

## EXPATRIATE GAMES

(New York Times Magazine, January 2005)

When I moved to Paris in 1989 to work on a second novel, I hadn't seen Alex in twenty years. We'd played together as kids then fallen out of touch. By the time we became reacquainted in Paris I barely recognized him. He had thick, ink-black curly hair, ringlets almost, that shone with some secretly applied liniment, and he wore a hat, a cool, slightly insouciant number, part Belmondo and part Boyer, that went nicely with his patterned waistcoats and the long key chain that looped out of his pants pocket and the Gauloises that he smoked day and night.

He had come to Paris to study at the Ritz cooking school, then landed a *stage* at Taillevent, one of the world's most celebrated restaurants. Yet in no time, fed up with chopping onions ten hours a day, he quit Taillevent. Quit Taillevent! But that was to be expected. By temperament, I would soon discover, Alex was an amateur, not a professional. It was the feeding of friends he believed in; in his mind, chopping onions for strangers was an entirely different, somehow smaller-hearted enterprise. He cooked the way he ate, and he ate like Orson Welles or Brando in their latter, Roman emperor days - as if he were going to swallow the world, but all in his own good time.

I introduced him to my circle of twenty-something American friends: Deb, a photojournalist; Josh, a television executive; Olivia, a philosopher; Phyllida, an editor; Lucy, a playwright. Most of us had gone to college together, but had made our way to Paris separately and for our own reasons, which, as with young people everywhere, had to do mostly with longing and possibility, a kind of permanent hunger. We wanted to step outside our normal lives and rebuild a community from scratch. We did this by spending a lot of time together, and by eating and drinking as much as possible. This, of course, was the sort of mission Alex was born to join. No one in my gang had ever met anyone quite

like him before. He said that he cooked, and we thought to ourselves, *Oh, he cooks*, but we didn't know what that meant until the night he invited all of us for dinner.

He was renting an old artist's studio off the rue du Temple – high-ceilinged and drafty, with a wood stove in one corner. The kitchen was open and primitive, just four electric burners and an old toaster-oven, which he seemed to prefer to the tiny oven. None of the dining chairs matched. The silverware had been stolen from various cafes and the glasses were shirt-cleaned.

That night Alex cracked open fat cloves of garlic with the side of a chef's knife and rubbed them, with the best virgin olive oil, over thick slices of peasant bread, then toasted them lightly in the toaster-oven. Then he served us a slow-cooked bolognese sauce of such earthy sweetness and meaty depth that it seemed at once ancient and new. To this day the memory of its taste is wedded in my mind to the cymbal-like crash of Alex banging pots in the kitchen.

From that night onward, Sunday dinner at Alex's became our weekly ritual. In between feasts – and sometimes during – life-altering decisions were made, hearts broken, songs badly sung. People came and went. For a few uncomfortable months Josh the TV executive and I shared a girlfriend. And Lucy the playwright arrived in the City of Light with an arrogant, pasty-faced, vegan boyfriend whom none of us liked; but then one Sunday she showed up at dinner on the back of a Frenchman's motorcycle, suffused with an unmistakable glow. Overnight she'd become, as it were, a carnivore, and we responded by toasting her liberation and welcoming Yves the Frenchman into the gang. Ditto for Paul, the huge-hearted Russian who stole Deb the photojournalist's heart one night at a party; the following Sunday he became one of us, and is still.

And so it went for many months. Sunday morning would roll around and each of us would receive a mumbled phone call from a very hungover Alex: you, bring bread! you, haricots verts! you, wine! you, fresh sage! and so on. The meal's centerpiece – the lamb shoulder, the Cornish hens, the *poulet de Bresse*

– our chef would trust to no one but himself. Dressed like a dandified gangster, he would roam the narrow streets around the Place du Temple and in his highly eccentric French discuss the freshly killed birds with the butcher.

That evening we would arrive on his doorstep with our packages. Often I would be the first to get there and find him already on his third glass of Bordeaux and his umpteenth Gauloise. An apron, folded in half and tied at his waist, a dishtowel draped over his left shoulder: the calm before the storm.

He always started slowly. But as the group arrived and the room grew lively with voices in French and English, Alex's spirits seemed to rise commensurately, mirrored by delicious odors and the noise level. By ten o'clock we'd be salivating like animals and he'd be just getting warmed up. He was one of those insane people, a renegade magician, insufferable to live with but impossible to look away from, who could spin culinary gold out of the dross of a few dried herbs and a handful of grain. It was like being in an artist's studio as he paints – face to face with the creative moment, the choices made on the spot, the diving forward. Remembering it now, I'm struck by what seems an obvious thought: that it was not the back-breaking toil that Alex hated in restaurant jobs, or even the submission to the necessities of commerce, but the insulation of the closed kitchen door. Who wants to be a madman locked away in a closet? Here in his own theater, with us as audience, he could play the mad king every week. We were as much alarmed by him as we were enthralled by the tastes to which he introduced us.

He finished Cornish game hens in the toaster-oven, using a sable-hair paint brush to glaze them. On Thanksgiving, he peeled back the skin of a turkey, stuffed it with herbed Norman butter, then sewed it back together again. He sautéed Brussels sprouts with cubes of pancetta, and stood poached pairs upright in a tart dusted with crushed almonds.

Then, within a period of months, it was over. Deb and Paul left for Moscow; Josh for Madrid; Lucy and Phyllida and I for America. Alex wrapped up his chef's knives and went home, too. I had dinner with him in New York a

couple of times, but somehow, after Paris, any other city was an uneasy fit. The mad king, having lost his throne, began to seem more mad than king. I remember him coming to my apartment one night and emptying my vodka supply and dropping burning cigarette ash on my rug and inadvertently breaking a chair; but also, of course, roasting the best capon I've ever eaten in my life.

Fifteen years later, our old Paris group remains in close touch. Everyone except Alex, that is. The rumor is that he's on the West Coast making priceless *objets d'art* out of silver and glass. But none of us knows for sure. We talk about him the way one talks about a bungee jump once made from a very high, very beautiful cliff: how vivid the colors were! how alive we felt! But we are also cowed to the point of paralysis by the prospect of calling him back into our relatively ordered lives. Yet one day without warning – I simply feel it – he will come back to us, his knives sharp as ever, banging his pots and pans like music.