

Cooking for an Orgy

Planning groceries is the difficult part. Matthew decides mussels steamed in white wine with asiago and cloves, but how many? The guest list is still a little vague. I fret about overcooking. If the timing is off they'll be rubbery. Will everyone politely eat them anyway? Or will the bowl remain full?

I do not like metaphors. They embarrass me with their indirection.

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One of the guests is a poet. Will she be the one to draw attention to the irony? She likes to be the most interesting person in the room. No gag goes unobserved.

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The hills are crusted with snow. The walking trails bare.

There is Rosé for the mussels, Pinot Grigio for the fruit, Syrah for the cheeses and soup, ice wine for desert; Oban scotch whiskey and a bottle of Courvoisier as a joke that can only be taken seriously.

Pillows in surplus. Soft blankets. Hand-blown glass bowls of mints. Scented candles—cardamon and gardenia—and in the foyer, a tier of honeycomb candles, hand-rolled into stiff pillars.

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Our budget is tight. We've made certain commitments to frugality. Living on less than we earn. This is a splurge.

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Potluck felt tasteless and, quite frankly, unpredictable. Too many dips. Not enough sweets. And preparing for a potluck makes a party a chore—awkward phone calls to inquire, Should I bring this or that? The agony of store-bought, even something lovely at the gourmet deli, instead of cooking from scratch. Besides, it's always the women who have to cook or buy or at the least decide. Here the women will be demurred to, politely requested, not taken, not treated with impertinence.

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The menu is oriented toward strong flavors, balanced tastes. Gruyère stuffed star anise with slices of Asian pears. Platters of low-gluten baguettes and twelve cheeses. Duck compote. Bitter slices of sugared ginger. Chocolates with Thai chilies. We're past the age where food doesn't matter.

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I'll need help. It's the only way. None of the women need help. We have talked about these things in advance, even before hints fluttered at the edges of conversation. The women come easily. They're familiar with appliance but don't need them. Why would they? It's always been easy.

For years I didn't believe this.

And then the facts starting coming in.

It began with a novel and a scene in which a high school girl has one. Easily. In public. I balked over wine. Male fantasy.

They set me straight, so to speak. Is there any other way to speak?

High school loves. Long nights of rubbing and preening. Simple as that.

Not for me.

I hope that I will be able to excuse myself now and then to bring out a new platter. Farmer's cheese with honeycomb, anyone? Corn gazpacho with tumeric. Here, have a raspberry tart. I've mastered pie crust. At least I can do that. I am the only one I know who can.

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A flock sits on the power lines. They shuffle closer and then apart. Their breasts puffed with winter plumage. The trees are gray against the gray fence against the gray house next door. The house has no windows on this side but our curtains will be drawn. They do not look best this way but we can't afford new window treatments.

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There is nothing else to do in January. All feasts are past.

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It's been awhile. Since everything.

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A quiver. Thinking about game hens as a main course. The birds seem to sense this and alight. The tearing apart of limbs, each their own bird, buttery juices on fingers and palms, arms and chins.

Teeth gnashing through crisp skin, sinking unresisted toward hollow bones.

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Walnut tart, six layers, a filling of mocha frosting and coated in firm chocolate icing. My favorite cake to make—the structure of the spongy layers lifted on processed walnuts only.

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There was a time when cooking appliances were disdained too.

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Matthew regales the menu, offers to shuck crab for the carrot soup, a purée that reminds me of baby food, too many years spent whirring the Quisinart. But the bright orange soup and the tender crab is too good, bowls swirled with crème fraîche, a hint of nutmeg, a creamy suggestion, warmth in the belly. We chop celery greens as a garnish.

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Our voices all sound the same. The accent, such as it is, is gone. We are congruent. Babies are like this. You have to know one to know one.

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In a dream a slip of paper had written on it: The man dreamed the woman dreamed she split the house in two.

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Longing is nothing. Joy less than that.

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They're talking about a parking lot but it's like they're talking about death.

They ask us if we are afraid of dying. We say no. They say, Everyone around you is dying, what's the big deal? We say we don't want to die. They say, But you don't really like living. We say, Good point. They say, So why don't you want to die? We say, Because we don't want to die.

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We have nothing to lose.

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Perhaps a lovely repast in the kitchen.