

EATING UNOBSERVED

by Amanda Huggins

The letting agent urged Marnie to admire the handmade kitchen cabinets, to appreciate the proportions of the bedroom fireplace. But there was really no need. She'd decided to take the apartment on Rue Annette as soon as she walked into the salon, captivated by the high ceilings, the elaborate cornice, the flood of light from the huge windows.

The concierge apologised for the furniture. He said it had been left by the previous tenant, a Madame Hubert. She'd moved abroad quite suddenly and he hadn't had time to clear the rooms. Yet Marnie loved the worn chaise longue, the crystal chandelier in the hallway, the pale grey bedstead decorated with overblown roses. The walls were filled with foxed watercolours, pen and ink sketches of Parisian streets, portraits of forgotten ancestors. She told the concierge he could leave it all just as it was.

In the bedroom there was a glorious oil painting, depicting a sumptuous banquet – a sensual feast of fruit, cheeses, fish and game, spilling out across a thick linen cloth. Figs were split wide open, ripe and glistening; succulent peaches wore a velvet bloom, tempting the observer to bite into their yielding flesh, to lap up the sticky spill of warm juice. Fish lay on blue platters, mouths agape, their scales glittering and slippery; rich, silky cheeses collided, their melting centres running over the edge of the board.

And when Marnie lay in bed, gazing at the painting, something inside her melted with them.

The day after she moved in, she dragged the heavy dining table across to the windows. It was late autumn, too cool to eat outside on the narrow balcony, but the windows faced east, caught the sunlight during the mornings, and she could imagine how it would be in the spring. She'd buy a simple gingham cloth, enjoy breakfasts of flaky croissants and warm baguettes, brew fresh-ground coffee, crowd the table with tiny dishes filled with curls of pale unsalted butter, apricot jam, fig preserve, lavender honey.

And in the evenings she might take her dinner at the small bistro on the corner. She would order simple, straightforward dishes: steak, mussels, a seasonal omelette, bread with a thick floured crust, a carafe of house wine.

But all that was for the future, when the advance came through for her next book – the novel she'd given herself six months in Paris to finish.

Marnie quickly fell into an effortless routine. She bought fish and vegetables from the market each morning, bouquets of fresh herbs tied up with rough twine. She wrote in the afternoons, and when the light faded she pored over the yellowed pages of the cookery books left behind by Madame Hubert, practised making bouillabaisse, croquettes and crepes. Every evening she dressed the table as though for an opulent dinner, with candles, flowers, platters of fruit, the embroidered tablecloths and heavy silverware she discovered tucked away at the back of the kitchen press.

And when she went to bed she gazed at the painting of the banquet, half-lit by the streetlamp, and in her dreams she walked into its rich dark heart, was swallowed whole by its slippery, lubricious flesh.

The building directly opposite her own appeared to be empty, and in the evenings the rooms remained in darkness. Most of the windows were shuttered, save for the second floor apartment which showed signs of recent occupation; it was brightly painted, with a striped awning over the salon window and red geraniums in glazed pots. But for the moment, there was no one to watch and nobody watching, and at dusk Marnie lit candles and sat by the window, eating unobserved. She had given herself Paris as a gift, yet now she was here she hardly knew what to do with it, and each morning she woke with an unfathomable longing; the half-remembered remnants of a dream slipping away at first light.

Then one evening she saw a light across the street.

The apartment with the striped awning was illuminated by a single lamp. Marnie could make out a coat thrown across a velvet couch, a coffee table piled with books, a flicker of blue light from the television in the corner. A man crossed the room and placed a glass of wine on the table. He sat down, stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankle.

Marnie continued to stand by the window in the dark, strangely compelled by him, by his unknown story, the possibilities of this stranger's life. When he reached for a pack of Gitanes, she watched him lean back, inhale deeply, blow his smoke towards the ceiling, felt the rush of the drug, the pull of the ritual. She went into the bedroom to fetch the Marlboro Lights she'd bought on impulse from a kiosk in the square. They'd remained untouched for three weeks. She'd kept telling herself it would be stupid to start again after so long, that she didn't want to smoke alone. But tonight she had company.

She walked back into the salon, opened the window to let in the cool air, sat down at the table and pulled out a cigarette of her own. For a few moments it was benign, an unarmed weapon.

Then she slipped it between her lips, flicked open the lighter, leaned forward into the small, pale flame, and inhaled.

As she exhaled she looked across the street and realised the apartment opposite was in darkness again.

The following evening her neighbour arrived home at dusk. Marnie stood at the window and watched him disappear into the building carrying two paper sacks filled with groceries. After a couple of minutes, the kitchen light came on, casting a pool of soft yellow onto a scrubbed farmhouse table. Cupboard doors opened and closed as he packed away tins and packets. He arranged vegetables in a huge earthenware bowl: fat courgettes, green and red peppers, an aubergine, dense, shiny and perfectly smooth, golden onions, over-ripe tomatoes. Then a cool light shone out from the open refrigerator, spotlighting him as he put away cream and butter, cheeses and saucisson. When the table was finally cleared, he reached for a bottle on a high shelf and poured himself a glass of red wine before starting to cook his supper.

She watched him chop herbs with a mezzaluna before gently whisking three large eggs. When the omelette was ready he cut himself a large hunk of bread and sat down at the table. He ate quickly, with a fierce hunger, his throat pale as he tipped back his head to drink the last of the wine. There was something thrilling and sinful about his beautiful mouth.

She went through to her bedroom and brushed her hair, re-applied her lipstick, changed into her silk robe. It was cold in the unheated room and she shivered a little, then tied the sash tighter before walking back into the salon and flicking on the lamp. She sat down on the chaise longue with her own glass of wine, gazing out into the street.

Tonight she wanted him to see her.

He cleared his supper away and walked into the sitting room, came over to the window and stepped out onto the balcony. He was only a few metres away from her now, and as he fumbled in his pocket for matches, she was tempted to open her own window, to throw her lighter down to him. For a moment she thought to wave, half-lifted her hand, felt herself smile and blush. But she realised the stupidity of it and dropped her arm, stayed quiet and still, watching him in profile against the light from inside his room.

In bed that night, Marnie could hardly concentrate on her book, could only see his strong hands, the fullness of his lips, and when she eventually fell asleep she dreamt he was with her, that they were running together, tiny figures between towering plates of fruit, biting into black cherries

the size of pumpkins, dark juice staining their greedy mouths, grabbing handfuls of ripe mango flesh with their bare hands.

In early December, it snowed. Swirling flakes thudded gently against the windows, reminding her of moths drawn to the light. Marnie sat at the table, watched her neighbour stand up and press his hands to the glass, staring out as though transfixed. Something in his stance emboldened her. She switched off the lamp, untied her robe and let it slip to the floor. She walked over to the window, pressed her own hands to the glass in a mirror pose. He stared out, unblinking, and she found herself unable to move, pinned to the night sky by the falling snow. Yet still his face gave nothing away.

The next day was Saturday, the snow had already melted, and Marnie decided to go down to the market. As she bought her bread, she saw him at the vegetable stall behind her. She blushed, embarrassed, as she remembered her boldness the night before. Yet what did she have to lose now? He was holding up two aubergines, talking to the stall holder in rapid French. She stood at his side, waited for the transaction to be completed.

‘Good morning – it’s a beautiful day,’ she said in halting French.

He turned to her, puzzled.

‘Do I know you?’ he asked in English.

Her blush deepened.

‘I live in an apartment opposite your building. I see you sometimes . . . cooking, smoking on the balcony?’

‘So you are spying on me?’

‘No!’ she gasped. ‘Nothing like that! I can see into your room, that’s all – when it’s dark and you don’t close your shutters.’

‘I’m sorry, I haven’t seen you before.’

‘But you must have. You’ve watched me eating my dinner. And last night . . .’

She laughed, too embarrassed to say more.

‘No, sorry,’ he said again, and he shook his head as he walked away.

Marnie followed him home at a distance, wondering why he would pretend not to know her, upset that he would deny having seen her before. As they reached Rue Annette she caught him up, slipped silently into the lobby behind him as the outer door swung shut. She waited there for a few minutes and then walked up the stairs and knocked on his door.

‘Oui?’

‘I just . . .’ She shrugged, unsure what to say to him now she was there.

He smiled and waved her inside. ‘Entrer! Come in, come in. I apologise – you are my neighbour and I did not mean to be rude. Would you like a coffee, er . . .?’

‘Marnie.’

He shook her hand. ‘I am Henri.’

The salon was bright with pale winter sunshine, the table scattered with plates and cups, a wine glass stained red at the rim.

She walked over to the window and gasped. It was impossible to see into her apartment from inside this room. The angle was all wrong, the street so narrow that the awning blocked it out. He would only be able to see into her salon if he were out on the balcony.

As she stood there, a young woman appeared at the window of the apartment beneath her own. Her hair was still sleep-mussed, dark eye make-up smudged. She posed, left hand cupping her right elbow, cigarette held between long fingers. With a rush of embarrassment, Marnie realised that it was this woman, not her, that Henri had been watching from his couch.

‘Voilà!’ He set a tray down in a space on the coffee table.

She pointed across to her apartment.

‘I live there. The third floor.’

‘And as you can see, Marnie, I have no view into your room.’

She nodded. ‘I know that now! I thought you were watching me, yet all this time I’ve been eating alone, unobserved.’

‘That’s Beatrice,’ he said, lifting his hand to acknowledge the woman in the window. ‘She works in a bar, so she sleeps late in the mornings. She has two lovers – one for the weekend and one who turns up Monday to Wednesday.’

‘So what does she do on Thursdays?’

He laughed. ‘She makes sure she gets her story straight.’

Marnie couldn’t take her eyes off his mouth as he spoke. His full, soft lips.

‘So you are renting Eleanor Hubert’s apartment,’ he said. ‘Do you know what happened?’

She shook her head.

‘Madame Hubert was a private tutor. There was a scandal involving a young pupil. They say she seduced him and his parents tried to press charges even though the boy was almost seventeen. Eleanor tried to blame it on a painting in the apartment. She claimed it had sent her crazy with lust, that she couldn’t help herself! Who would believe that?’

Marnie smiled and shook her head again, yet she was barely listening. Her mind was filled with the image of him cutting open a ripe fig, scooping out the dark red flesh with his tongue.

‘I have clams,’ she said quickly, ‘and a good white burgundy – if you’d like to come to dinner tonight?’