

The Gourmet Sisters. Fragment translated

The story I am about to tell began in a war and ends in this kitchen. I was a child and used to play with my little sister Silvina, Silvi as I call her, hiding weapons in the nooks and corners of the house: very old guns, short swords, cartridges, double-barreled shotguns. When the grown-ups weren't paying attention, we'd take them out to play at shooting our Russian doll: I aimed at the doll's face, faking the shot, and Silvi replicated with her mouth the sound of the gun. Then we'd both pretend to be dead. The Russian doll was still on the ground, but we'd get up alive, to continue shooting at the small Russian dolls that popped out of the body of the large Russian doll. Six or seven were snuffed out, poor things, stiff, whilst us two just died of laughter.

Till one day there no longer was a war, and the weapons disappeared. All weapons, including daggers and ancient pistols. A long time has elapsed since then and Silvi and I have promised ourselves that we will never speak of that war again. Neither do we wish to pretend or shoot for real, not even the ragdoll hanging on the back of the pantry door. We now live in peace, without leaving our kitchen, but we are still gripped by fear sometimes, as when taking a sharp-toothed knife from out of the drawer, or when grinding meat, crushing ice, or introducing vegetables into a blender and pureeing them. Those things remind us of the war.

One night, on finishing our work in the cookstove, Silvi, who is the most mischievous of the four sisters, put on a fake mustache with the tail of a fish and a pot on her head for a helmet. Thus, she crept up from behind and bellowed: "Stop there! I am the commander of the enemy army!" I was frightened and covered my face with my hands so that my sisters wouldn't see me cry.

This life of ours as happy cooks who get rich with their work has undergone a change ever since the day the kitchen door swung open and someone who was not one of the four owners entered. There was a perfume in the kitchen that day that made one's mouth water. The seafood that we'd bought fresh that morning at the port was now changing color on the red-hot griddle. Langoustine with claws longer than their body; they mustn't be cooked for long, and know when they die; one can tell from the color. As they stiffen, their aroma becomes intense and exquisite. It is time to serve them and eat them.

But that day my little sister Silvi did not serve them on time to the customer who had ordered them practically raw as his only lunch. The new smell that entered was to blame and made us forget how the sea smells. That second smell immediately spread and we all four froze. The scent of a young man in a kitchen where men have never set foot.

There was silence as the open door closed. The rock fish and marinated algae soup, the black truffle salad with sea urchin roe, the langoustine and their claws, the venison fillet stuffed with berries. Each sister prepares a dish, and we've all four abruptly stopped our work. The young man is handsome, but I, the third sister in line, am the boldest and

stand before him. He wears shorts, has a stubble beard, about four days old, and a hand-painted backpack with little drawings of naked chicks.

"Who are you?" I asked the youngster who'd come in smelling like a man.

"My name is Maxi."

"What a thuggish name. Here we have different kind of names. We like names from the Roman times. My name is Julia. If you've come to book a table you can wait sitting in the town square, and can come back in six months' time. With any luck you'll have a table for two."

"I've come here to work. I'm responding to the advertisement."