And then they feed you again

by Arithanas

Summary

Anton Ego needed to do something with his spare time.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Anton Ego swirled the wine in his cup and sighed.

The small bistro was full to bursting. Alfredo had done a wonderful job training the waiters, Anton thought, smiling as the young, Indian girl offered him desserts for the third time. She smiled back and suggested a cup of espresso this time. He nodded sadly.

There was no way to avoid it anymore. He must return to his lonely house, to his silent entombment and to his new project that had proved to be both difficult and amusing. With a chagrined smirk, Anton Ego sipped the last of his wine.

The young waiter put the coffee on his table and turned her back almost immediately. Anton noticed how she stood by his side hugging the tray. Her lips parted for a second but she turned around without uttering a word. Anton cocked his head, intrigued. The wine cup tilted dangerously in his hand.

The double doors to the kitchen opened and madame Tatou crossed the line between her domain and Alfredo’s, striding confidently, carrying two glasses of ice water. The stained apron sat around her waist like a crown; a testament to her mastery. Anton bowed his head and his smile widened.

“Anton, we need to talk,” Colette said, placing a glass in front of her favorite patron.

“Is there anything the kitchen needs?”
“A better qualified chef, if you are turning down my desserts and returning my dishes with food still on them,” Colette accused, arms crossed and elbows on the table. “And today we have a rhubarb and apricot clafoutis done just for you. I would have said nothing for a day, but it has been three weeks of this.”

Anton looked at the glass, then at the coffee. He sighed and took the glass. The first sip sent shivers down his spine. The dreaded moment of confession had come.

Much earlier than expected.

“I have been unfaithful to you, Colette.”

Colette raised her right hand but Anton stopped her with a peremptory gesture.

He continued, “And what you and your little genius concoct in that kitchen daily is high quality enough to keep the most demanding patron satisfied.” He sipped the water with the same elegant motion as for the wine. “I need to do something with myself, Colette. The saddest thing in the world is to watch a passion decay. Your passion is creation; mine is discovery.”

“So, you are visiting other places?”

Colette looked confused, her wrist turned and her palm hanging open, as if she were begging, probably for an answer. Her lips quivered slightly.

Anton put the glass down gently and steepled his long fingers over it. “I had enough time to rest after I lost my spot in the journals.”

“And now you have regrets…”

“Madame Édith Piaf had a whole song about my feelings,” Anton smiled, thinking of the song that had become his battle anthem. “It was my time to leave an editorial world where they wanted only my dry wit. I regret nothing, I repeat, but I lacked a place to do the other thing I love.”

“Are you reviewing food again?”

Anton nodded and picked up his glass again. The surprise in Colette’s voice was even more refreshing than the cool water.

“I had the most awesome experiences these last three weeks. Paris is filled with hidden treasures, just waiting for someone to shine a spotlight on them. And I believe my perspective is fair, if tough.”

Colette blinked, then cleared her throat and picked up her glass. She took a long sip and sighed before she returned the glass to its spot and leaned forward.

“Tell me about your discoveries,” Colette finally said. There was a bright light in her blue eyes, like she was a girl anticipating the pleasures of Christmas dinner.

“I could do better than that, if we had one of those newfangled devices that bring me more chagrin than satisfaction.”

“Do you mean a computer?” Colette asked, taking a steadying breath. “Are you writing on a computer?”

“I’m a self-publishing critic!” Anton admitted and opened his arms wide, missing a waiter’s tray by
an inch.

Colette stood up, taking Anton by the wrist and starting for the door. Anton barely had time to pick up his bag.

As they passed the host station, Alfredo smiled at them before opening his mouth.

“We are going to Sasha’s place,” Colette said before he had time to ask if Anton had a good time. “Tina is in charge of the kitchen. Tell her that there will be hell to pay if she puts chilli flakes on the chicken breasts again.”

“Of course, Chef!” Alfredo replied and turned to the next customer on the line with a big smile.

“Who is Sasha and why are we going to her place?” Anton asked as Colette towed him along.

“We are going to his place because he has a computer and I want to know about your discoveries.”

Anton stumbled while following her trail, avoiding bicycles and other assorted obstacles. His smile hadn’t faded. People around them looked amused. A kid pointed at him with slack jaws as Colette turned the corner. Anton noticed that the child had let his ballon go and it was flying away. Was there a more fit metaphor?

Colette pushed open a door, dragging him inside a dark building. The climbed a narrow stair with uneven steps. Anton looked around curiously, noting that the handrail was dark wood, stripped bare by the touch of countless hands. They stopped in front of a yellow door that Colette barely knocked on before pushing it open.

Inside on a ratty sofa, a pair of lovers were kissing. One of them wore a bright orange summer dress, her black hair contrasting nicely against the fabric. The other person sported those informal slacks made of denim. This person had short hair and pink lips, and had a wide bandage around their ribs.

“I need to use your machine, Sasha!” Colette warned before dragging Anton inside a small room behind the sofa.

The short-haired person just made the thumbs-up sign without a care in the world.

“Was your friend hurt?”

“You can say that,” Colette said, finally let go of his wrist to sit in front of the computer. “How can I find you?”

“Look for Cassez la croûte! in Wide Web Catalogue.”

Colette entered the title and waited for the results. She rubbed her thumb over her lip as Anton approached. The screen was so bright that her features were highlighted starkly.

“Why did you choose that name?” she asked.

“The crumb is the best part of the bread, isn’t it?”

Colette looked like she was about to ask something, but the faint ping of the machine distracted her and she turned her attention back to the glaring screen.

Anton waited with his hands clasped behind his back. His lips felt dry and he felt a rumble inside his belly. He hadn’t had an upset stomach since the first time he published a review. It was
comforting to know he could still be nervous to have his work on display.

“... the cubed meat was the next dish,” Colette read to herself. Her eyes danced as she followed his words. “It was served in a leaf of lettuce and the zesty sauce was appealing to the nose. This was the first time I have tried Lok lak and I found pleasant but rather surprising how the black Kampot pepper crept in the back of my mouth. Chef Pheakdei provided the most refreshing glass of Teuk Touy ...”

Anton smiled as he remembered the young chef’s laugh and the amusement in her gentle eyes. It was clearly not the first time a Parisian man had almost choked on her spicy food.

“‘Chef Adilah spoke proudly of her recipe as she wrapped my beurek in butcher’s paper,’” Colette recited. The second review apparently illuminated the topic of Anton’s self-publishing site. “I thanked her for the meal and asked if I could return later to try her tajine, since I was in a hurry. She invited me to return the following Friday. Fridays after midday prayer she offers the most amazing bestilla topped with sweet, crunchy almonds...’”

Adilah had also extended an invitation to taste her mrouzia at the end of Eid al-Adha, Anton remembered, mouth watering. Her number was still written neatly in his address book.

As Colette read the first entry, the one that started it all, her voice threw Anton into a flashback. He felt the icy water dripping off his slouched shoulders as if it were happening again; the chill penetrating his bones. He remembered the kindness of the large African woman who warmly bade him to enter her shop and escape the rain. That simple, gentle invitation had given him the best gift he could ask for: his passion rekindled.

“‘Despite its messy appearance, the fragrant chakchouka that Chef Kufreabasi served to me was a melody of flavors that I still remember on days when hunger strikes me the hardest,’” Colette finished, and joined her hands in front of her lips.

That was not the reaction Anton had expected and he felt this eyebrow rising quizzically.

“They are all women,” Colette said in a whisper.

Anton let his eyes drop, unable to find the words to express his feelings. He had said it once: The world is often unkind to new talents. The chefs in his reviews needed friends; they were the bearers of great talent, but had little support from the gastronomic world. Anton unconsciously tapped his fingers behind his back in the anxious movement his mother tried so hard to repress as a child.

“I expected more of you, Anton Ego,” Colette exclaimed, rising from the chair. She sounded muted, and almost disappointed.

Anton felt at sea; awash with uncertainty. He never suspected madame Tatou could fall prey to professional jealousy. He almost flinched when she extended her hand in his direction.

“You should take me on your excursions,” Colette demanded, hooking her arm through his elbow. “Or, at the very least, bring me something to sample.”

Anton smiled and patted the domineering hand on his arm. “I can invite you to sample a sweet and savory tajine next month that has been promised to be excellent, if that’s any consolation.”

“That’s a good start,” Colette accepted, smiling. “Now close your eyes, because we need to cross the room to get to the door and I can’t vouch for Sasha and his friend’s decency.”

“Well, when we are beyond the door, we can talk about that clafoutis you mentioned.”
With that, Anton Ego shut his eyes and let Colette lead the way.

End Notes

My gratitude to mlraven who was a kind and patient beta.

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