

The Reluctant Cannibals

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Legend  Press

Independent Book Publisher

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Contents © Ian Flitcroft 2013

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ISBN 978-1-9093955935-9-6

Set in Times

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Cover design by Gudrun Jobst www.yotedesign.com

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Chapter I

Trinity Term 1969

It took two men to lift the dismembered carcass. The departure of its copper coffin was met with a brief but respectful silence. Respect that derived from the fact that it contained the mortal remains of what was undoubtedly the largest turbot ever to grace a dining table in Oxford. Once the moment had passed, the room began to fill again with the sound of conversation. Augustus Bloom discreetly turned his head towards the ear of his distinguished guest, Takeshi Tokoro.

‘You’re up next. Do you want me to introduce you?’ Dr Bloom whispered.

Mr Tokoro declined the offer with an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He then rose to his feet and stood motionless, waiting for silence. The others around the table appeared not to notice him as he remained quietly erect, with a posture no European could ever match. He had an austere dignity, but his slim five-foot-four-inch frame lacked the physical presence of his fellow diners. Apart from Dr Bloom, the other guests continued their animated conversations, not through disrespect but culinary enthusiasm; egged on it must be said by a particularly fine wine, a 1959 Condrieu. The shadow faculty of gastronomic science and their guests were barely halfway through the dinner but it was already clear that this was a night

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to be remembered. The sea urchin and fennel en papillote with its sublime, caramelised vermouth sauce had proved a magnificent success as a first course, but even this great dish had been eclipsed by the turbot – a recipe taken straight from the pages of the great man himself, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. A turbot of implausible proportion had been cooked whole in a copper fish kettle of even greater scale; poached with vegetables in a white wine and cream stock. By the time the fish was cooked, the sauce had transformed itself into a perfect chowder. Fillets of the turbot were served on a bed of spinach with the chowder presented to each person in a small silver salver to universal acclaim.

Augustus glared across the table, trying to catch the eye of the chaplain, Charles Pinker, who was being uncharacteristically talkative. With each passing second, Augustus felt an increasing sense of frustration. Mr Tokoro, accustomed to immediate deference due to his status within the diplomatic service, showed no hint of any such emotion. Augustus nervously fiddled with his cutlery. Tapping a glass with a spoon, the traditional method of calling the table to order, would certainly have worked, but Augustus held back for fear that Mr Tokoro might not appreciate the gesture. After a few more agonising seconds, he caught the eye of Charles Pinker across the table who correctly interpreted the impassioned, almost gymnastic movements of Dr Bloom's eyebrows. A discreet cough and tap of the elbow to his neighbour sent a signal that slowly spread around the table until the last man still talking, Professor Arthur Plantagenet, finally realised he was holding forth amidst the silence.

Mr Tokoro gave a slow and solemn bow. In an instant he turned the tables on his audience who tried to cover the embarrassment of their discourtesy by variously nodding and leaning forward in stilted half-bows.

'Distinguished Gentlemen,' said Mr Tokoro. 'I have the honour of bringing to you a national treasure of Japanese cuisine: Fugu-chiri.' Then, with perfectly timed theatricality,

he clapped his hands. This was a cue to Gerald, the senior common room steward, to open the doors for Mr Tokoro's Japanese chef who, in contrast to Mr Tokoro, had the dimensions of a sumo wrestler. He walked in carrying a large wooden chopping board on which twelve small fish had been laid out. A table was carried in behind him and placed in the recess of the large bay window. This was followed by a large copper pot and a spirit burner, which were placed at one end of the table.

The chef placed his chopping board down on the table and from his apron produced an impressive set of wood handled knives, whose metal blades bore the swirling pattern of a medieval Damascene sword. He then set to work removing the skin and filleting the fish with extraordinary speed and deftness. Mr Tokoro was the first to rise from his seat and walk over to inspect the process at closer quarters. The precedent having been set, the others quickly followed him. When it came to the last fish, Mr Tokoro said a few words in Japanese to the chef who, with a deferential bow, stood back from the table and handed the knife to him. Mr Tokoro was clearly skilled with the knife but not to the same level as his chef. He removed the fins and skin with great speed but was more hesitant on the internal organs. He neatly excised the liver and intestines in a manner that appeared to meet the chef's approval but in removing the ovaries he sliced through the edge of one of them and left it attached to the flesh. The only person who noticed his mistake could not remark on this dangerous oversight. The social rules that have defined Japan's society for centuries prevented the chef from passing comment, or taking any action that might have shown up a failure on the part of Mr Tokoro. The chef stepped forward, keenly aware Mr Tokoro was still closely observing him, and knowing there was no escape from his master's mistake. Without any flicker of emotion on his face, he placed all the fish fillets into the copper pan along with the light vegetable stock that had been brought back to the boil.

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There was great excitement in the anticipation and discussion of these little fish when they were finally served. Sadly the actual consumption created less impact. The light broth was subtle and delighted Mr Tokoro, but seemed lost on Western palates used to richer food. The flesh of the fish itself was almost too delicate and the flavour an ephemeral mist that barely registered on the taste buds compared to what had come before. It was Mr Tokoro who raised the last piece to his mouth, with the mixture of triumph and sadness that greets the end of a fine dish. It was the very last fillet he had prepared. He washed it down with the fine white Burgundy that had been picked to accompany this course. He normally preferred sake but had to acknowledge the superior subtlety of the Nuit St Georges.

It was not until the seaweed ice cream that Mr Tokoro felt the first erratic beat in his chest. The perspiration that appeared on his brow was initially merely an imperceptible moistening. His lips felt peculiar but he put that down to the coldness of the ice cream. After a reassuring sequence of regular beats, Mr Tokoro's heart fell into a syncopated rhythm that made him draw a deep breath, or at least try to. He raised his chin to take in air but his diaphragm sat motionless on top of his distended stomach. There were no outward signs of any problem until his fork fell from his hand, his fingers losing their power of grip.

Mr Tokoro went to rise from his chair. He started the movement easily enough but after he had elevated barely an inch, his body rebelled and refused to move further. He held this position for a second until gravity conquered his failing muscles. He slid to the floor, his weight dragging the tablecloth as he fell, bringing with him an array of cutlery and wine glasses. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Arthur Plantagenet's fast reactions, an almost half-full glass of Nuit St Georges would have been lost too. Mr Tokoro, his mouth opening and closing in a silent and ironic parody of the creature he had just eaten, looked up at the equally stricken face of his host,

Augustus Bloom. It is true that Dr Augustus Bloom was in possession of a medical degree, but it was obtained with little in the way of practical experience and his years in academia had dulled whatever limited resuscitation skills he had ever possessed. Augustus Bloom, his own heart racing from panic, fell to his knees and, for want of anything better to do, cradled Mr Tokoro's head in his hands.

'For Christ's sake will someone call an ambulance,' Augustus shouted.

Gerald, the senior common room steward, who might have been expected to be the first to respond, stood rooted to the spot with a look of complete terror on his face. Mr Tokoro's mouth continued to open and close silently for another few seconds and then stopped.

'Gerald, you heard the man. Go and get Potts to call an ambulance,' said Dr McIntyre.

Arthur Plantagenet was the only person in the room to remain quite calm. He emptied his wine glass and murmured to no-one in particular,

'What a bloody marvellous way to die.'