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Table for One

I wait tables in a restaurant at the hub of Portland's foodie culture, an industrial chic destination spot where the chairs are hard and the food is fresh, local, and very fine, but not in a traditional *fine dining* way. There are no starched white shirts or black pants—it's all about the food. We've cultivated relationships with the people who grow and tend what we serve, and taken field trips to their farms, vineyards, and even to the slaughterhouse. To risk sounding like I have an altar to Alice Waters in the corner of my bedroom, I truly believe that a meal is the culmination of an entire journey from birth to death to table; a journey that includes, and is colored by, every person involved—not least the person who eats it.

But tonight, late, alone in my clean, white, and rarely cooked-in kitchen, I'm eating cold refried beans out of the can. And it's not the first time.

At clarklewis, the staff is fed incredibly well. At the end of a shift, the chef piles the carving table high with the surplus of our daily-changing menu. Tonight, for example, there was creamy Anson Mills polenta; mesquite-grilled, locally-raised lamb, bulls blood beets with gremolata, black cod with prosecco butter, garlicky escarole and braised fennel. We sit at a long wooden table to eat, drink, talk, and do our paperwork. Some of us have worked together for years. This communion sometimes takes on a heightened significance, the way eating with family can remind us of the thousands of times we've come together in the same way.

But tonight I didn't eat anything. My paperwork was snarled and frustrating, and I'd had a customer so determined to be and stay unhappy that I was now unhappy as well, and all I wanted was a glass of wine. Okay, two glasses of wine.

And hours later, I'm hungry and alone. Though the edge of my temporary unhappiness has been dulled by wine, my dinner options are revealed by the cold, yellow refrigerator light—wilted lettuce, aging eggs, a vast number of condiments and a bottle of cold-pressed flax seed oil. Sinclair, my fat, aging black cat, is sprawled across the piles of books and papers on my kitchen table, and I watch him stretch, carefully knock two books off the table and then act startled. I laugh as I'm supposed to, then open the cupboard, the contents of which seem odd and inexplicable—why do I have so many cans of creamed corn? Why do I have so many baking supplies when I haven't used my oven in over a year?

And then I see a can of Rosarita's vegetarian refried beans nearly hidden behind the whey powder. At the sound of the can opener Sinclair jumps off the table and weaves around my ankles. I let him sniff the beans' slick surface; he turns away. "I know. It's completely disgusting," I tell him, fishing a spoon out of the drawer.

Years ago I read an article in a women's magazine that said self-care for singles should include a sumptuous meal made for you and only you, eaten on a table cleared of papers and letters and cats and set with a placemat, matching napkin and a spray of bluebonnets in a vase. I don't remember which magazine it was, but I very well remember thinking, that's a perfectly lovely idea that's never, ever going to happen. And furthermore, why not a more easily procured flower, like a rose or a tulip?

But what was being espoused, of course, was the notion that you are valuable, *you alone*, and that beautiful, carefully prepared food is just as important for a table of one as a table of twenty.

And I agreed, in theory. But in practice, eating alone feels wrong. I'm so accustomed to eating with people, and serving people who are eating with people, that the social aspect of it seems inextricable from any other step on that journey from farm to table. Without the shared appreciation, a meal might as well not exist, like a book with no one to read it except the author.

And as I lean against the edge of the counter, eating my refried beans as quickly as I can to avoid really tasting them, I feel a rush of shame as I remember the very particular woman who ate alone at Clark Lewis three or four nights a week for nearly six months.

She was an immediate irritation to the staff. The first time she dined with us she showed up six minutes before the kitchen closed and stood at the host stand impatiently, arms crossed in front of her chest. Her bare, unlined face suggested youth, but her floor-length skirt and sensible cardigan did not. I was disheartened: A single diner always means a lower check, and she definitely didn't look like a drinker. And I'd thought my night was nearly over.

Single diners can be awkward. Some are lonely and want a lot of attention; some are nervous, embarrassed to be eating alone, and their discomfort is contagious. It's hard for me not to create a story around a single diner, as eating alone in a restaurant is an uncomfortable intersection between the public and the private. Serving the single diner I

feel like a voyeur, and also guilty if I wonder why he or she is alone. After all, why is anyone alone, finally?

But this woman didn't seem lonely, nor did she want to be engaged. She simply wanted things exactly the way she wanted them. After I gave her one of the small flashlights we offer all our customers, as our restaurant is well-known for its rather intimate darkness, she demanded that I give her some of the votive candles off neighboring tables. Satisfied only after ten brightly-burning candles illuminated her surroundings, she ordered room-temperature mineral water, and then promptly returned her glass because it smelled of detergent. Her precision was strange and sort of gorgeous, and I was a little in awe of her as I brought her a new, non-smelling glass.

Our chef, however, isn't so awed by overly particular customers. Though exquisitely talented, he is equally mercurial, and occasionally prone to slightly hysterical, irrational behavior. And as I watched this woman pore over the menu with studious determination, I got a little worried. Every staff member has been, at least once, reduced to tears or silent rage by the chef's outbursts. I once brought a complaining customer's plate back to our open kitchen and whispered, "She says it's overcooked." Our chef's much too-loud response was, "No, it isn't. You can tell her to go fuck herself."

Right, I'll tell her.

As I'd expected and feared, this very particular woman ordered three courses of items that were not on the menu. She wanted the shaved fennel and grapefruit salad, but she wanted the fennel to grapefruit in a ratio of three to one, and did not want our new press olive oil dressing or the olive garnish or fleur de sel. She wanted the crostone of farm

egg, speck ham, frisee and aged balsamic without the toast or the ham, and with the egg as lightly poached as possible without being raw. She wanted the Fuyu persimmons without their accompanying heirloom lettuces or the cypress farm goat cheese. And she did not, and could not, tolerate garlic, and sent me back to the kitchen several times to see which meat and pasta courses could be prepared without it.

On this night, lucky for this garlic intolerant woman, and therefore for me, the chef was in a good mood. Pleased with the experience, she returned the next day, and then every few days for the next six months. We came to refer to her as No Garlic Lady, and then, eventually, fondly, as NGL. She often tipped forty percent.

NGL adored food, and she ate with careful attention, apparently following her own formal set of rules and rituals, cleaning one small plate completely before touching the next. I found myself wanting to please her, to be as exacting as she was. She seemed to experience the kind of communion that I'd only thought possible with someone else to share in it. I started to look forward to seeing her. I always learned something about stillness and attention and self-care when I was around her.

Though excess conversation seemed to diminish NGL's experience, over time I learned that she lived in San Francisco and worked in computer programming. She often did business in Portland. When in Portland, she ate with us and only us. The one time she showed up when the restaurant was closed for a private party, she was disappointed in a way usually reserved for the discovery of infidelity. Each restaurant I suggested was met with a grimace. I worried about her—what would she eat? NGL was not the sort of woman who would eat refried beans out of a can.

So now, picturing her, I'm ashamed of myself. I set down my can and spoon and look around my midnight kitchen. Despite the papers and books and cats claiming the table, it is a calm place, abundant with plants. And as I rarely cook, the counters are very tidy.

I have a history of food allergies and eating disorders—years where food was not a pleasure, and was sometimes a source of near-despair—so despite my immersion in food and food culture, I often try not to think about what I eat. Sometimes, when I see people eating fast food, or pepperoni pizza, I find it impossible not to imagine the conditions of a feedlot, or the screams of the downer cattle dragged to their factory slaughterhouse deaths. Even my mother tunes me out when I go on about this stuff, but I'm like a rubbernecker slowing past an accident—I can't help myself.

This is another reason I've preferred not to eat alone—conversation helps drown out thoughts of this sort of injustice, as well as the memories of deprivation, frustration, and being outside the norm. But now eating alone also reminds me of NGL, who is certainly outside the norm, but in witnessing her, these 'dangerous' thoughts have lost their sting. Of all the Portlanders I know who claim to be living in the present, of being with the *now*, NGL actually is: She eats with nothing between herself and her fine meal.

Though it may take practice to be as intentional and present as she is while eating alone, perhaps it's worth a try. I find my favorite green ceramic bowl and scoop the refried beans into it, remove the cat from the table, and put all the papers and books into a paper grocery bag. I find my favorite tablecloth, green and yellow cotton from Provence, and place it over the painted wood. I locate an empty blue glass vase—I have a good imagination—to set in the middle of the table. With my pretty bowl of beans in front of me, I take a moment to focus before I begin to eat. They're still cold, true. But it's a start.

