SHORT STORY

The Education

by Charlotte Gajek



"Qu'est-ce qu'on fait maintenant? (2017)" by Nelly Sanchez

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They arrive at the Mayfair restaurant just past eight in the evening, as they always do.

Four men, in their late thirties: men who wear striped shirts with white collars and golden cufflinks. Men who try, in vain, to hide their hair loss by slicking it back with too much product. Men who met as boys and have stopped each other from growing up.

Prema watches as Lin, the head waitress, leads them over to their usual table by the open kitchen, near her station. The open kitchen was the owner's idea. He thought it would offer patrons the chance to feel more engaged in the preparation of their food. In reality it means the cooks can barely have a conversation amongst each other, let alone yell at someone to get out of the way when they have a flaming hot dish in hand.

One of the men says something to Lin and the others laugh. Prema can see the frozen grin on the waitress's face through the steam of the boiling pot of squid ink tagliatelle in front of her. It doesn't matter that she didn't hear the comment. She knows exactly what kind of thing the man said.

Each time they come into the restaurant, on Thursday nights for the past three months, their comments towards the female staff have become progressively worse. Prema assumes it is a game the men play, to see which one of them can get away with the most outrageous thing to say. Lin is the main victim of this game. She is a beautiful, tall woman with long black hair that falls down her back. Prema and Lin have never had much interaction. They operate in different departments. But the first time the man with the beer gut said something about her "exotic look," Prema heard. The two women locked eyes. There was an unspoken understanding. Prema was no stranger to fetishization, disguised as a false compliment. It has become a little more bearable now that consequences follow.

The group of men bursts into another round of obnoxious laughter.

"Anyway, I told them," the one with the fake Rolex says, "she's a decent lawyer. But I'll always rely more on a man. How am I meant to trust someone when they don't even know who played in the Premier League last night?"

He swirls the red wine in his glass with a ham-fisted gesture. Some of it spills onto his sleeve.

Prema juliennes the peppers. Her knife flashes under the fluorescent light.

"Plus I've seen the photos," the man with the fake tan says. "With a skirt like that she's obviously fishing for a sexual harassment lawsuit."

They roar. The thin man whinnies like a horse. He tries too much.

Prema throws the peppers into the pan, squeezing a dash of chilli oil on top.

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She doesn't understand why the men choose this restaurant. They are much more suited to a middling pub. All they ever order is a variation of overdone red meat and a form of potatoes, accompanied by red wine that they neither understand nor savour, but simply order because it boasts the biggest price tag, followed by the most uninspired dessert on the menu, usually a brownie or cheesecake variant, because it is the only item containing words they recognize. She has never seen any of them order interesting food; not the sea urchin with shaved cauliflower on a roasted garlic reduction, or the scallop sashimi with orange confit.

She glances over. Beer Gut keeps fingering around in the breadbasket, making sure to touch each slice before fishing one out.

"I know you're not supposed to say it," he garbles through a mouthful of half masticated baguette, "but my wife's really let herself go since having the baby. It's been four months. Time to get back on the treadmill."

Prema slaps a pale prawn onto the cutting board. Her blade sinks into the white flesh. She rips out the vein running along its back.

The conversation turns to corporate finance slang. Beside her the Rôtisseur throws a steak into a hot pan and the sizzling hiss drowns the men out. Prema is grateful for the momentary reprieve. But she sees as the leering eyes of Fake Rolex follow Lin across the restaurant.

The men are due another lesson, evidently.

Prema sees her profession as a privilege and a responsibility. She is providing people with an education, a refinement of taste and understanding. She is helping to broaden their horizons by feeding them.

But Prema has come to realize that the education doesn't have to be limited to the connection between the customer and their meal.

She has always known that women's contributions to the art of cooking have been systematically undervalued. Recipes were created and perfected over millennia with the aid of countless anonymous women who were overlooked in favour of their male colleagues who simply shouted louder. Even in the restaurant, Prema is one of only two female chefs.

Prema sees her experiment as an extension of her responsibility. It is a simple and straightforward recipe: if the patrons engage in behaviour that is unacceptable, they get rewarded for it with slow-acting, excruciating pain. A marriage of flavour and respondent conditioning.

Several weeks ago, Fake Tan had called Lin "sweetheart" and asked "whether her job entailed truly satisfying the customers." Prema has known men like that all her life. The kind

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who make offensive remarks, shrouded in the safety of a joke, and then act surprised when you have the audacity to call them out on it.

Prema didn't hesitate. With a flash of determined certainty, she threw a sizeable dose of ground flaxseed into the pasta sauce. She added a dash of turmeric and saffron; the acidity would help to balance out the flavour. She needn't have bothered. The men shovelled everything into their mouths, barely chewing and tasting even less.

Prema knew it would take some time for the effects to set in. The men would be safely out of the restaurant before they felt any discomfort. But when they returned the following week for their standing appointment, they complained to Lin. Prema was treating some angry burn blisters on the back of her hand and overheard. Lin looked up and met her eyes. Prema made no effort to look confused.

Lin didn't miss a beat.

She apologized profusely to the men and assured them that nobody else had had any bad reaction to the food recently and maybe it was unrelated. She gave them a bottle of *Chateau Margaux* on the house – which they paired with well done steaks, like animals – and Prema and Lin never talked about it.

A female bond can be such a potent thing.

In order to ensure that the men wouldn't become suspicious again Prema began to experiment. The fact that the men had nothing even resembling a refined palate made it easier. A dash of crushed Oleander seeds mixed into the minced meat, a pinch of dried Aloe Vera leaf in the seasoning of the deconstructed Shepherd's pie. In their dried and pulverized state, the illicit ingredients passed innocently for thyme and oregano. Dedicated to her newfound craft, Prema tested some of the concoctions on herself in the comfort of her own home. It made for an exhausting way of spending her precious day off, but it was a sacrifice she never regretted, even when she lay in bed sweating and shivering.

The more time she spent perfecting her creations, the better she became at drawing out both the incubation period and the unpleasant result. Over the weeks the shadows under the men's eyes grew darker. Fake Rolex's hairline seemed to have crept back further and a greenish tinge shone through Fake Tan's skin. And yet, they never suspected the restaurant again.

Prema pours the seared prawns into the asymmetrical bowl and slides it down the stainless steel counter for the superfluous parsley flourish.

The men are on their third bottle of *La Tâche*. Prema glances at the clock on the wall. They are starting early tonight.

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Prema hears the Chef Pâtissière curse behind her. She glances over her shoulder. It isn't pretty. The Sous Chef is dashing over, fresh towels in hand. The woman's thumb hangs at an odd angle. Blood pulses onto her chef whites. It will mean the end of the night for her.

"Hospital, now," the Sous Chef says in a voice that allows no argument. In a closed kitchen he would tell her to wrap it up and get back to work. But out here they can't risk the customers seeing a hand in a blood-soaked rag roll out their puff pastry.

The Chef Pâtissière is gritting her teeth so tightly that Prema is surprised they don't crack. She knows the woman is determined to remain stoic. It is a rule all female chefs have made their first commandment: Don't show weakness.

"Who can take over?" the Sous Chef barks.

Nobody meets his eye.

Thin Man's horsey laugh cuts through the silence.

"Wish I could make it to the game on Saturday, lads," he sighs dramatically, "but I have to babysit the kids."

Prema raises her hand.

"I can do it," she says.

The Sous Chef barely glances at her.

"Good," he says and whisks the Chef Pâtissière out of the kitchen. Prema can hear her let out a groan of agony when she thinks she is out of earshot.

Pâtisserie isn't Prema's strength. It requires rules and rigidity. She enjoys the freedom of cooking, the possibility of experimentation and constant improvement. But the men always have dessert. And it sounds like today they are in need of another course of edification.

She has to move further into the back of the kitchen to take over the pastry station. The men's voices don't drift that far but she can still see them. If she has counted correctly they have had six glasses of red wine each. Their movements grow exaggerated and sloppy. Thin Man's eyes are glazing over.

Prema whips frangipane into a frothy texture. She fills the crispy pastry shells. The smell of almond permeates the kitchen as she shoves trays into the oven.

Beer Gut has taken out his phone. He is passing it around the table. The men swipe along the display. They all have nasty grins on their faces. Prema has good eyes. She catches a glimpse. They are photos of a sleeping woman. She is naked. Beer Gut says something and the entire table bursts out laughing.

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Prema is sure the woman in the photos isn't his wife.

She wrenches the neck of the piping bag.

She thought the men were beginning to learn. She was putting in the work, training them regularly. Like a dog with a treat and a silver bell, she expected them to show results by now.

She picks up the bowl of pomegranate seeds and sprinkles them on top of the buttercream. Their dark flesh glistens like fat droplets of blood on a pristine linen tablecloth.

Maybe she is playing it too safe. Maybe these men will respond better to a firmer hand.

Another bout of laughter.

Lin is writing down their dessert orders with a tight smile. Prema can tell she is trying to get out of there as fast as possible.

Fake Rolex reaches out. He paws at Lin's behind.

The men guffaw.

Lin freezes. Then she walks away without a backwards glance. She swerves around the steel counter and walks straight into the kitchen. She never comes back there. The Commis Chef, recently promoted to Prema's usual station and thoroughly overwhelmed and flustered, glances up in confusion. Lin ignores him.

She comes to a halt next to Prema. She slaps down the crumpled up dessert order on the marble worktop. Her lips are pressed into a thin line. She doesn't meet Prema's eyes.

"Might be time to take it up a notch," Lin murmurs out of the corner of her mouth.

Prema can just hear her over the clattering of pots and pans. Without another word Lin turns and leaves the kitchen. Her black ponytail swings between her shoulder blades.

Prema carves the dragon fruit into wafer thin slices. It would be a lie to say that she hasn't had a plan for this. Two weeks ago the new Plongeur tripped with a tray full of wine glasses. Everyone had to help pick up the mess of shards.

There is a bowl underneath her station with some broken stems and shimmering splinters, waiting patiently on a shelf at the very back. She thought it might be prudent to keep them, just in case.

Prema arranges the sliced fruit on the plate and drizzles caramel sauce around the edge.

There is a large marble mortar and pestle on the pastry counter.

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She glances over at the wrinkled bit of paper with the men's dessert order: Four orders of the chocolate financiers with raspberry mascarpone.

Yes, she can work with this.

Prema begins to melt butter in a saucepan and waits for it to brown.

The ground glass will glitter beautifully, sprinkled on top of a glistening web of spun sugar.

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