of manning the kitchen, of being the host. Let someone else do the work.



Richard considered their guest. Tall and slightly stooped, with thinning hair and metal-rimmed glasses, Chef's no looker, he thought, as he offered Jay Orecki a plate of warm *gougères*.

Two men approached, their arms extended simultaneously.

“Great to meet you!”

“Great to meet you!”

Drew and Kurt—the Krews Jonathan called them—were friends from the charity circuit. Drew had sold yellow pages for the *Yellow Pages*, and medical supplies for a medical supply company. Meeting Kurt, an anaesthesiologist, changed everything, he said to the people they met. Kurt had encouraged him to invest in *himself*, in his creativity, and he had, thanks to Kurt’s moral support, developed a line of facial products based on the healthful properties of the pomegranate seed. It was remarked that Kurt was his own best advertisement: already in his late thirties, he still had the lustrous skin, the ruddy pallor, of a very young man.

The Krews had acquired a certain cachet at these events, where they were known to sponsor entire tables. Hard-bodied, with trim waists and matching haircuts, they presented the image of a living, breathing symmetry. They even moved similarly, their arms pressed against their thighs, their chests thrusting forward as they walked.

Richard and Jonathan had recently seen them out at another event. Jonathan was standing next to a rail-thin person with angular features and bleached hair. Kevin Michael was a stylist at a mid-priced salon. Perpetually single yet constitutionally optimistic, he saved up for these events in the hope of meeting someone, a near impossibility, he was quick to point out, as many of the attendees were couples (“so to speak.”) He nodded at Kurt and Drew in matching tuxedos and cummerbunds.

“Love them!”

“They do look good for their age” Jonathan remarked. “And so alike.”

“Now, now,” Kevin Michael wagged his finger in mock reproach. “How old is Drew *really*?”

“You mean Dorian?” This was Jonathan’s other nickname for Drew.

The stylist smiled blankly.

“I mean Drew silly. He can’t be a day over thirty. Kurt—I don’t *care* how old he is! I think they’re amazing.”

It was Richard who suggested they invite the Krews to their dinner for Jay Orecki.

“They’re the kind of people Jay wants to meet.”

“I thought *we* were the kind of people he wants to meet.”

“It’ll be fun.”

For you, he thought.



The chicken was on the simmer. Jonathan opened another bottle of Pinot and poured himself a glass. Richard came into the kitchen, filled another plate of hors d’oeuvres (“Terrific, honey!”), and returned to the party.

Laughter: the evening seemed to be going well. Jonathan sautéed croutons and cloves of garlic in separate skillet.

A hyena laugh and Drew has led them there. The party clustered around the central island, a single sheet of granite as shiny as a fresh-cut tomb. The kitchen was lit elaborately yet discreetly. Even in the middle of a party it was immaculate.

Guests in the kitchen. Jay Orecki, standing there!

Drew walked around. "That's some oven."

"It's a \_\_\_\_\_," Richard mentioned the brand name knowingly. "Jonathan says the heat's incredibly even."

The Krews nodded with interest.

"How'd you guys do it?"

"Richard covered it, if that's what you mean."

"Not true!" Richard protested. "We did it together. This is Jonathan's lair. I'm lucky if he lets me in."

Drew bent down to inspect the mini-cellar.

"Sweetie, we should *think* about one of these."

"Do you collect wine?"

Jonathan's voice had the soft tone of condescension, which Drew did not miss.

"I think we should let Jonathan cook." Richard winked at the others. "You know what they say about too many chefs!"

The group moved to the dining room.

Jonathan assembled the first course. He dappled the salad with a warm vinaigrette and tossed the leaves gently. Leaning against the kitchen door he walked out with a cut class bowl and served the tender leaves, as Richard poured the contents of a decanter into six goblets. A red monochrome painting hung above the buffet, dimly lit.

"We're so glad everyone could come!"

The merry sound of clinking glasses as hosts and guests saluted one another.

Richard put down his fork.

"Really great, honey!" Richard was Jonathan's most fervent ally in the kitchen if not always in other affairs in life.

They awaited Jay Orecki's opinion.

"This is really nice."

Jonathan beamed. "The lettuce is from a little farm in Indiana. First of the season."

Kurt took a sip of wine.

"Good stuff."

"It's a Chambertin," Jonathan explained. "A *Pinot* . . . Richard's pick."

There was a lore between them that Richard had the better palate. Not only could Richard tell a Burgundy from an American Pinot (Jonathan noted to friends); he could say this Pinot came from the Willamette Valley, and this one from Carneros. If Jonathan played Chef, Richard was *sommelier*. That was the house legend, and Richard kept the glasses filled. But it was Jonathan who replenished their cellar, who set the itinerary during their trips to Northern California, who insisted, when Richard remarked that it would be fun to visit a certain vineyard in Napa, that they were to go to Kistler in the Sonoma that day—it had been planned for weeks.

And it was Jonathan who, in a moment of rare determination, informed a proud waiter at a restaurant on Nob Hill that the bottle of Graves she'd just poured was "*unacceptable*."

"Where did you learn to cook?" Drew tried to sound impressed.

Jonathan shrugged. "I read books, follow the recipes. I'm just a home cook." He hoped the table would contradict him.

"Drew's a good cook too," Richard said.

It had never occurred to Jonathan that Richard had sampled Drew's food. (*Drew? Food?*)

Drew wanted to know their opinion of a certain magazine. They had just taken out a subscription.

What is that ghastly citrus scent, Jonathan wondered, that competes with the delectable warm odor of the salad, the earthy fragrance of the wine?

"They have okay recipes," Jonathan said. "It's a lifestyle magazine. I don't know what you think about it, Jay."

"Same."

Jonathan asked Jay Orecki about a prominent young chef. They'd made a special trip to his place during their last trip to the Bay Area, and found it disappointing.

Jay Orecki hesitated. "We've worked together. He's a talented boy. Must have been an off day."

Drew alluded to a popular television cook known as The Happy Chef.

"Cheesy lady," Kurt remarked; his weary tone implied they'd had this conversation at home.

"Actually, she's done pretty well for herself" Drew contradicted him, reminding the party that he was more than Drew of Kurt-and-Drew.

Jonathan's lips were arranged in an icy smile.

"I think she's horrible."

He's becoming drunk, Richard thought, nasty drunk the way he always does.

"She can't cook!"

The table turned to Jay Orecki.

“She doesn’t know a lot,” he said, “but she’s everywhere, you have to hand *that* to her.”

“She’s nothing compared to you.” Jonathan poured himself another glass. “Anyway, I heard she’s an awful person.”

“How do you know that?” Richard sounded annoyed.

Jonathan contemplated the lettuce at the end of his fork. “Billy told me.”

“She’s on the Food Network. What does Billy know?”

“She’s accessible,” Drew developed his idea. “Someone the average person can relate to—”

Jonathan reminded himself never again to invite the Krews.

“If being a bad chef—”

Richard looked around the table apprehensively. The dinner had taken a bad turn.

“She has her own *TV show*,” Drew persisted. “Products. Books. (We love the cake one.)”

“She can’t cook,” Jonathan snapped. “*Jay* says—”

Drew smiled imperceptibly at Richard, then turned to Jonathan. “It doesn’t matter whether she can cook. She knows about marketing. I totally—”

Jonathan stood up clumsily. The table lurched, the stemware shook, the flatware rattled. The Krews exchanged knowing glances. Richard looked down at his plate.

“Sorry guys!” Jonathan stacked the salad plates (purple and gold *fleurs de lis* from their trip to Provence, when all was well) and retreated into the kitchen. He dipped a spoon into the pot. Something was wrong. The sauce was insufficient, it lacked depth. In an attempt to make the dish less fatty he’d degreased the sauce excessively, removing the bubbles that percolated up from the bottom of the pot, scoop after scoop. He’d degreased the flavor out of the poor bird. He considered his options. He could add another stick of butter, and the dish would taste buttery. He could add a half-cup of flour: the consistency would improve but not the flavor. He could add more salt. Whatever he did Jay would know.

He arranged the chicken parts with onions, mushrooms, and parsley, and carried the platter to the table.

“I’m afraid I’ve made a mistake.” His voice was thin. “It’s *coq au vin*—a ‘spa’ version—less fat—Give it a try!” The guests took their portions. There was silence, a silence that said it was not a bad dish, but not a very good one, either.

“Is there salt?”

There was a hint of satisfaction in Drew’s request that Jay Orecki didn’t like.

"Julia Child?"

"Well—" Jonathan started.

"Good for you," he said. "No shortcuts there. Can I have another piece?"



Jonathan emerged from the kitchen with a metal mold on a plate. A *crème caramel* poured out with a slight tease of the knife, round and perfect.

"Awesome."

"Really great, honey."

Jay Orecki nodded affably. He had made his first custard at eighteen as an assistant chef.

"It's about the ingredients," Jonathan explained. "The milk and eggs come from this organic dairy I like, two older people. Richard's met them."

Richard poured a dessert wine into another set of glasses.

"I really like the way these go together." Drew contemplated the golden liquor swirling slowly in his glass.

"They're probably not a perfect match," Jonathan corrected him. "*Crème caramel* is delicate . . . Sauternes is a major flavor story. It needs something bigger," he turned to Jay Orecki, "like one of your genius chocolate tortes."

Jay Orecki's eyes twitched slightly.

"Have you been to Jay's restaurant?" Jonathan asked.

No, they hadn't.

"I don't need to tell you. Jay's—"

"You'll have to come," Jay Orecki interrupted. "Just let us know in advance."

"We'd really like that."

"You'll have to order . . ."

Jay Orecki stood up. "This has been really great. I have to be at the restaurant early I'm afraid." He nodded to Richard and Jonathan, who sat at either end of the table. "Thanks so much." He wrote down his number on a card and gave this to Drew.

The others followed him to the door.

"You'll have to come again," Richard said.

Jay Orecki put on his jacket. "I'd like that."

He hugged Richard, and Jonathan, to whom he remarked "Wonderful," as he walked out. Jonathan listened to his footsteps in the stairwell. He listened as Jay Orecki reached the second floor, and then the first, and then the lobby, and as the front door lock snapped shut.

"Can I have a cigarette." Drew looked bored.

"Back porch," Richard said. "I'll show you." Kurt followed them into the kitchen. The screen door slammed behind them.

Jonathan carried the dessert dishes to the kitchen and stacked them in the deep steel sink. He loaded the dishwasher and washed the goblets one by one. He scrubbed the salad bowl, and the pots and saucepans, scooping the leftovers into plastic containers and dumping the unwanted *coq au vin* into the trash. He stopped short of the porch door and peered through the screen. He wondered why they hadn't bothered to turn on the lights. It was so dark out.

Through the intricate pattern he perceived a close assembly of chairs and plants and bodies. He heard hushed voices. A breeze; the twinkle of chimes. He smelled tobacco smoke and a scent of citrus, that nasty citrus, he thought. His eyes adjusted slowly to the shapes he perceived dimly through the metal scrim. He saw the faint outline of two arms around Richard's neck, and he understood.

A spotlight flooded the porch. Jonathan stumbled toward the group, his shadow preceded him.

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"We thought you were cleaning up."

"I was."

They stood in a circle. Kurt's eyeballs were glassy pink. Richard's eyes concentrated on a spot just below Jonathan's chin, as if he saw something he'd never seen before.

Drew looked him straight in the eye. "The dinner was awesome."

"Totally," Kurt said.

"Sweetie, we should go. Kurt has to be in the OR in the morning," Drew reminded them. "That's what you get for marrying a doctor!"

Polite hugs, and Drew and Kurt clambered down the stairs. The sounds of car doors opening and slamming shut, of Kurt turning on the engine, of his jeep pulling into the alley, filled their ears.

Time to rinse the dessert glasses and plates and the hand-painted salad plates that must be hand-washed. Time to turn on the dishwasher. A splash of water tumbled loudly into the sink. Jonathan felt a hand curl around his neck. Once an unstated signal that Richard wanted to have sex, this gesture now inferred he had something to say. Jonathan switched off the spigot, wiped his hands on a towel, and turned around.

"I'm fine with it."

He was fine with it. He was fine with it and not fine with it and resigned to be fine with it. No, he was not fine with it; but what could he do? Better to drop the subject. He should drop the subject. Instead he heard himself say:

"It was supposed to be anonymous, tricks. People we don't know."

Richard's face was blank. His body stiffened.

“If you want to talk about it.”

Jonathan hesitated. The dishwasher rumbled softly. No, he did not want to talk about it.

Richard suppressed a yawn. “You’ll finish up here? I’m gonna hit the sack.”

“The dinner—” Jonathan was desperate for him to stay.

“It was okay in the end, don’t you think.”

Richard looked at him strangely. The fine features were contorted. It appeared that he was laughing at him. Yes—he was definitely laughing. He was laughing and shaking his head.

Jonathan stumbled through the screen door and dragged the trash bags, bloated with the evening’s refuse, down the back stairs. The stairwell was narrow and the bags got caught between the planks of the balustrade at each turn. One of the bags had a small tear, and he smelled the chicken bones and wine sauce, and the skins of the potatoes and onions he had peeled, and the lettuce soggy and sour with vinegar.

He was forced to make two trips. At the pavement he hoisted the bags into the dumpster, and then he waited in the alley until the wind blew off the lake again and he shivered.

When he returned the kitchen was brightly lit. They had planned it that way. The kitchen was bright and clean and he hated it. He walked softly through the dining room and peered down the hall that ran the length of the house. The door at the far end was closed. He returned to the kitchen and turned the spigot on warm and let the water splash on his hands. He let the water run until his fingers were puckered and red and it was black out, and he knew that Richard had pulled the pillow over his face.