

The Trouble with Dining Out

A stroll to the restaurant had seemed like a good idea but it was still too humid and Roma's heels were too high. They wove through the Sunday evening crowds on the seafront, past the brass band and the balloon vendors. It was high tide and clouds of spray rose up over the sea wall. A family was having their picture taken in front of the Gandhi statue – Roma called out to Amit but he walked squarely into the shot.

As they turned into a side street Roma glanced down: her foot looked strangled by the gold straps of her sandal, the second toe raised, as if struggling for air, the little toe pinker than usual under the slash of dark polish.

'It's only five minutes away. And no one asked you to wear those shoes,' said Amit.

'You have a big sweat patch on your back,' said Roma.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they paused in the sudden chill of the foyer, waiting for the hostess's attention.

‘Does my shirt still look . . . ?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she lied.

When the hostess turned to them, she murmured in a tone that spoke of marble, mirrors and soft leather.

Amit said to Roma: ‘They are already here.’

They followed the hostess down the aisle, stepping in and out of pools of light, past a water feature and towers of orchids to the corner table where Brij and Sabine sat like forms carved into the restaurant’s dark wood panels. Behind them a searchlight caught the shimmer of rolling waves.

‘Brij,’ said Amit.

‘Amit,’ said Brij.

‘Gosh,’ said Sabine.

The hostess smiled and walked away without a sound, the light catching her earrings.

Roma noted that Sabine’s hair was newly bobbed and looked like it had been styled in consultation with the restaurant’s architects. She wondered how long it would be before Paris was mentioned. Sabine had a French grandparent, long dead, who was invoked whenever possible. Formerly called Sabina, she had snipped off the last syllable. And even though she spoke little French, the words she knew she pronounced with a histrionic correctness.

‘Roma,’ said Brij.

He leaned in to kiss her, smiling like a man who turned on his good humour with a tap on a touchscreen. Roma felt his hand slide down her back, his thumb lingering and pressing into her spine. She drew back and her hip knocked against the table. A glass shook. She looked to see if Amit or Sabine had noticed but they were trying to recall when they had last seen each other.

‘I give up, it’s too difficult,’ said Sabine, leaning back in her seat.

‘I have already ordered the wine. It’s a goodie. Hope that’s okay,’ said Brij.

‘Absolutely fine. You’re the man for that,’ said Amit.

Roma put her clutch down on a corner of the table and shifted in her seat. Brij was looking at her breasts. There was no suggestion of a glimpse or a peek; his was a studied appraisal, a tour of the flesh below her collarbone, the dip of her neckline and the swell of her blouse. She cast her eyes downwards to see if she had any cleavage showing, whether fabric had ridden down or a seam slipped. He caught the look and acknowledged it as a sign of consensus.

Roma looked again at Amit but he appeared oblivious. Conscious of Brij’s numerous trusteeships and directorships, he was talking about the difficulties in getting a position as an orthopaedic consultant in the premier hospitals. He mentioned a trauma symposium he was to attend in Edinburgh and the tightness of his schedule. He said that it was great to be so busy. He shrugged, smiled and shifted his chopsticks about on the table.

It was obvious to Roma that Brij was not listening to a word Amit said of his work conditions or his plans for advancement. She too had stopped listening – all she could focus on was the sight of Brij’s fingers stroking the surface of the tablecloth, running lazy loops from his glass to the edge of the table.

Sabine said that the previous night had stretched into the early hours and they were feeling the effects: drinks and dinner with a friend who was a curator at the Musée d’Orsay.

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Brij. ‘I’m absolutely fine.’

‘He was telling us about a recent acquisition they have made, a stunning mahogany art deco dressing table. The way dear Eustache describes these treasures, he really makes them come alive. But such a tragedy, the original mirror broke in transit and will have to be replaced. Of course, it was insured and blah blah blah but that’s it, the piece will never be the same again,’ said Sabine.

The waiter placed a bowl before Roma. Pieces of conger eel glistened in their broth, its surface flecked with yellow chrysanthemum petals. The steam smelt of the dark rock pools that appeared on the shore when the tide drew out.

‘Looks delicious,’ said Brij to Roma.

‘This is all so light and lovely, doesn’t at all upset the regime,’ said Sabine with a profoundly guttural ‘r’.

Brij reached for the bottle of wine and motioned towards Roma’s half full glass.

‘No thanks, I’m fine for now,’ she said.

He poured anyway, to about an inch from the top, looking at her the whole time. Sabine put down her chopsticks. Amit picked his up.

‘Coming back to what we were saying,’ said Sabine, ‘I think it’s too fussy, too loud and showy. Whose benefit is all this for? I don’t understand why the organisers can’t show a little, I don’t know, *restraint*.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Amit.

Roma braved a glance at Brij. There were plenty of women – and men too, she supposed – who would find him handsome, dashing even. He had fleshy lips that seemed to move even when he was not talking or eating. His hair was slightly longer than it ought to be, curling up over his collar, a mark of some imagined iconoclasm. He looked like he had

shaved recently, his jaw appearing almost laundered. She imagined his bathroom cabinet: a deadly blade lodged in an old-fashioned razor; a tortoiseshell comb with sharp teeth; cubes of odourless soaps; aftershave lotions that burned on impact.

‘The hyoid bone is here, quite high up in the throat area. I don’t see how he can have broken that while dancing,’ said Amit.

‘I didn’t say he was a good dancer,’ said Sabine.

Brij leaned back in his chair and looked at Roma again. He picked up his glass and took a large sip.

Roma ran her finger over the smooth surface of the chopstick rest. It could have been a fossil, a product of the world tamping down its past, layers of *urushi* and pine needles and seashell and gold leaf coalescing into this precise element of tableware. She closed her fist around it and let it grow hot in her hand.

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A waiter placed a bloom of pufferfish sashimi on the table, served with a thimble of *ponzu* sauce, the slices cut so thin that they looked like they would pop when pierced.

‘Sarita’s delightful when she needs a favour but the rest of the time she’s an absolute seven-star witch. You know, she has a PA now? How much organisation can it take to show up at the gym by three in the afternoon? Oh but I forget, she had that job as creative muse for that oaf in Dubai. Although that was a while ago. Anyway, this PA, God only knows where Sarita fished her out from,’ said Sabine.

Roma’s skin felt raw from having been out in the sun. Earlier in the day, as Amit dozed on the balcony, she had

slipped out of the hotel room and taken a taxi to a nearby beach. But it was the wrong beach. There was a smell of dried fish in the air, crows pecked at rotting fruit, and a wave left a plastic bag wrapped around her foot. Then she had seen a dead turtle beached on the sand.

Sabine had turned to the subject of Brij's brother who was in the middle of a divorce in New York.

'So, first his wife tried to hack his emails, of course with no success since she lacks any kind of expertise, technical or otherwise. Then she went out and bought an audio surveillance transmitter to listen to the conversations he had in his car. It just wouldn't be believable, even in some awful airport novel,' said Sabine.

'Isn't that illegal wiretapping?' asked Amit.

'Of course it is, but Brij's sister-in-law wouldn't let something as trivial as legality get in the way of her personality disorders.'

'This can't be true.'

'There's so much more I could tell you. He decided not to go to the police for the sake of the children.'

'What could have got into her?'

'She actually said that she didn't understand what all the fuss was about, that if he had nothing to hide, he wouldn't care whether anyone listened to his conversations or not.'

'She just cracked, I suppose,' said Brij. After a pause: 'What do you think Roma?'

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'But can you understand what they are actually doing on stage?' asked Amit.

'You have to place it in context,' said Sabine.

'In the context of what?'

'Of what they are trying to achieve. It's not really a performance, more of a slow descent into a primal state.'

'I see.'

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She was convinced now that Amit was only pretending not to notice, that it was convenient and comfortable for him not to react. There was a teardrop of dry skin just below his right ear, red and peeling. She recalled her insistence the day before that they should cancel the dinner. They were on holiday and a chance meeting with Brij and Sabine did not have to turn into an elaborate night out, hours of protocol and performance. But Amit had chipped away at her resistance that night and the next morning.

'At least come for the food. It's an award-winning restaurant – we're lucky it's arrived in India. And in Pondicherry, of all places.'

She thought of her flair for capitulation, the pride that she believed could no longer be injured, the daily increase in her lassitude; she thought of the long evenings she had spent providing Amit with encouragement and reassurance; she thought of the praise she had lavished and the counsel she had kept; she thought of the bags meticulously packed, the dinner parties organised, the family members appeased; she thought of the husbandry, the administration, the sex. She had faced the hot fear that nothing would ever be enough for her and she had resisted it.

And she thought that if she looked across the table now, Brij would be smirking at her with the decisive carnality of someone who had never suffered a snub.

‘I love the delicacy of Swiss villages,’ said Sabine, ‘they look like a flick of the wrist would make them tumble down the valley.’

Roma tilted her glass, the surface of the water forming a deep slant. It was not as if there had never been temptation or opportunity. There had been men, at least two, who had thrilled and disturbed her, men who had promised to gild her with exhilaration, one whose throwaway utterances she had studied like coded messages, and another whose wife she had been forced to let go as a friend in order to avoid seeing him.

She glanced at Amit. His back looked hunched, his voice sounded craven, his conversation was wretched when it was not asinine. She realised that over the years a hard, contemptuous thing had trailed her, like an object attached to her hem. It had witnessed the anniversary dinners, the surprise bottles of perfume, the weekend trips with other couples. And it had ended up here, coiled in a corner of the restaurant, scene of Amit’s deliberate blindness to the grim seduction being played out in front of him.

The waiter set down the tempura of silver sillago and angelica tree buds, piled on the dish like a heap of severed claws.

‘I saw a dead turtle on the beach today,’ said Roma.

But they were all laughing at Brij’s joke and did not hear her.

If she sedated herself, dulled all her responses, neutralised anything that fell within the realm of disgust or outrage, she could see herself walking into a hotel suite with Brij. The set of rooms he always took, with the flowers as they should be, the corner lamps lit in the middle of the afternoon, a view of the sea. He would be impatient, proceedings would begin

seconds after the key card was slipped into its slot and the door kicked shut. She would try to identify the taste in his mouth, the maltiness of beer, the freshness of aniseed. There might be a brief interlude as drinks were poured, not a concession to romance but a mechanical imperative: fuel or lubrication. The champagne would foam over his wrists and leave a wet trail on the thick pile. She imagined that he would want to touch her cheek, drag his chin down its length so that she could feel the graze of his stubble before his fingers pressed into the base of her neck.

‘Excuse me for just a moment,’ said Roma, tossing her napkin on to the table. Picking up her clutch, she turned to go to the ladies’, aware that the conversation would falter the moment her back was turned, that Brij and Sabine would watch her walk across the restaurant, see the light catch the span of silk at her waist, read the motion of her shoulders, sense the heat from her skin.

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She pushed open the heavy wooden door and put her bag down on the marble top. She applied a little powder over her face to temper the flush, put some hydrating drops into her eyes and touched up her lipstick. She re-pinned her *pallu* to reveal a little more above her neckline. Then she made her way back to the table, head lowered, the gait of the desirable, conceding the inevitability of the room’s gaze, allowing it as part of a social pact. It was only temporary; she knew that all too well. In time a new bargain would have to be made with her body.

A glass partition ran along one side of the passage, a sheet that appeared to have trapped within it chunks of melting ice,

wisps of smoke, crystals and gems. Through the glass she could make out the shape of their table, the hazy sheen of Sabine's hair, the movement of Amit's gesturing hands, Brij's solid mass.

'What did I miss?' she asked, sitting down, smoothing the stiff cotton of the napkin over her lap and then looking directly at Brij.

Sake had arrived in her absence and she let it burn its way down her throat.

'Brij was telling us about Africa,' said Amit.

'Tell me about Africa,' said Roma to Brij.

'I would love to tell you about Africa.'

'Any particular part of it?'

'Mozambique.'

'Mozambique.'

'Massive coal reserves. We have just started something there now. They are bending over backwards, rolling out every red carpet. It's really something to see.'

'I'm sure it is. So what else are you doing?'

'We are looking at Liberia too.'

'And how does Liberia look?'

'Pretty damn promising at the moment. Gold, diamonds, iron ore. There's huge potential there. We have some contacts in Monrovia, so hopefully things will move fast. There's definitely a new scramble on.'

Brij laughed.

Sabine looked tired now. Every few minutes she closed her eyes for a couple of seconds as if she was trying to instigate a revival. One of her hands moved with a slight tremor. Her neck looked thin and frail. It would not be able to bear the weight of her head for much longer, the tissue

would fall away, the tendons would strain and snap. The lights on the promenade behind were strung out in a sequence of white, gold and amber until they stopped dead at the blackness of the sea.

‘Can you remember their names, the people we met at Victor’s?’ asked Amit.

Roma ignored him, not even bothering with a shrug or a nod. It was as if he had said nothing at all. She kept her eyes on Brij, her expression flickering at the edges of amusement and enquiry. He looked like he was toying with the inevitable outcome of his desire, tossing it from one hand to the other, already on the verge of becoming bored with it.

The hostess returned to ask how they were enjoying their evening and made a minute adjustment to one of the fleshy stems in the table centrepiece.

Amit began an account, who knew whether true or false, from his time in medical college, a time of high jinks, when his spirit of adventure involved him in fiendish capers, when he and his close-knit group of friends entertained and bewitched in equal measure. Roma’s mind drifted to the walk back to their hotel, the silence in the room as they got ready for bed. She saw the web of hairs that fanned out from Amit’s navel, glistening over his nascent paunch, a place that he scratched often as he slept. She made a knot in the napkin on her lap, and then another, and one more, until it was a gnarled ball that she could let drop on to the floor. It landed in the middle of the aisle, unseen by the others.

Roma continued to fix her gaze on Brij. She made sure he was not listening to Amit, locking her hands loosely on the table, parting her lips, leaving a space that would only just accommodate the tip of an index finger.

'Crazy days,' said Amit.

'But long gone,' said Sabine, 'and now what?'

'We have a bright future,' said Brij.

He ordered another bottle of wine and nodded at an acquaintance at another table. Then he turned back to Roma.

'Would you like me to tell you what the future holds?' she asked.

'Please do.'

'You'll have to give me your hand.'

'My hand?'

'The future is written on your palm.'

'I see, you're a palmist, are you?'

'I am.'

Amit was immobile; Roma could see his unchanged profile.

She took Brij's hand. His fingers were long and thick and seemed full of a latent energy, intending at any moment to try and escape her clasp. If there was anything to be done, they would do it. She ran a nail over a deep-set groove on his palm.

'This, you see, is the life line.'

'I see.'

'You seem to have been blessed with an endless one.'

'Really?'

'It looks like it goes halfway up your wrist.'

'If you say so, Roma.'

She pulled his hand closer and undid the clasp of his cufflink. She lifted the onyx panther head clear of the button-hole and dropped the cufflink on to the table. Slowly and precisely, she folded his cuff back up along his arm until it formed a neat band under his elbow. His forearm was pale, firm, a thick vein forking its way towards his palm. She ran her fingers down his arm, her thumb settling on his wrist.

‘Look at that,’ she said. ‘The line stops here. This is where it ends.’

She could feel his pulse, a great clap that was like the sound of something approaching, a beat that matched the rhythm of the trembling walls, the seesawing ceiling, the night sky of Pondicherry rotating over the sea.

She gripped Brij’s hand hard and lifted her head to look at Amit. He was gazing at the cufflink, his features showing only a sad harmlessness.

She leaned forward, the edge of the table digging into her stomach.

Sabine was sliding a scallop around on her plate: shifting, propelling but not eating.

Brij took back his hand and raised his glass.

‘Cheers, Roma,’ he said.

Amit looked at Sabine’s bowed head and then back at his lap before letting out a delicate cough.

Two waiters hurried past their table towards the water feature that had begun to spurt ungainly jets over the stone rim and on to the parquet. Another waiter was laying down towels as a fourth struggled with the tap at the base of the wall. A momentary hush descended on the restaurant and it seemed to Roma like the most human reverberation she had ever heard. Sabine’s eyes were closed, Brij was putting his cufflink back on, Amit’s hands lay flat in his lap. Behind them a thin runnel was inching down the aisle between two sets of tables. The hostess gestured to the waiter with a finger, avoided the splash with an elegant hop and walked back towards her station.