

DERRICK ABLEMAN

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## TASTEFUL

**A**NTON, MY WIFE'S FRENCH LOVER, has been leaving me clues in the kitchen sink. Before I realized what was at work I thought them to be merely lazy with their adulterous business. "Careless, careless," I thought on finding the clamshells piled on the countertop, some rimmed with lipstick, a red kind that I'd never seen before. Determined to leave them to their affair, I said nothing and cleaned up, scrubbing the saucepots and plates (Anton would sometimes take the courtesy to rinse the blackest of the bunch and these gestures little reliefs to me).

Eventually, however, a line was crossed, or rather, a line was drawn. For the record, I'd like to state that my initial reaction was not violent in nature; I tore no hair, or cursed and banged my chest in agony—in truth, I flinched. Getting home late one evening I found the house in a state of measured disarray: chairs carefully overturned, shelves upset of their volumes (mostly mine), pictures skewed on their hooks—but the dining room was ruined for me alone. Honestly, it appeared as though they had gone to some trouble to give me a show, as the walls were speckled with soup (a pork and potato potage, I determined, after much finger-licking), the plates and their contents scattered across the floor (swordfish, in a light virgin oil, with mixed greens) while the table itself was strewn with the wreckage of a planned passion: a snow angel of wine-stains and silverware to document their deliberate bad fun. In the heart of this scene was a heavy line of salt, running lengthwise down the table, dividing the house into territories of mine and

theirs, but like a challenge as well—a dare, if you will. Justifiably, I remained a gentleman and made no effort to erase the line or its litter, but switched off the lights instead, the salt strip illuminating the room like a tail of phosphorus. Knowing hunger myself, I righted a chair and fell to, picking through the leftovers.

Later, weeks later, the taste of this food remained in my mouth, blooming at the back of my throat into a kind of perpetual gag reflex, an unshakeable sweetness, there, just behind my tongue, trimmed with the sting of stomach bile. Momentarily, I believed the nausea to be the announcement of a great nest of ulcers, all growing fat from my ample stress and rotten habits—a consequence of adulthood with which I have learned to live. Nevertheless, the symptoms here refused to match up—they were more violent, unpredictable and stretched to include bouts of strenuous retching, night fever, insomnia and a general bad temper. Of course, no conventional remedy could slake the tides of digestive fluid awakened by their leftovers, but I soldiered on. Polite as you please, I spent each night splayed across the cool tiles of our shared bathroom, stifling my moans and thumbing eagerly through a French dictionary, my ear pressed to the wall, conjugating his irregular and exclamatory verbs with all the severity of a death sentence.

Quite by accident I discovered my own antidote.

Regarding the innocence of my intentions, I must say that reckless knife-play has never been customary in my kitchen—however, fortunate slips of the hand are. So, one afternoon, while straying admittedly too far from my task at the chopping block (dicing fresh rhubarbs for rhubarb pie), I found myself wandering the house, knife in hand, apparently seeking out some hidden rhubarb, or some such thing. This long and aimless search ended at last (surprisingly) in my wife's private bedchambers. Under oath (were I ever to find myself in such a civil bind), I would feel obligated to include in my testimony a brief description of my wife's habit of discarding useless and quite obtrusive items onto the floor her bedroom (examples escape me at the moment), as it sheds, I believe, some light on how I managed to plunge, or rather, trip, knife-first into the bed.

Very much by coincidence the bed was unoccupied and none were duly slain—but oh, those sheets—those stained and soiled and sinned upon sheets, they did get a running through, by god! When I was finished and had calmed myself I gathered up the tatters and, being myself a bit short on rhubarb, saw no better course than to include them in my pie. XXL Egyptian broadcloth bed sheets, it turns out, need only a good dousing of sherry before being sealed under a cinnamon crust

and set to bake for more than two hours at a medium heat. Yes and it came out marvelous, tasting in the end something like almond or arsenic, like a poison you build yourself up against, becoming stronger by every bite until the last of acid is snuffed out and you are at once full—full up forever. Zero states, in the stomach and the heart and all the rest, full up and empty forever, never again to feel hunger or pain, free to eat now for reasons of your own.