

## Endgame in the Cuisine Wars

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You've dressed up for this one. You're wearing a light cotton suit with just a hint of blue in it and a sun-reflector—for it's hot, and it's New York. Your shirt matches and your tie doesn't. "Tie-clashing"—according to Jeanne whose sharp-minded advice you always follow—shows that you are solid and middle of the road; but that you handle the unexpected. And you do. You carry a gun to every interview, even if the job description doesn't call for it. Guns impress. They always will.

The restaurant is a flashy Upper Eastside Manhattan job in a neighborhood where rich white guys with dreadlocks still skateboard down the avenues braving the unflinching sun, and where up-and-coming film-makers walk the sidewalks recording the steaming cement in front of them. You mop your forehead under the reflector, thankful that handkerchiefs are back in style. It's only thirty-four out, but the humidity is high. As it always is in New York. As it always will be.

There is a theory about art, that what makes something *art* is the intention of the artist. You look at the just-filmed sidewalk and you can see why people think this is true.

The restaurant has a brickless glass front that transparently portrays neatly arranged tables meant to be seen from the street. The tables are clothed in velvet, the candlesticks are thick and marbled like Roman columns, and the new crystal flatware twinkle like fallen stars. Class distinctions have been observed in all aspects of design, as you are to tell at a glance. The

glinting menu notice is charmingly marked, UNDER CONSTRUCTION, and it hints of gustatory pleasures to come: A simple scripted list, the chef's name bronzed, the names of his more famous works, the French, Latin, and Croatian, all untranslated, de rigueur. There are no prices listed. There never will be.

The owner is very well-known in financial circles. He bought up hundreds of acres of Canadian tundra for a song over twenty years ago, with large chunks of the Arctic circle thrown in. So prescient. The rumor on the web is that he wants to introduce penguin to New York. Free-range penguin. The subsequent web-buzz has generated numerous sites with black and white videos of penguin family life. Mom penguins feeding chick penguins. Daddy penguins fishing together. You can tell it's serious because they never dance, and because there are baby seals everywhere. This style of documentary—quickly and widely imitated like everything else these days—has come to be called penguin aesthetics. Smart man. He wants to eat penguin as little as you do.

The restaurant is not open for business. So you tap at the heavy glass with the butt of your Waterman. A small emaciated man slides back a door where you realize you didn't know a door was. He is balding, somewhat neurotic in gesture, and licks his lips when he sees you. His forehead bulges too. His eyes are pinched horizontally, the rest of his face is rounded and puffy, and he has no eyebrows. Negative charisma, lots of it. He is clearly mistaken about where he belongs.

You nod gravely at each other in the chill air, for he seems incapable of smiling, and you remove your sun-reflector. You show him your papers, and while he ponders them carefully, you take in your surroundings. A vast dining room lies open before you, just as the view from the sidewalk promised. The tables are spaced far enough apart for the ordinary New Yorker to

notice, and there are no mirrors to give the impression that the appearance of largesse is deceiving. They paid plenty. “These are fine,” he tells you.

A massively fat man in khaki is seated at a central table. He is not the owner of the restaurant. A waiter in black jeans and T-shirt stands by. Embedded silver studs ring his exposed neck. The fat man gesticulates wildly, besides himself with emotion. This is always a bad sign. You move towards him a little, your hand on the bulge in your jacket. You mean only to intimidate, not kill—not this time. You expected an incident, of course: incidents like this—*designer incidents*—are common interview devices for your sort of job. You always handle the matter professionally. You always refuse the job afterwards. Ethical revulsion: You’ve learned to live with your principles, regardless of the cost.

“Is *this* a tomato? I ask you, *is this a tomato?*” the fat man is half out of his seat, gasping out his words as fat people so often do. Something reddish is pronged on his fork and dangles precariously as he swings it around. Perhaps it was a tomato once. “I dunno,” the waiter responds softly, in a way that sounds very much like fear, “it *looks* like a tomato.” You move closer and the bulging forehead man says something to you that you don’t bother to hear. “No—this is *not* a tomato,” the fat man sings out, and you realize this is not rage, not fury, this is joy, ecstasy; “this is heaven this is the egg of the taste god this is genius,” he says. Something white and clotting leaks down his fork. The waiter too is smiling, you can see that now. “Can I have a bite?” he asks. The fat man rapidly pops the misshapen thing into his mouth and glares. “Don’t you have something to do?” he says, licking the fork repeatedly.

A man just this side of forty-five dressed in schoolgirl clothing approaches you. He has bright turquoise hair spikes which ring a bald spot and number two screws in his lips and cheeks. A small teddy bear hangs from a long chain around his neck, a lollipop is in his mouth. He has

blue lips. Dangling from his belt are dolls. He is extending the teddy bear towards you instead of a hand. You're momentarily nonplussed, unsure of the niceties of teddy-bear etiquette; are you supposed to grip it or what? He smiles and says: "thip eq plo plob. Heg lip —". "What?" you ask politely, but firmly, cutting the gibberish off. He takes the lollipop out of his mouth and says (again): "This is Alphone. He'd like to say hello, but he's shy and you're intimidating." After a pause, during which he intently looks into your eyes, he pushes Alphone down the top of his shirt. You stand six foot six and have a football player's physique: You can understand why Alphone might be intimidated. "That's alright," you say, watching the unmoving Alphone under the shirt. *This* is the manager. His skin is terrible: aging, pockmarks with something blackened in them, scabby lumps, eczema inflamed by years of cheap makeup and over-the-counter sunblock, inept tattoo erasures, remnants of numerous subcutaneous infections. You don't see the owner anywhere. You never will.

You're brought into the kitchen area where you're to wait while Apple—that's the name of the manager—gets you "materials." You notice the doors leading from the dining area into the kitchen areas. Metal. Fireproof. In code. Electric eye. Bombproof. Or at least, they look bombproof, which is usually just as good. The tomato incident did not prevent you from locating the positions of several cameras: You counted one, two, three—you suspect a fourth but did not have time to locate it. Two of the monitors are in the kitchen area, as you hoped.

Bobby Bland is nowhere to be seen. You know what he looks like, and that he is supposed to show up later. You hope that he will take a moment or two out of his busy schedule to meet with you, but you have doubts that will happen. It doesn't matter. The kitchen staff is well organized and unconcerned with your presence. They're moving slabs of different-colored

meats and various unmarked jars of fluids and jellies to and fro. Tonight's opening is a special evening and they are busy.

Off to the side, near hulking refrigerators, are four men sitting around a table on folding chairs. They seem detached from the bustle. Apple brings you over, and there are smirks. They are friendly towards *you* though: you're being interviewed for the guard position, right? pull up a chair don't be a stranger. They introduce themselves and you do likewise, first names all around: the two sous-chefs, a chauffeur, and a Manhattan-style valet—*his* chauffeur, *his* valet. Your eyes are drawn to the crinkled little green Buddha icons, potbellied laughing ones, that dottle one of the sous-chef's shirt. The other sous-chef has a nosebleed and is holding tissues to his nose while he talks animatedly.

They are impressed. You are a personal guard—a professional—and to cement the impression, you modestly tell several prepared anecdotes about previous jobs: Vicente Fox, Salman Rushdie, Donald Trump, Paris Hilton, a number of stunningly untalented rock musicians. To authenticate your claims you drop several unverifiable personal details: a recently bungled episode with a poodle, several politically incorrect remarks about Asians and shoes, tidbits about someone's fungal disorders, secret visits to Doctor Zizmore, smuggling activities in Latvia. They get the point. Everyone you mention is still alive.

They are relaxed with you now, more than half convinced, you suspect, that you're the one for the job, and they start treating you like family. The conversation turns to Bobby Bland. Not French, a genius, one sous-chef is saying, a genuine American genius. "You know much about him?" the chauffeur asks you. "Not really," you lie. "Oh, this will be a treat, then," he says with real enthusiasm. You stare. Nice guys always make things hard.

Bland was born in Kentucky, you're told ("Can you believe it?" the valet gushes), of British descent. "Nah that's just a rumor," one sous-chef says authoritatively, "his hair is dark he's instinctive about pasta can make successful cold dishes with fettuccine and rigatoni—he's got to be Sicilian like me." "No way," the other sous-chef, the one with the bleeding nose cuts in, "don't forget the marvelous things he's done to the chickpea," grinning, "there's a healthy number of Arabs back there somewhere or other—Lebanese probably since they're the best cooks —." The ethnic sparring goes on for a while. Then you drum your fingers lightly on your knees while they argue over whether the official spelling of "chickpea" should be changed to "chicpea." They decide yes.

You ask, during a momentary break in the conversation, "What's with the aging raver?" "Oh—PR made us hire him," the nosebleeding sous-chef says, "he's supposed to be seen irregularly by the customers induces nostalgia in the target demographic some sort of subliminal frisson or something. I forget." Everyone chortles and he tries to snort along—which leads to his attending to his nose again. "Who knows, right?" he says after a moment, a little defensively, "but they're A-one—got Bush elected for a third nonconsecutive term." You give a low whistle of sincere approval. *That* PR firm. Everyone beams, even the depressed valet. "Two thousand and twenty nine is going to be a very big year for us. November is going to be a very big month for us," the valet manages to say. Everyone nods.

"Say," the chauffeur says to you, "here we are sitting in a fucking *restaurant* and we haven't been very hospitable *at all*. Don't you want something to drink?" "Are we allowed to?" the clean-nosed sous-chef says, "I mean he hasn't been hired yet." This sous-chef is a bit stuck-up, you note with satisfaction. "Oh come on," the chauffeur responds. The way he leaps up impresses you with its physical energy. He moves to a refrigerator and pulls out a large plastic-

looking bottle clearly marked Hydrochloric Acid. Standard skull-and-crossbones logo. You stare like you're supposed to while everyone laughs. "What is *that* doing here?" you ask on cue.

"Recipe," the chauffeur says, barely able to contain his giggling. Everyone laughs again. They give you the recipe group style, interrupting each other, finishing each other's phrases, plenty of mirth all around: "Remove lobster meat from shell," one starts off. "*Discard meat,*" several voices say at once, "marinate shell in two cups 4 percent strength hydrochloric acid, two pieces of dried Laos root, three garlic cloves, peeled and bruised." They are all laughing now. "This is a joke, right?" you say, looking around at them. You know it's not a joke. The valet looks at you seriously, and everyone quiets down for him. You sense a tense respect. There's more going on here than appears. "It works," he says to you, "it really works." Everyone else nods. "The result is delicate and layered, better than good baklava, he sweetens it, taro root is involved, wineberry and cinchona bark stuffing—it's unbelievable." "I'll say," you say. "And," he goes on, "even people with shellfish allergies can eat it." The nosebleeding sous-chef says to the other one, "It stretches the mind it really does. I've been told by people *I didn't know how different different acids could taste*. As if they'd never heard of vinegar or lime."

"Christ, I've *heard* about his temper tantrums," the clean-nosed sous-chef says. "Not temper tantrums," the chauffeur interrupts, "pain depression workblocks acting out—there's a big difference." "Whatever," the sous-chef continues firmly. He doesn't like being interrupted. "I've heard about *those*—weeks go by he refuses to come out holed up in the hotel weird business with prostitutes—" "Oh god the prostitutes—" the valet sighs, "I have to send the recipes over *first*—douche twice with diced onion peanut celery salt one cup sour cream cilantro mashed vinegar eel—*pervert!* hissed at me over the phone by pimps—" "And and—" the sous-chef cuts him off, "people running out of the sauces not knowing what to do. Forgetting to rinse

off the lye. You know,” he says, turning to you, ‘he’s published cookbooks and they sell big they sell really big but he’s always leaving out ingredients steps in the algorithms, it says so in all the introductions like this is a good thing or something. He calls them *recipe-guides*. Same thing in the kitchen—you’ve got to watch him carefully see what he’s doing, always leaving stuff out even while he’s telling you what to do.” “But you’ve been working with him for a while,” the chauffeur says supportively. “Sure sure and I’ve got a good memory for feels pinch of this pinch of that—.” “*He’s amazing*,” the other sous-chef says, eyes bright and respectful, “he imitates Bland’s body language *perfectly*—I’ve never seen anything like it.” “Yeah yeah,” the clean-nosed sous-chef says depreciatingly, “who’d think being a mime would come in handy here?—I imitate him from behind so he doesn’t notice, the staff thinks I’m crazy but recalling how he twists his hands bends his body that often tells me—this much tarragon rubbed this long into the tofu. The problem is *I don’t understand his recipes*.” Everyone laughs. “Stuff left out?” you say helpfully. “No no it’s worse—*no one* understands them,” he explains. “They’ve got symbols like this and that—.” He grabs a napkin and scrawls some symbols on it with a pen. You look at the symbols while everyone gets mirthful again. “You’re joking,” you say. You mean it because you haven’t heard about this. “These are *mathematical* symbols—that’s an integral, if I’m not mistaken.” “Yep,” someone says. You don’t catch who. “Heat transfusion,” the valet says at the same time. “Eh?” you ask. “Fourier series,” he says, “*that’s* what it’s about. Food is chemistry plus thermodynamics.” “He won’t sauté,” the sous-chef pressing the handkerchief to his nose says glumly, “not ever. Evil. That’s what he calls sautéing. Evil. I *grew up* on sautéed food,” he *whines*, as I notice with satisfaction, “especially the vegetables. How can *that* be evil?” The other sous-chef responds: “*Retire the potato?* It’s all flash and glamour. You can’t take him seriously.” “No no that’s just *wrong*,” the chauffeur is waving his hands. They’ve argued about this before.



“You guys are just getting jaded you need to live on Chinese food for a week or two,” everyone laughs at this, even the valet. “No no, really, try *try to remember what ordinary food tastes like* why you can’t go back again—it’s all a matter of taste.” There’s a pause. And then the valet says, almost to no one in particular: “In Holland I wouldn’t have a problem. You just fill out forms—what you want I mean. Big breasts, but the bra a cup size larger still, stuffed with oatbreadcrumbs, small amount of clarified butter. Rosemary. *No problem*. They’re very sensible in Holland.”

“Bobby is a really interesting guy,” you venture cautiously, after a long silence. The stuffed bra seems to have momentarily sobered everyone up. The valet grimaces. “Really complex, anyway,” you add to conciliate. “The public likes that sort of thing. How come PR doesn’t bring him out into the media light a little more? Do a cooking show?” They’re all laughing at you again. “Have you ever *seen* him?” the valet asks. “Don’t be mean,” the chauffeur cuts in. “Well for one thing,” the clean-nosed sous-chef says, “his face is all scarred up.” “But ugly’s no objection ugly’s never an objection,” the other sous-chef says, “remember old man Perdue?” They are all nodding appreciatively. They’ve all seen the videos at the museum. You’ve seen them. Everyone has. “What poise what political acumen what *wisdom*,” the nose-bleeding sous-chef goes on, “never *never* a wrong move.” “It’s Bland’s *mouth* for sure,” the valet says glumly, “it’s his *personality*. Disordered.” The chauffeur sighs in agreement: “He *has* said things that taken out of context might seem a little cold a little uncaring a little mean.” “Like?” you ask. “Like he isn’t very interested in World Hunger because hungry people aren’t very discriminating about what they eat.” “Yeah,” you say, “out of context, that certainly could give the wrong impression.” “And like the time remember?” the chauffeur goes on, “that nursing mom, him saying *mother’s milk—it’s all just a bit too traditional isn’t it?* you know? with that

really obvious sneer?” You’re surprised at the revulsion welling up in you, powerful and deep. “He isn’t very ethnic-looking that’s really important these days no one likes looking at WASPs,” the nosebleeding sous-chef says.

The conversation has splintered. The valet is having trouble with his marriage. You learn this in snatches while he têtâtêts with the chauffeur. Visiting right. A daughter. Mother in AA. He hopes that’s working out. They’ve moved to Vermont. He tried to fight it. Too far away. Six hour drives. Can’t afford court. The chauffeur gives good advice. Keep calm keep negotiating don’t let any of this get under your skin think of the child keep the lawyers out of it. Stay calm stay calm. Meanwhile you’re treated to a description of an inspired Bland thinking up recipes: “Chop maim dice splay,” the clean-nosed sous-chef says. Waving his hands rolling his eyes dicing imaginary duckheads. “Hack dismember season,” he adds. This man *loves* gossip, you realize, the meaner the better. I have a daughter too, you think. “Natural gas. It’s just better,” someone nearby says.

You realize that you never got anything to drink. No second offer after the joke. You wonder whether the chauffeur just forgot when he saw the hydrochloric acid or if he planned the joke all along. You’re a little concerned that this question matters to you.

“Mind if I join you?” someone new asks. Apparently they do. Within minutes, everyone has scattered, excuses offered, *nice to have met you* tossed your way several times in passing. You’re nice to meet. He isn’t. And now you’re alone with him. He’s *really* unhealthy looking. Sort of yellow, something definitely wrong with his teeth. You’ve never seen teeth like that before. His lips are wrinkled and broken, scabby. Something smells too. He keeps touching you. He interrupts his words with little sighs and hiccups. You gather that he is a food critic and that he knows most of the details about the job you’re applying for.

“Amazing history,” he tells you, “born in Kentucky—white trash upbringing Spaghetti-Os swimming in Campbell’s tomato soup—that’s *breakfast*. Biscuits and gravy, roast chicken. Bright guy, became an engineer, some chemistry background—not much—did turbulence of all things—you know plane crashes—lived somewhere in Ohio married whitebread wife, kids with no ethnicity at all not even a drop—that weird blond thing. Tunafish sandwiches burgers steak mashed potatoes. Then there’s an accident at a building site, metal tube right through his face, serious brain damage, coma, wakes out of it gurgling like a baby. *Gla bla. Gla gla bla bla*. Putting anything he could reach into his mouth and drooling nonstop for weeks. Weeks. *Mommy? Mommy?* No hope, no hope at all. They put a television in the room. Celebrity chefs. Then suddenly a month or so on he can talk again—but only about food: amazing descriptions of food, discourses on the various textures of mashed potatoes the virtues of lemon curd on kippers, superkeen tongue and nose sensitivities. Divorces his long-suffering wife. *She microwaves.*” He holds his stomach briefly. “They *all* do that out there.”

You were briefed on all this history already. But you keep silent and use your eyes to give him the impression he’ll get somewhere if he keeps it up. Something might come along that you don’t know. He keeps touching you. That’s ok. It keeps your mind off the valet and focused.

“Everything is just taste and texture for him now including sex,” he tells you after he describes you as a very attractive young man. “Really unpromising beginning in the hospital letting him cook, looked therapeutic I guess. Really unpromising. Jellied dishes with sow’s ears—British cuisine I guess. But even then something was different: cayenne and cinnamon showing up unexpectedly, yams akimbo. If you tasted carefully, you knew this was just the beginning, that something really interesting was developing. Amazing guy that old Oliver Sacks. Brilliant. *He knew of course*. Wrote an article about him.”

“Think about it,” the yellowing food critic tells you. He’s warming to his subject and forgetting to hit on you. “Texture of limabean creamed with chocolate, coriander, finished with a dusting of flaked beetleshells—you’d think: *this is not going to work* this is *just* not going to work this is kind of *revolting* actually, but he figures it out: adds a touch of *seaweed*, and the tongue luxuriates in the result gives voice to praise.” “Uh huh,” you say.

“Revolutionary, a synthesizing brilliance we haven’t seen since since since—well it’s just unbelievable that’s all, a simple example: Rocky Mountain oysters. Olive oil dressing. That’s when I knew: genius. They’re so delicate so easy to drown the flavors. Olive oil? *No way*—everyone knows that only peasants eat them that way—obliterates everything—but *he* did it. The trick?” He pauses. “No one, and I mean *no one* saw this coming. Don’t use *virgin*.” He leans back appraisingly. “*He* can do *anything*. That’s when I knew.”

“No stopping him. Blend in small—very small—amounts of blowfish poison parsley white wine and *pine nuts*. Amazing. And vegan.”

“Subtle. Visual puns conceptual pieces *food sculpture*. That’s when the phrase was invented. For him of course. Apple pie with real dirt in it. Only the beginning. Think of this: some soil—mint leaves growing out of it roots slugs a very young frog—*stunned* so it doesn’t run off and spoil the effect. You eat *the whole thing*.” He arches an eyebrow and you nod appreciatively.

“New flavors,” he tells you, “heavy metals are the trick. And afterflavors. Imagine new colors—it’s *that* radical. Revolutionized the donut—who would have thought *that* was possible? And what a biography. Megamillion negotiations with St. Martin’s and Little Brown. Small glitch because he doesn’t want anything in it to be true.” “In the biography,” you say, because you’re not sure you heard what you heard. “Right,” he says. “You’d think, the way biography is

done these days, no problem. *Nothing* true, though. *Nothing*. There might be a problem with street names. All the street names have been changed to protect the innocent.” You laugh politely with him.

“Not above catering to the masses,” he tells you, giggling over the pun, and you grimace along. You’ve realized one thing that’s up with his teeth. They move. Teeth aren’t supposed to move. “St. John’s Wart dappled on mushroom finished with a light white lobster sauce and aspirin speckles. Amazing texture rush but it’s not his best work. Insufficient integration. Especially with respect to the aspirin.”

Apple shows up. Ventriloquism. Badly done. Alphone apologizes for the long wait, ushers out the food critic who tells you good-bye with real longing. Alphone explains that there was an accident and all the spare copies of the Briefing Brochure have dissolved. There’s still a video. But let’s look at your résumé first. “It says here on the résumé that you speak French. That’s important.” “Parlay vouze fransay,” you say helpfully. “Say what?” he says. “It’s French,” you tell him. “Oh,” he says, “whatever.”

“You know this job is about protecting Bland from terrorism?” he asks you, “*French* terrorism?” “I know,” you say. “They think we’ve stolen everything cultural from them and poisoned it with Mickey Mouse.” “I know,” you say. “Philosophy. Mathematics. Literature. Modern Art. The Web. The Statue of Liberty. Jazz. Kinko’s.” “Right,” you say. “They blame Disney. The videos. American television. Burger King. Buffy reruns.” “Yes,” you say. “They draw the line at food. No way Americans are going to take over food too. It’s all they’ve got left.” “That’s right,” you say. He leans forward, Alphone is mute and unmoving on his chest. This is obviously too serious for a toy bear. “French Culinary Institute.” “Oh?” you say. “They’re the ones.” “Yes?” you say. “Right here in Manhattan,” he tells you. “I’ve eaten there,”

you say. He stares. “I know stuff about them,” you add. The bear remains expressionless. But Apple smiles. It was the right thing to say.

“Hey,” Alphone says with surprise, Apple looking up from your résumé, “you’re older than you look—by a *lot*.” He’s impressed. You’re always doing that to people. You casually lay a muscled arm on the table. “Healthy lifestyle,” you say, “fruits and vegetables. Organic greens. No chicken. Not ever.” “Uh huh,” he says. Since you haven’t mentioned vitamin supplements, he has no clue what you’re talking about.”

*Right this way*, you’re told. Someone else is in the viewing room already. Young square-jawed midwestern. He identifies you as a contender, tightens up his body language. “Howdy,” he says. You howdy back. You’re relaxed. This is a lot bigger than he realizes. He doesn’t have a chance.

You watch film clips together. A senile Derrida is saying something that is hard to understand. No subtitles to help. Then Deleuze is speaking. He is also incomprehensible. And there are no subtitles. Now a younger man—also French—is castigating Bobby Bland. He can be understood. Outrage to France. Outrage to Canada. Well, part of it anyway. Outrage to Haiti. There’s a lot of audience participation. Stomping and whistling. More outrage. Questions from the floor. *What can we do about this?* What can we do *now*? People are starting to cook this way. Sackrah Blew.

“Uh, I’m a little confused here,” the square-jawed midwesterner says suddenly, sitting up in his chair, “can we have a little clarification, please?” The video stops midtrack French fingers raised in the air French mouths distended in rage. The lights turn on. Nice trick. Voice activated. “Yes?” the bear ask. “Um—these guys they’re French right?” “Yes?” “And like there’s no dubbing here did I understand that correctly?” “Yes?” Alphone says. “They’re like speaking in

*English*. Do I have this right?” “Yes?” Alphone says again. Same tone of voice. “Well I’m really confused here. I really am. You’re going to have to explain this a little. Some clarity would be really helpful right about now.” “What seems to be the problem, sir?” *Very* polite bear. You didn’t realize he had it in him. “Accents. These guys are speaking English and they don’t have any accents.” “What sort of accent were you hoping for, exactly?” You’re sensing sarcasm. A sarcastic bear. “Um, well, a *French* accent would do nicely, don’t you think?” Sarcasm back. You’re impressed. “These guys the audience too they could be like from *Chicago* for all I know. I mean except when they say *Americano* or *gringo* like in *gringo art*. Just before the bit on Cultural Imperialism, the last evil. I heard it twice. Then they sounded Spanish. Sort of. I mean like what’s up with that anyway? I don’t get it. Do you get it?” he asks you. You don’t respond here. He’s drowning alone here. They always do.

“Accent,” the bear says, “that’s part of the problem. That’s the subtext of the whole thing here. *The French accent is extinct*. There *haven’t been* any French accents for *over a decade*. And because of this—because French sounds so bad without its accent—the French language is dying out *too*.” “Oh shit,” the midwestern guy says, “I hadn’t heard *this*. Is this true? Really?” He looks to the bear for clarification. Silence. No change in expression. “I’m from Wisconsin,” he then tells you. Some excuse. You offer no sympathy either. “There are still patches here and there—old people mostly,” the bear says finally, “but who listens to old people anymore?” “You *heard* about this?” the midwestern guy says to you incredulously. “They blame Disney,” you tell him finally, “all those illegal imports the children kept watching on the Web without appropriate *dubbing*. Little Mermaid, Hercules. And television. Nick at Night. Jerry Lewis. So *many* of them sound like Jerry Lewis now.” You carefully keep the bitterness out of your voice. “How can

*anyone* speak French if they sound like Jerry Lewis? It’s all over the Web,” you tell him sadly, “they’ve been grousing about it for *years*.” You pause. “In *English*.”

“It’s not totally gone,” the surprisingly insightful bear says, “you can still hear the accent a little in English words, kind of like insects in amber: restaurant, chef-d’oeuvre, decoupage, chauffeur, valet, cellardoor. *Word-colonization* they call it. Outside English, in the language vacuum that is now French, it’s gone without a trace.” “That’s eloquently put,” you tell Alphone with genuine admiration, “that’s really quite eloquent.” “Somebody French said it,” Alphone responds, “in English.”

“A whole language gone,” the midwestern guy says. He’s bolt upright, stunned. The magnitude of what America, his America, has done, is still doing, is sinking in. He really understands. He may be a good man some day. “*French* still exists,” Alphone says, correcting him, “but it’s fading fast. So many of the French are depressed because of the way it sounds now—they’ve just caved in—they just speak English. Like you saw on the video.”

“Schools are springing up,” Apple adds, “French accent schools, but it’s just desperation. People blocking their noses with cotton, operations to make the adenoids bigger. Just not the same.” “*Spanish* accents are not extinct,” you tell the midwesterner, not *yet* anyway.”

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You’re in the dining room, which is beginning to fill up. The bulging forehead guy checks each card carefully before letting anyone in. Many are turned away. You stroll around authoritatively, smiling when someone catches your eye. The chauffeur and the valet are at their own table but you avoid it. “On a bed of baby snail shells,” you hear, “delicious, textured.” “Plenty of calcium too.” “Bustling with ruderal and chickweed.” “Camel-hump.” Bland is in the kitchen area. You still haven’t met him. You were moved out into the dining area when it was



announced that he was on his way over. “Don’t worry,” Alphone had reassured you before disappearing back into the kitchen area, “you’ll meet him for sure but not just now. Too much going on.”

“Cherrywood finish,” you overhear, “because of the wasps.” The food critic is sitting near the window with a hulking woman in a layered black evening dress. There is an attractive couple at the next table. You try not to look at them. “Thematizing the Midwest,” is said, “sort of like Joseph Cornell and Queens for the tongue.”

Someone is giving the bulging forehead guy a hard time. He’s wearing gray and doesn’t seem to like where he’s been seated. He waves some credentials around, but you can’t see what they are. He’s reseated within ten minutes, after two waiters confer with the bulging forehead guy. He’s now within sight of one of the cameras, you notice. You don’t know if its monitor is in the kitchen area. This is a gamble.

Some of the food smells quite good. You’re approached by the chauffeur who again apologizes for neglecting you. He wonders if you’d like something. There are some marvelous choices. You beg off, mentioning butterflies in your stomach. “*Oh yes—they were good, weren’t they?*” he says. You nod and let the mistake pass. You don’t know if you have the job yet, you explain to him, “and this sort of thing always makes me nervous.” “You’ve got nothing to worry about,” he tells you, “no one else even came close. That’s why you’re still here.” “Maybe later I’ll eat,” you tell him.

You realize, about the same time a waiter does, that the man in gray has taken out a spice rack. He is quite methodically re-spicing the food on his plate, making disapproving gestures and smacking sounds while shaking his head. The waiter approaches him quickly, the same one you saw when you first arrived at the restaurant. “Sir? sir?” real fear in his voice, you can see the

difference now, “you *really* shouldn’t do that in here.” You don’t catch the low-voiced response, but the waiter interrupts, “no no you don’t *understand* you really *can’t* do *that*, please listen—.”

It’s too late. The metal kitchen doors burst open and a screaming Bobby Bland, a mop of blond hair over a scar-tissued face, is waving a knife, a big one, horror-movie style. It worked. You didn’t expect that. You expected it all to take a lot longer. Weeks longer. The gray-suited man dives for the floor as you pull out your machine pistol, and pummel Bobby Bland with bullets. He’s dead for sure. You then spray the restaurant, crystal bursting in air and dented candle sticks falling asunder. You kill the rest of the clientele—apart from the gray-suited man—the picture windows suddenly waterfalls of splintering glass. *Marred*, you say aloud as you shoot. That’s a description of everything you’ve seen today. Nearly. You’ve spared the chauffeur and the valet. The sous-chefs too since they haven’t come out from the kitchen area. The blistering heat bursts in over the bloody dining room like the third world at dawn. You step over the broken glass into the street, and move quickly. They won’t catch you. They never do.

Guess what? You *work* for the French. In fact, you *are* French and you have no accent either.

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You and Jeanne are eating dinner together some days later. Your daughter is asleep in the bedroom. In France. “You always describe people so horribly,” Jeanne tells you, “they’re not always like that you know.” “Maybe,” you say. But you think: How would you know? *You’re here and safe*. “Is it so bad,” you say, “that I want to dislike the people I kill? That’s a good trait to have isn’t it?” She doesn’t say anything. You both eat. Steak. Potatoes. Lima beans. Traditional French food like what normal people eat. And there are popsicles for dessert. Grape ones.

You think about Angelo, Habib, Joe and Dave while you chew. You're willing to think of their names now that you know they lived. A happy ending is when you get to spare the people you wanted to spare. You're happy. You hope Dave is doing alright. You hope he's *moved*. Vermont is nice. He should go there and try to work things out with his wife. There are things to cook there. Flapjacks for example. Flapjacks are nice.