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The Plate Raider

Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut

Even when he was very little, Ernest Pardieu knew something wasn't right: his purée would be both thin and lumpy, carrots crumbled under his fork, and his steak was something a shoemaker might use.

Because she was either stingy or unskilled, his mother overcooked food or didn't salt it enough, and she avoided spices as if they were the work of the devil.

So as not to waste away completely, little Ernest developed the salutary habit of showing up—seemingly by accident—at his chubbiest classmates' houses just before dinnertime. An invitation to stay was inevitably extended, and never refused. Like a member of the family, Ernest enjoyed tender, juicy roasts cooked by *cordon bleu* mothers. He boldly eviscerated stuffed tomatoes, releasing juices redolent of shallot and saffron. He savored glazed slices of apple pie studded with raisins.

At the age of ten, with his considerable but still amateur savoir-faire, young Ernest Pardieu chose his goal in life: he would be a professional plate raider.

He found ways to crash birthday and tea parties, where he was just one child among others, but the most gluttonous and voracious of them all. He refined his approach tactics, excelled in the art of infiltration, and stopped eating at his mother's.

As a teenager, you would find him at drunken parties, arriving after the revelers had succumbed to liquor or psychedelics and sat sprawled in battered armchairs, leaving the refrigerator defenseless. Ernest Pardieu would then raid the cubes of fragrant cheese, chips, and dry sausage. He took everything and disdained nothing except peanuts, whose vulgar smell he hated.

As an adult, he swore off his earlier crude manners and lapses of taste, though he wasn't above stealing the occasional pacifier from an unsupervised baby.

Pardieu began to pay careful attention to his appearance, usually dressing in black and parting his hair on the side. At book launchings, he would casually lean on the display stand of a publisher whose works he had no intention of reading, stretch a practiced hand over a tray of petits fours, and eat them with an air of put-upon disillusionment. In fact, each mouthful was a little delight: the puff pastry sparkled when he bit into it, the zigzags of icing fired off bursts of coffee and chocolate, the little cream puffs exploded with sumptuous spurts of

confectioner's custard. Far from anchoring himself to a booth, Pardieu flitted from flower to flower, excited by the variety of foods available. He relieved a Breton publisher of a miniature vol-au-vent garnished with bits of scallop and seasoned with a drop of apple *pommeau*. At a Provençal colleague's, he nibbled at tomato confit mille-feuilles. At the booth of a national newspaper he savored rabbit rillettes in apricot jam and curried tandoori mussels served in little tasting spoons with curved handles. He elegantly downed oysters in lemongrass gelée, smoked salmon with guacamole, and green tea mousses. To mislead overly sharp-eyed waiters, he would occasionally say in a friendly voice to nobody in particular:

"Would you like me to bring you a few tasting spoons?"

Then, with a magnanimous gesture, he would scoop up a half dozen, and go off to eat them in peace.

Pardieu liked book parties, but he loved gallery openings, where he would mingle with the early crowd. He had a weakness for *verrines*, those little glasses full of marvelous layered ingredients, as delicate as jewels. He liked veloutés of avocado and shrimp brightened with a sprig of watercress, and chiffonades of Parma ham with slivers of melon, which were tiny gold and garnet gems. To fit in, he would take a verrine of four-spiced foie gras with crushed pear drizzled with honey and go stand in front of a painting chosen at random. There, he would nod a few times, step back, mutter something, lean closer to the work in question. This required hardly any effort and allowed him to savor the subtleties of the culinary creation at leisure.

If someone asked his opinion, he would pretend to only speak Hungarian. If someone asked for his card, he produced an ivory business card in the name of Zoltán Kosztolányi, a correspondent for *Magyar Posta*, an art magazine. This satisfied everyone and left the cosmopolitan plate raider a free field.

No doubt about it, it was a good life. Thanks to his talent, Ernest Pardieu had blossomed into a high-class parasite, on intimate terms with luxury and pleasure without having to open his wallet.

Just the same, he didn't want to be thought uncultured. To enhance his intellect, he spent time at both the Sorbonne and the Collège de France. Not to take classes, but to attend doctoral thesis defenses. These had two advantages: they presented the results of arduous research, and were followed by very pleasant cocktail parties.

True, he did have to sit through a few dry sessions. One involved the asymptotic analysis of layer limits in fluid mechanics, another an experimental study of the function of anaphoric marks of textual cohesion in linguistics. But overall, he was rarely bored, and during a physics defense he even learned that quarks have flavors.

Pardieu didn't choose the theses randomly. He came only when the doctoral candidate had a name from southwest France, which practically guaranteed a cocktail party with matchless delights. Thus, after a sociology defense that was especially hard to swallow, he was able to sample canapés of capered ringdove breast whose flavor he remembered long afterward. On another occasion he stuffed himself from a *dodine* of wild quail, followed by peppered pine nuts in dark chocolate.

Leaning against the walls of these venerable institutions, holding his little plate, Pardieu considered himself an accomplished humanist, who filled his belly only after having fed his brain.

One fall day, feeling a pang of hunger, he noticed a funeral party that was ending. A certain Monsieur Chanzy had just been buried, with a very well-dressed crowd in attendance. Trusting his instinct, Pardieu fell in behind a woman wearing an otter stole and mingled with the funeral party, which was heading for the late Chanzy's penultimate residence for a farewell buffet.

In the reception hallway, a long table set for a royal feast immediately caught Pardieu's eye. There was a profusion of dishes, from a salad of liver fried with truffles to a lobster chartreuse with chanterelles, by way of spiced roast pigeons. A cargolade of *petit-gris* snails stood next to an oyster tartare that suggested the Provence *garrigue*. A crème brûlée with chestnut preserves waited near macaroons stuffed with red fruit and cocoa-covered semolina cookies with *reINETTE* apple preserves. His appetite heightened by the rich smells and exotic aromas, Pardieu could hardly contain his joy. He waited impatiently for some hungry guest to give the signal to go on the attack.

As it happened, Ms. Otter Stole made the first move, wolfing down a guinea fowl ravioli. Pardieu promptly took a crab canapé. Otter Stole seized a tuna zucchini roulade. Pardieu countered with a snail flan in parsley cream.

Meanwhile, the other mourners were sharing vivid anecdotes about the dead man, stressing his wisdom and praising his sense of humor. Just as Pardieu was about to swallow a frog's legs fricassee in a hazelnut croûte, they turned to him so he could say a few words. He looked down and spoke in a choked voice.

"My memories of Monsieur Chanzy so far transcend words, I am reduced to silence."

The assembly found this delicate sentiment very moving, and went on to the next person, who spoke about the deceased's exemplary career:

"Augustin Chanzy was not only a man with a big heart, he was also an unrivaled researcher, a renowned scientist who will influence generations to come."

Finally free, Pardieu went back to enjoying the frog's legs. He picked up a piece of the golden crust and greedily lifted it to his lips while the panegyric dragged on.

"Let us salute Augustin Chanzy for his research on the eradication of the *hymenolepis* tapeworm..."

"Tell me about it," muttered Pardieu, taking a deliciously crunchy mouthful.

This turned out to be a mistake, because he immediately detected the hated taste of roasted peanuts. In revulsion, his body tried to expel them in a sneeze, but Pardieu violently repressed it, so as not to attract attention. As a result two large peanuts shot up into his nasopharynx and lodged in his nasal cavities. With these blocked, he was now in danger of suffocating. He tried to open his mouth to breathe but the soft caramel oozing from the croustade glued his teeth together and kept any air from entering.

In this way, his nose plugged and his lips tragically sealed, Ernest Pardieu died in the exercise of his duties at the very moment that the funeral oration for his host concluded:

"To the memory of Professor Chanzy, our late director of the Department of Parasitology."

Translated by William Rodarmor