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Soothing the Lobster

By Julia van der Ryn

a short story about men, women, food, and service

The water is boiling. The water is hot and ready but he is still busy soothing the lobster. He strokes the lobster's back over and over again, keeping time with some music that must be in his own head because I can't hear anything. He stands over the red crustacean, holding it head down over the wood chopping block. In his white chef's jacket he looks like a health professional, like a doctor who does the opposite of heal.

As he strokes, the lobster's tail begins to relax, curling forward towards its head, achieving a yoga position I have never quite mastered called the scorpion. A sedate scorpion, whose venom-less, sweet meat will be untainted by the rush of death.

I have this problem with chefs. They always treat their food better than they treat me.

He walks away to chop some chives and leaves the lobster standing on its head, tail curled over, ignorant and om-ing. Massaged and relaxed, the lobster is too blessed- out to hear death calling its name.

He chops the chives with a rocking motion, a rocking-horse blade that causes the chives to not stick together, to be fluffy and sprinkle-worthy. The chives will be green snow littered on the white china around the lobster's brief reincarnation as something beautiful about to be eaten.

I don't want to see him put the lobster into the pot. I don't want to hear the screams that the chef says are only the sound of the steam escaping from the lobster's shell. I do not believe him for a minute.

I do not really understand why the poor lobster has to die for some rich, bulimic woman who will just go throw him up after dinner. But what do I know? I am just the server, the waitron, the brainless body, the transporter of the vessel. I carry the chef's message, his holy gastronomical grail.

Like the lobster, I am not so far from the boiling point myself. The bubbles of desire rise up from the heat source inside of me, disappearing faster and faster as they break against the invisible ceiling, where one self stops and another begins. Like water and air, the parts of my whole are all so different. They scream where they meet.

I think of the lobster awakening from the hypnotic pre-death trance that the chef has rubbed into its oddly vulnerable crustaceous exterior. The lobster picks the chef up with

one large claw. The chef, who is already predisposed to a boiled looking appearance due to his Scottish heritage of red hair and pale freckled skin, has no time to scream.

I am not a sadistic person. The image fades before the lobster can drop the chef into the pot.

Basically I enjoy this chef. He is better than most men. He can cook and like a holy roller who believes in himself more than anything else--he puts on a good show. I am glad that he is not my type. He is a blanched Gaelic specimen, whereas I prefer the Latin variety. The olive oil skinned, dark-blooded, steamy, tropical, exotic fruits. The Brazilian, The Turk, The Moroccan, The Etruscan, even The Greek Geek, have been my downfall.

That is why I am here now, the sexless server. I could have been a chef but I could never read a recipe through to the end. I had all the ingredients but all I ever made was a mess. I didn't know how to handle men so they handled me and over and over again I melted into a sticky protoplasmic mass, a will-less condiment with no main dish.

Men used to look at me. Now they are just looking at what's on the plate when I manage to set it before them. I stand behind them as they coyly talk politics and wine. I wait for that slight gesture of compliance as they lean just barely to one side allowing me to set the dish before them. They pause in their conversation and glance nonchalantly at their plate, as if they don't care.

But I know that they do care. They dare not acknowledge my presence but I bear food, nourishment, the chef's passionate marriage of flavors. I carry the dream.

We all have dreaming in common. Like the lobster before the pot, we want to be stroked into submission. We want to give-in, indulge, be pleased, transported, made weak at the knees.

Tonight the chef made me suffer. I was so hungry. He didn't make an extra plate and leave it to one side where it would wait until my hunger got the best of my pride and I would eat his food without being offered. It is unspoken between us, this unofficial exchange of feeder and eater. Tonight though, he doesn't play our usual game. I feel so empty knowing that no pleasure awaits me.

Only after I have served his chocolate truffles and little pastry boats of lemon curd and poured the cordial in the thimble glasses, does he remember me. He cooks up a portion of fish just for me. The fish is topped with a lemon sauce and small pieces of lobster. It is so sweet. The lobster melts in my mouth like candy. I forget everything. I forget that I have vowed not to eat the lobster. It is too late, the first forkful is gone, and a second one will follow.