

Wag's Revue is proud to award NAOMI KRUGER its Winter 2009 Prize in Fiction. With a well-dressed yet unpretentious vocabulary, Kruger renders space and character swiftly, spherically, with precision and subtlety. She finds richness in the everyday—simple details, natural voices, and quiet emotional turns. “Pottery” displays the same effortless, understated grace found in the works of Chekhov, Salinger, and Carver. It is one of those rare stories that, in its brevity and depth, demands an immediate second reading.

—Will Litton,
Fiction Editor

POTTERY

Naomi Kruger

Max laid the ingredients out on the dark granite counter. First the pastry, still in its packaging, then the mushroom stuffing he had chilled overnight in the fridge, and finally the beef. It was still fresh, he noticed—no pooling blood, no grey tingeing its edges. He was glad he'd made the extra trip to the butchers. The fillets were thick and dark, never shrink-wrapped or swathed in plastic. He lit the hob and cut off a corner of beef dripping. It slid cleanly into the pan. And then he waited.

There was a moment, a specific point between the fat being hot, but not hot enough, and the first sign of brown-ness around the edges of the pan. That was the time to sear the meat. The fat was supposed to smoke, but not for too long. He scanned the recipe again. *Let the fat get as hot as you dare.* Not exactly precise. He squinted at the edges, just beginning to bubble and hiss. He thought, suddenly, how ridiculous he looked, standing there, stooped over an almost-empty pan, earnestly waiting. *What would Linda say?* He glanced at the kitchen door, left slightly open: beige carpet, dim lights, distant voices from the television. She might pop in during the adverts, but not yet.

There was a TV in the kitchen too. The small one that Linda didn't want to throw out. It sat in the corner, next to the recipe books, *'Larousse Gastronomique'*, still in a protective case, and Linda's *'Cooking Express'* or *'Meals in Minutes'*, all the ones with bent covers, permeated with splashes and stains, the smells of haste. She couldn't stand making anything fiddly like this, skipping straight past anything that involved pastry or marinades, anything that took time to perfect. It bored her. She cooked with the TV on, stirring absentmindedly, spilling spaghetti on the floor, standing on the cherry tomato that had rolled off the chopping board, leaving a trail of skin and seeds on the slate tiles.

Max rinsed his hands in the sink, working the antiseptic soap in between his fingers, under his nails. How long had it been since he'd cooked for her? He couldn't think. Neither of them had felt like going out to celebrate. Why go out when you could enjoy better food in the comfort of your own home? Last time they went for a meal had been a disaster. They had both agreed. Cold Yorkshire puddings sent out twice from the kitchen. How hard could it be? But he'd said it all a little too loud. Linda was squirming, he could see, couldn't wait to get her coat on, and get back into the car. Why pay someone for an experience like that? He picked up one of the fillets with swift tenderness, and placed it into the hot fat.

He began to trim the pastry sheets, brushing each one gently with beaten egg yolk, lining them up in a row; working as quickly as he could. They would look good on the platter, he thought. Of course there would be a little too much just for the two of them. But then it was better to have too much than too little. His mother had drilled that into him over every Sunday lunch as she peeled an extra carrot, and smothered endless roast potatoes with searing lard. Nothing worse than portion anxiety.

They had found the platter on a rainy Saturday in Richmond, pottering about in the antique shops and boutiques, passing the time, hoping the weather would clear so they could take a walk past the castle and over to the ruined abbey. It was exactly the sort of shop he dreaded going into, full of local crafts, lavender soaps, and candles. But Linda had pulled him over to the pottery and china, pointing it out.

'Isn't it lovely?'

He grunted.

'I mean, a little kitsch maybe, but really, really pretty.'

He had looked at the cream-coloured oval plate, hand-painted with tulips, all the colours merging fluidly, the flowers spreading out, a bending leaf almost crossing the rim.

'I'm not saying we should buy it,' she'd said, as if reading his mind, 'it's not really our sort of thing, it's just...'

When they got back to the car he told her he needed the toilet, ran back to the shop and bought it, concealing the thickly wrapped tissue-paper package in his backpack.

He had left it downstairs on her birthday, months later, lining it with nectarines and apricots, leaving her card propped up against the cereal bowl. There had been orange juice in a jug instead of the carton and *pain au chocolat* even though he hated the idea of chocolate for breakfast. He felt pleased, looking at the table laid out, hearing her moving around upstairs, anticipating her surprise. An expansive gesture, evidence of thoughtfulness and spontaneity. She had been puzzled for a moment, trying to place it. He moved the fruit aside to show her it was the same one, not just an imitation. *In Richmond*, he prompted, *you know, in that shop, you remember?* And she had kissed him and said *I can't believe you've kept it hidden all this time.*

But it hadn't been used for a while now. Max stood on a chair and felt for it, over the other casserole dishes and baking trays that wouldn't fit into any of the cupboards. He wiped off a thick layer of dust, and washed it carefully, before laying it on the side, ready. He scooped up some of the wet stuffing from the bowl, treacly, almost black from the porcini. But not too strong, just savoury enough. He hesitated. Was he missing something? He felt sure he was missing *something*.

'Lin-da', he called, hoping she could hear him above the television and the grease filter.

'Lin-da?'

'What's up?' she opened the door, glancing over her shoulder, in case she was missing anything exciting. She turned to face him and pushed her hair behind her ears.

'Smells lovely.'

‘Didn’t we have some nutmeg somewhere? I could’ve sworn I saw it somewhere.’ He was balanced on a chair, one hand deep in the top cupboard, packets and tins spread across the draining board.

‘Here’, she said, reaching across the hob and picking out a red-capped spice jar from the rack.

‘No,’ he said, his voice tinged with impatience, ‘whole nutmeg, not ground.’

‘Aren’t you going to grind it anyway?’

‘I’m supposed to grate it. It’s not the same.’

She raised an eyebrow.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ he waved his hand towards the cupboard, ‘I’ll find it somewhere.’

She shrugged, and walked back to the door, he saw her smile and bite her bottom lip as she moved from the tiles to the carpet and was gone. They would just have to do without the nutmeg.

Things were coming together now. The vegetables were almost tender. He gathered the cutlery from the drawer, not the every-day set—the one with some weight to the handles. The phone rang twice and then stopped. He hoped Linda wouldn’t be on long. The food wouldn’t keep. They only had a ten-minute window before it started to deteriorate. He took the knives and forks to the dining room. The TV was still on, an advert for herbal shampoo. Gleaming hair laid out against pomegranates and milk. Linda wasn’t there. He heard her laugh suddenly from the hallway and walked over to the door, moulding his fingers into a phone, ready to mime hanging up.

‘No, no, I’ve got to go,’ she said.

He stopped behind the door. Her voice was saturated in mirth.

‘His Nibs is waiting to serve the culinary masterpiece’.

His Nibs?

He put his hand against the wall and his ear closer to the door jamb.

‘Yes I’m sure it’ll be delicious, and if he could award himself a Michelin star he probably would.’

She laughed again. ‘No, stop it, I’ve got to go...’

He tiptoed away; almost breaking into a run, skidding through the kitchen, posing himself into what he hoped was a natural position. He considered throwing the glazed chanteney carrots into the sink. He gripped the handle just for a moment.

It had to be her sister. He’d seen the way she looked at him sometimes, the raised eyebrows, the twitch around the mouth. He hoped it wasn’t her mother. Were they all laughing at him, then?

He set the platter onto the glass table and wiped some stray juice from the edge with a tea towel. The pastry was perfectly golden, framed with red petals, introduced with a flourish of leaves. Linda put the TV on mute. A small man in a navy fleece gestured towards a cottage garden, high banks of waving delphiniums and yarrow.

‘This looks amazing.’ Linda smiled at him.

‘Who was on the phone?’

‘Just Eleanor. She was telling me about the girls, nothing new really.’

He nodded and cut into the beef. Linda held her plate up to him. He spooned her a generous serving of dauphinoise potatoes, carrots and steamed mange tout.

‘I could get used to this,’ she said picking up her fork.

He gripped the serving spoon.

‘It’s pretty isn’t it?’ she pointed to the screen. The garden was shimmering, lilac alliums filtering the afternoon light. But Max was looking at her plate. The beef, he noticed, was the perfect shade of pink in the middle.