

Conversation Pieces  
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# NoFood

by  
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“We meten so selden, by stok other stone”

— *Pearl*

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## NoFood

Her parents had gotten her a reservation at the restaurant for her eighteenth birthday. There is no need to ask which restaurant. They had put her name on the waiting list when she was sixteen, plus two guests—anonymous guests, for whose friends are the same at eighteen as at sixteen? They were not sanguine about their chances of being invited themselves—too old, too ugly. What made it utterly out of the question, finally, was the fact that neither of them had had the procedure by that time. Seychelles had been among the first clients once the process was indemnified; hers was the TGB generation. It was going to save them millions in surgery later: parents with any sense looked upon it as a cost-saving measure. So on the evening of her eighteenth birthday, her proud parents saw her into the security helicopter, with her wrist corsage and her two most beautiful friends, Rihoku and Donovan, TGBers, too, and retired to have dinner with their personal trainers behind the reinforced windows of their apartment block. “Thank God they have one-way glass,” Seychelles said, “or everyone would see them eating. Right on the main street. It’s disgusting.” Her friends giggled in their safety straps.

They arrived on the helipad at precisely 7:02 and were photographed by the blogbots of the main papers, looking gorgeously windswept in the dwindling chop of the overhead blades. All the bots were anchored to the roof because of the constant storm of copter blades they had to endure; every now and again the bolts loosened and one would scud off

to drop like a bomb for two hundred floors. They were programmed to erase after 15 feet of free fall, so nobody worried about them. Seychelles, Hoku, and Donovan, having talked it over in the helicopter, faced the cameras—or did not quite face them—in animated but serious conversation, in which they contrived to look intelligent, engaging, busy, and to show their teeth at the same time.

They proceeded coolly inside past the checkpoint and were seated at their table, a small round frame of Lucite with mahogany beach chairs. Each of the tables in the restaurant was filled with water, a few waving fronds, and neutral-colored pebbles; and each guest was served on a floating tray of balsa wood. “Both woods just off the watch list,” said Donovan admiringly as she sat down. She was doing embargo law; her father was the city’s foremost nenvironmental-ist. He could get around anything. They looked down into the reflective surface of their table. It was rare to see so much water at once. After they had peered down at it for some time, they noticed tiny translucent fish flickering past. “Gross,” said Hoku, “they must shit in there.”

“Exactly,” said the busboy, appearing at his elbow in a raffia apron. It looked like he had lost a battle with a ball of furry twine. “Some patrons were actually drinking the water.”

“Gross,” said Hoku again.

“Yes,” said the busboy, “and quite against our philosophy. If they want to drink, they can drink at home.”

“Quite so,” said Donovan, looking affronted. Seychelles smiled at the correctness of their sentiments. That was why she had brought them. She had known they would fit in.

“Would you like to see the wine list?” asked the busboy.

“Of course not,” replied Seychelles. “Even thinking about alcohol is a waste of time. Please bring us the appetizer menu.” The busboy looked at her appraisingly. Seychelles refused to care about impressing a busboy. Some things were obvious. As her mother always said: those who can’t afford doctors self-medicate. “Thank you.” The busboy departed in a swirl of raffia.



The waiter who returned with their menus was ten years older, as they instantly understood by the fact that he appeared ten years younger. He wore no raffia and instead of alertness exerted an air of command. He set their calligraphic menus lightly and precisely on their balsa wood trays, causing scarcely a ripple. "Pure cotton paper," he said, "hand-ground ink, reed pen."

"Thank you," said Seychelles graciously. He made some subtle hand gesture without moving that powerfully suggested a bow and moved away.

"What's a reed?" whispered Hoku apologetically.

"Kind of grass. Grows in water," replied Donovan, trying to pick up her menu without getting it wet. Seychelles grabbed hers without fuss and looked it over. Nothing too unexpected. The fashion for complexity was over. Almost everything from the Asias was tainted now, no use even buying it contraband. She saw the word *mangosteen*. Engineered, maybe. It seemed improper. Perhaps they could be grown in hothouses. She would ask about it. The point was that they were supposed to be able to make anything you ordered. What else were you paying for?

They mulled things over in silence. Seychelles wondered about her friends' strategies. Had they been practicing for weeks, pulling out their grandmothers' vintage cookbooks? She had read over a few of those herself. One ancient e-vol, compatible with hardly anything her parents had, had been called *The Joy of Cooking*. Now there was a word she had never heard anyone use. *Joy*. It sounded religious, made her think of fundos. There had been a recipe for squirrel. There were still squirrels; she had seen a few on campus. Of course, maybe there were only squirrels in places with armed guards. She had also read restaurant reviews going back twenty years or so. Some of these were surprising: it had never occurred to her that people would travel all over the world to go to certain restaurants. None of her friends traveled, for reasons too boring to think about: risk, disease, security ennui. That people once

flew to Istanbul or Beijing just to eat was incredible. Wasteful really. She would not include mangosteen in her order.

When the waiter returned, she was ready. She asked her friends to order first. Hoku chose Japanese. Boring. He was just ordering to go with his hair. Donovan went for quirky, but her choices revealed her as a student of embargo: everything she ordered had been de-listed within the week. Seychelles ordered a watercress salad with black pepper and wild strawberries. This was what came out of her mouth when she opened it, displacing several more ambitious ideas; she was startled. She hoped she hadn't shown it. She steadied herself, thinking: well, that's what I would want to eat. If I ate. The waiter wrote all this down in a beautiful cursive on more of his cotton paper and disappeared.

Seychelles, Rihoku, and Donovan sat elegantly in their mahogany armchairs for a few minutes. They watched the fish. Hoku complained that the humidity from the table was ruining his hair. The waiter returned and silently deposited some small cards on their floating trays, conveying by some indefinable gravity that this was a signal honor. The three eighteen-year-olds looked at each other in puzzlement and rising incredulity. The waiter remained by their table like a wound-down clockwork from an eighteenth-century castle. Seychelles reached for one of the small white cards. It was blank. She flashed it to Donovan with trembling fingers. "*Carte blanche*. It's the chef's card. We can—we can order anything, right?" She turned uneasily to the silent waiter. He nodded.

"Why have you brought these to us?" asked Seychelles, in amazement.

"It is Mr. Arar's privilege," replied the waiter. This unforthcoming answer increased the enormity of it. Seychelles thought of her simpleminded strawberry order. Had it been such a gaffe that this response was a test of their quality? Would they be thrown out if they ordered badly now? People had been thrown out, she knew, and presumably it was not because they were drunk. Deprived of the list of entrée ingredients that she had been expecting, Seychelles was sudden-

ly at sea. She focused her mind on the wavering green fronds half-hidden by her floating tray and felt lost. She nodded.

“Please thank him for us,” supplied Donovan. Hoku managed a weak smile. Seychelles knew he would have preferred the standard menu. He did not seek out stress. Donovan would already be calculating out all the angles. It was so unexpected that Seychelles could not work out what she thought of it herself. The waiter nodded to her, ignoring Donovan, and departed once more.

“What do we do now?” asked Hoku.

“We wing it,” said Seychelles. Trying to foster some *esprit de corps*, she gave her one bit of advice: “Just think of something you’d really like to eat. Anything.”

“But there isn’t anything I’d like to eat,” said Hoku, “That’s the whole point of the bypass.” Donovan looked at him as if he’d said something indelicate.

“The point of a bypass is that you can eat absolutely anything you want and it won’t matter,” she retorted. “I wonder what happens if we order stuff he can’t get?”

“Our order’s free,” joked Seychelles. Donovan looked strategic. “No,” continued Seychelles, “I don’t think it works that way. I think we order stuff that would be interesting to eat—or to make, right, it’s the chef’s card—and that, uh, reflects us. It’s a form of self-expression.” Donovan was bent on finding the right self to express. Hoku was sure that his food-self wasn’t going to be as beautiful as his face. Seychelles decided that if she thought about it too much she was going to get nervous and spoil her birthday. “You two,” she said, “I’m starting to stress out. I’m just going to take a little walk around. Might as well see the fabulous people, anyway.”

Hoku looked affronted. “You got your puffer?” asked Donovan, concerned.

“Yeah.” She stood up and moved away from the table, trying not to look aimless. She could hardly say she was going to the bathroom. There were no bathrooms. She went to the windows instead. She threaded her way through the glowing pools of Lucite and the fabulous people sitting around them;

they looked bleached by the white light. The reflections that met her in the silvery tinted windows were even more ethereal; she was reminded of the translucent fish fluttering beneath her menu. The restaurant was an aquarium. Better tell Hoku not to order sashimi, she thought. She smiled at her shatterproof enlightened self in the glass and turned back, passing a dimly-lit wall of glass brick behind which coppery shapes showed in distorted stretches: the kitchen? There was a kitchen, she had read, relic of the restaurant's past in which ordinary food had been prepared: never much of it, and at exorbitant cost, but still, food.

Arar had led the way into the no-food dining era; that was back in the day before the procedure, when food was still dangerous. He was the first one to appreciate its danger and the remedy for it: at his restaurant you could have the pleasure of commanding every kind of food you could imagine without the threat of having to eat it. At first, she had heard, people had ordered spectacular dishes, and the chef had made them; the staff brought them out for you to see and then took them away again. Soon people began to object to the smell, and some wondered what became of the meals; the chef assured them they were safely thrown out, but no one felt certain, so he dispensed with the display altogether, to higher customer satisfaction. Since the advent of the total gastric bypass, the restaurant had become even more fashionable—it was new again, with a different meaning. In principle, Arar could now be serving whatever toxic feasts his patrons dreamed up, knowing it could not hurt them, but people admired the purity of his resolve. He was a true artist.

Seychelles returned to the table. "There," she said, "I've worked up my appetite." The other two looked at her in mild horror. "Just kidding," she said. But she wasn't kidding. As she had walked around the restaurant, she had been asking herself: what is it people want here? What do I want? Her body did not give her hunger signals, but the place did. A scentless, invisible aura of desire pervaded the room. Seychelles understood, as her friends did not, that she had an

opportunity to be the chef's perfect customer, the ideal diner. She sat down again, gazing at her wobbly Lucite feet. "All ready?" she asked.

"No," said Hoku.

"Not really," said Donovan, her face still working, crossing off lists in her mind. Her hands were twitching in her lap. Seychelles remembered her habit of drumming her fingers on the table, which was impossible here. Her estimation of Arar rose: he knew how to make things difficult.

Her friends failed to rise to the chef's standard. Hoku did indeed order sashimi, yellowtail, with wasabi, ginger, and mayonnaise. The waiter's eyes glinted at this last detail. Seychelles thought it was with approval, but Hoku was paranoid: "My grandmother always served it that way," he blurted out. The waiter wrote it down with his beautiful cursive. Donovan ordered a complex dish with three kinds of seafood, two of which were illegal, wild boar sausage, rice, and saffron; it also required a certain kind of Spanish wine in the sauce of which there were fewer than 200 bottles left in the world, as Donovan knew because one of them was in her father's cellar. The waiter wrote all this down expressionlessly.

Seychelles took a long, calm breath. She remembered being cold as she stepped into the helicopter; her birthday was in late autumn. The celebrated maple tree on campus had turned, and all its red leaves had been collected. She had hers vacuum-framed in her room, along with the one from the previous year. She quickly ordered braised short ribs of beef with caramelized onions and a mashed yellow potato. Then she smiled hugely with relief and a strange delight at her choice, which had come to her out of the blue; she had only eaten beef twice in her life.

"It's slow," she said, "but I can afford to wait." The waiter smiled. He wrote her order down and headed away toward the translucent wall that suggested, but did not reveal, the kitchen's coppery shapes.

Shortly after that, a door opened soundlessly in the glass brick, and a figure dressed all in white like an ancient magus

walked out in soft shoes. It was the chef. He walked silently across the restaurant to their table. The waiter followed him in the hush that had settled over the room and conjured a mahogany chair for him from nowhere that Seychelles could see. He sat down.

“Mr. Arar?” said Seychelles. She was shocked. The chef looked exhausted. He also looked old, which was the truly shocking thing. He was very tall and very thin—too thin, she thought, something she could not recall ever thinking before. He had a nose that in anybody else would have cried out for surgery. His eyes were red-rimmed. Though he was still, agitation hung in the air about him. Seychelles nearly handed him her puffer. He looked at her intensely with his black eyes.

“TGB?” he said in a near-whisper.

“Yes,” said Seychelles.

“You ordered those ribs?”

“Yes,” said Seychelles.

“Why?”

“It’s my birthday.”

“Happy birthday,” said Arar after a moment. She felt that this automatic phrase was endowed with some astonishing force. She had just been reborn. The congratulatory image of her own father, perfected, pale, provident, seeing her into the helicopter collapsed in her mind like a house of cards. “Do you always eat something special on your birthday?” continued Arar in his hoarse voice.

“Not usually, no. I’ve been TGB for a while. But this is a restaurant, isn’t it?”

“This is a restaurant. Yes,” said Arar. He seemed to lack the strength to go on.

“And I thought it would taste nice,” said Seychelles, gently, to the thin man staring into the depths of their table. Arar lifted his burning eyes; she was surprised the water was not boiling.

“You thought that?” he said.

“Yes. That it would taste nice,” said Seychelles. Her friends looked at each other. They had no idea what was going on. The chef suddenly extended his thin hand across the table,

over the bobbing balsa wood, to Seychelles. Some of the tense wrinkles around his eyes smoothed out; he looked younger.

“Hardwicke Arar,” he said, his rough voice gaining life. “You may call me Hardy.”

The formality of his tone made her conscious of a great privilege. “Thank you,” she said. “Seychelles Xenobarbus.” She found they were still holding hands over the floating pool of the table. The chef’s hand was dry. Something made her press her hand down, still holding Arar’s, until it just broke the surface of the water. The wooden trays rocked and the fish scattered in fright. He looked down at their clasped hands, and suddenly pushed them down harder, all the way to the bottom of the tank, soaking her sleeve and her watch. No matter; it was waterproof. She laughed. The chef smiled suddenly and let go her hand, bringing his own out of the water and shaking off the drops. Hoku flinched away from the flying droplets, fearing fish poop.

“Would you like to see the kitchen?” asked Arar, standing up. The waiter’s flicker of emotion was as evident as if he had fainted.

“Yes, of course,” replied Seychelles. “I walked by it before. I didn’t know if it was still in use.” She rose, and the chef took her arm. They walked across the floor between tables of gaping people.

“It’s a meditation chamber now,” said Arar. He led her through the glass-brick door. A large room was revealed to her, full of chrome machinery and copper pans hanging in neat rows. A large empty space was cleared in the center, and a white futon lay on the floor in the precise middle. Seychelles turned slowly. Most of the hardware she had never seen before.

“This is all still here?” she said, “From before?”

“Yes,” said Arar, with finality. He looked down at her. “If I were to make those ribs,” he asked solemnly, “would you eat them?”

Seychelles looked back at him with equal solemnity. “Yes,” she said.