

Chef Joopi

by C. P. Boyko

Joopi, you seared the lemongrass beancurd under the broiler till it was brown and cracklingly crispy.

Joopi, you felt that nothing in life was better than soup served hot with a crust of bread.

You wondered, Joopi, if you were hungry.

I, Joopi, tasted the soup that Briskip had made.

“How is it?” asked Briskip anxiously.

I, half joking, replied: “Could use some edulcorating.”

Joopi, you diced a shallot, and diced another, and diced another.

You diced a caseful of shallots, one at a time.

Joopi, you ate a mango with undivided attention.

You, Briskip, tasted the pie that Joopi had made.

“How is it?”

You, joking, said, “Not edulcorated enough.”

The downtown basement refectory where you, Joopi, worked, and had worked for over three lustrums, seated a hundred persons, and served on average a thousand meals every day.

The bulk of your diners lived in the tower’s upstairs apartments: tiny, se-

edulcorate: to make more palatable.

lustrum: a period of five years.

questered, kitchenless rooms that nevertheless were much in demand, it seemed, among artists, invalids, cosmopolitans, drunkards, wanderers, students, loners, and childless singletons generally.

I, Joopi, best loved a soup puréed, because then its uniform texture didn't distract the tongue from the instantaneous degustation, in every spoonful, of every flavor.

A diner asked to address a cook. Joopi, you emerged from the kitchen, wiping your hands and knife on your apron.

“Supper,” the diner said, “was superb. Most thanks.”

“I had many helpers,” you said. “Most welcome.”

I, Joopi, destemmed a grape leaf, destemmed another, destemmed another, and so on, till I'd destemmed a caseful of grape leaves.

Joopi, watching your family happily eat the meal you had made sent shivers of happy pride through your body.

Joopi, I, Ridu, showed you the lemon mint that I'd chopped.

“You've diced it,” you said, “not chopped it!”

Your booming voice had a laugh in it, but I shrank a little in shame.

I, Joopi, overheard someone saying, “The food is always amazing here.”

Your refectory's kitchen, Joopi, was worn to dullness by age and use, poorly lit, and cramped because crammed with boxes of food and crowded with persons—literal-minded foodworkers who were eager to earn their foodcredit by preparing or serving food. Yours, like every kitchen you'd cooked in, frankly was overburdened with skillless, wellmeaning volunteers.

We, Odori and Joopi, cuddled in bed, becoming aroused, then sleepy.

singleton: one who is alone or unaccompanied.

You, Joopi, tasted the winter melon and seabee soup that you'd made.

It covered the tongue completely with smooth and savory warmth.

Hegki acquired from somewhere a demonpowered destemmer. Wary, you, Joopi, fed the machine some chard. It produced a clangorous din—and, after a minute, perfectly stemless leaves that were clean and ready to eat.

"It's loud," you complained, "it's heavy, it's slow, it occupies far too much of our counter space, and it wastes the stems."

With a flourish, Hegki disclosed and opened a drawer in which the machine had safekept the clean and perfectly leafless stems.

You reiterated your four remaining objections.

You, Marjoey, squirted sriracha sauce on your callaloo before even tasting it, much to Joopi's vexation.

"Lately you add sriracha to everything that you eat."

"That's only because I love it so much," you matter of factly said.

"Sriracha sauce," said Marjoey, "always improves, or never has failed so far to improve, the flavor of everything that I put it on. I assume it therefore'll improve this callaloo too."

"I think that you're still too young to be drawing generalizations. Taste it without sriracha sauce first."

Tilani reported, "Everyone loved the lychee and loquat gravy. I soon lost count of the many compliments."

"Good," you, Joopi, said, feeling good.

I, Joopi, removed the fork from my mouth. The cake, in its thrice distilled sunshine sauce, dissolved on my tongue in nacreous sheets of flavor.

I shivered.

nacreous: pearly or iridescent.

Joopi, intoxicated with food, you praised and interrogated the chef, who beamed.

“I’m so glad you liked it. There’s much we couldn’t, of course, for so many persons, do in the way we normally would. You ought, if you’ve time some day, to come visit us at our restaurant, where we really pop every cork.”

You, taking the address, promised you would, and soon.

Joopi, you thought you heard in the blender’s motor a novel undertone, faint but keening, that worried you.

I, Joopi, reminded Hegki that I was waiting for pomegranates.

“I can’t get any right now from anywhere,” Hegki said. “There’s a worldwide shortage.”

I wondered.

Joopi, you told me, Ridu, to dice some yams. I, afraid to mince them in error, diced them quite large.

“You’ve chopped them,” you said, “not diced them!”

I withered slightly.

“Don’t worry. Now you can dice them finer. An eighth that size ought to do the job.”

Joopi, you asked your book, which confirmed that there was indeed a shortage of pomegranates just then.

You added your plea to others entreating farmers to solve the problem as soon as possible.

Thus, Ridu, you learned the adage’s first and literal meaning: Chop before dicing, dice before mincing.

You, Joopi, knew that the rice was done by the sound it made in the pot: a slight crepitation.

You, Marjoey, read from *Bertrolu's Fables* aloud to Joopi.

“ ‘A magpie sang from its treetop all the year round to any who, passing by, cared to listen. Meanwhile, a wagtail flitted from hill to valley, from lake to ...’ How do you say that word?”

“ ‘Veldt.’ ”

“ ‘... from lake to *veldt*, and from copse to stream with the changing seasons, to bring its song to as many hearers as possible.’ ”

Cooking, you, Joopi, never used timers.

Helping out in the kitchen, Hegki, you used the mincing machine to mince the courgette.

Tightlippedly Joopi thanked you.

“Food chopped by machine tastes worse than that chopped by hand,” you told Briskip, Joopi.

You, Joopi, wondered aloud, “What happened to all that broccoli?”

“Briskip used it for last night’s supper,” said Ridu.

“Didn’t it have my name on it?”

Ridu’s wriggling confirmed it.

Joopi, you brushed with water a dumpling wrapper. You scooped and plopped on the dumpling wrapper a grasp of caramelized cassava and dulse. You folded the dumpling wrapper in half and sealed it with little pinches along its edge. Then you filled and folded another dumpling, another dumpling, a dozen dumplings, a hundred dumplings, another hundred, another.

Though part of you dreamed of getting a new, more powerful blender, Joopi, you took the old one in first to be, if it could, repaired.

Laughing, I, the repairer, sharpened the blade and squirted the blender's motor with grease.

“This beast'll outlive a tortoise's kids,” I reckoned.

Proudly, I, Hegki, opened a box of corers.

You tested one on an apple, Joopi, and demonstrated conclusively that a knife was faster and more unwasteful.

I stowed them sulkily in a drawer—“So that others can, if they want to, use them,” I said.

“One leaves a clean kitchen for the next cook,” I, Joopi, told Ridu.

You asked yourself, Joopi, if you were hungry yet.

“We couldn't get acerola this week?” asked Joopi.

Said Hegki, “Use, if you can, bananas instead. We've heaps of bananas, ripening fast.”

The corers stayed in their drawer, unused.

Joopi, you thought again of the thrice distilled sunshine sauce.

On the menu blackboard, you, Joopi, wrote the lunch menu: “Amaranth leaf and tarragon salad; artichoke bottoms stuffed with red wine reduction and smoked pimentos; and crusty caramel pudding topped with hot chocolate sauce and shaved frozen rosewater.”

I, Tilani, said, frowning, “Basically: salad, artichokes, pudding.”

“Basically,” you agreed.

My expression cleared.

“What's for lunch?” asked a diner.

“Artichokes,” said Tilani.

“Again?”

You, Joopi, withdrew yourself to the kitchen.

Joopi, you let the almond and radish loblolly simmer. Meanwhile, you added chives to the pancake batter.

I, Joopi, eating some leeks that Briskip had roasted, found in my bowl a morsel of roasted scallion, whose incongruity disconcerted me slightly.

You, Joopi, tasted the burdock root and kohlrabi soup that you'd made.

It had an exquisite mouthfeel, like plush. Its flavors were mild but many, and all were daintily balanced.

Joopi, you punctuated your list of groceries, separating each item by a full stop.

Tilani came from the serving station to say that one of the diners had a complaint: "The soup is too salty."

You, Joopi, came from the kitchen, wiping your knife and hands on your apron. "Who says my soup is salty?"

The diner who had complained now murmured inaudibly.

"I will taste the soup," you announced, and tasted it. "No: such saltiness as it has is a complement to its sweetness, savoriness, and sourness. I wouldn't change it one drop. But everyone's palate's different."

You then returned to the kitchen.

You, a new volunteer, asked Joopi for guidance. "How do I get these spines off these hedgehog cactuses?"

Joopi patiently showed you how to remove them.

"Pecans.

Pistachios.

loblolly: a gruel or stew.

Taro.
Turmeric.
Cauliflower.”

I, Joopi, sprinkled the rhubarb cobbler with flakes of cinnamon.

Joopi, you, at the mirror, hefted your paunch appraisingly.

Ridu, you paused to watch Joopi skin a pineapple, separating the rind and pith from the fruit in several deft strokes.

“Get back to your work,” joked Joopi.

“Aren’t restaurants run by goldworkers?” asked Odori.

“Not always,” Joopi replied.

A regular diner called through the kitchen door, “You’ve surpassed yourself with those rissoles, Joopi! Most thanks!”

You, Joopi, called back, “Most welcome!”

You, Joopi, halfway through lunch, observed that my, Ridu’s, plating technique was lacking panache.

You lightly (but loud as ever) corrected me: “Let the sorrel fall from the tongs, like so. And a dusting only of toasted beechnuts on top. The watercress chutney goes on the side.”

I grumbled, “But your way’s slower.”

“It’s not a race,” you said, disingenuously.

Joopi, you honed your knife on a honing steel.

You, Joopi, called for the scurvy grass. —“On the way!” cried Ridu.

“And are those cucumbers ready?” —“Almost!” cried Briskip.

“Who’s got the bean sprouts?” —“Me,” said a volunteer whom you’d

panache: flamboyant confidence of style.

never met. “Or at least I think these are them.”

You looked at your wristwatch; lunch would be late today.

Hegki acquired a box of ripe cherimoya, a fruit you rarely encountered, Joopi. You flipped through recipes on the shelves of the public library, finding finally one you trusted—because it called for a bay leaf.

Joopi, you, in advance, compounded the basting sauce for the acorn squash with cayenne, oregano, thyme, white pepper, paprika, basil, tomato powder, and fig juice.

Whenever, Joopi, you searched the library for a recipe, you included the keyword “best.”

“What can I eat that’s sweet?” asked Marjoey.

“Hungry again already?” said Joopi.

“Maybe. I think so, yes. I don’t know.”

“You’ll know when you are.”

On the footpath, under a tree, some children had placed a table, from which they offered the passersby (as a sign declared) “FRESH CROQUETTES.”

You, Joopi, felt obligated by civic spirit to cross the street and accept with thanks the alleged delicacy—which scrutiny proved was not a croquette and no longer fresh.

You, praising their altruism and effort, promised to eat and savor it later.

You, Joopi, could sightread recipes, tasting them in imagination.

You, Joopi, thought about what you, when you again were hungry, would eat.

Joopi, your walnut, kumquat, and tofu pasta received that day many compliments.

You remembered only the one complaint.

The restaurant that you, Joopi, had been invited to by the chef at the celebration hotel was privately run, you learned, by a cooks' collective, and not by goldworkers.

Most recipes were unable to teach you anything, Joopi. Only the most unusual combinations of herbs and spices could even kindle your curiosity—but then usually proved unpalatable.

I, Joopi, tasted the ricebean, samphire, and truffle soup that I'd made that morning.

It filled my mouth and encased my tongue with its sweet acidity, airy richness, and sapid tang.

The ginger was turning rubbery.

“Ginger soup!” you decided, Joopi.

“Coconut water.

Nori.

Potatoes.

Spelt noodles.

Almond oil.”

“No peaches this week?” asked Joopi.

Said Hegki, “Lots of bananas, though!”

The recipe earned your, Joopi's, contempt, by calling for seven eighths of a grasp of oats.

There was no such measurement. Seven eighths of a grasp was simply a grasp.

sapid: full of pleasant flavor.

You, Joopi, worked forty hours that week. You claimed only thirty—to keep the national average low and achievable.

You, Joopi, hungry and feeling venturesome, grabbed a quiche at a kiosk on your way home.

It tasted of grease and undercooked onions.

Nevertheless, you pleasurelessly, with grief at the waste of appetite, slowly, swallowmeal ate it all.

Joopi, you sometimes, rarely, resented working so many hours. But you called to mind an old aphorism: “The more a person has had entrusted to them, the more they will be expected to give.”

“I’m lucky,” you thought, “to have so much work to offer the world.”

A question appeared on one of the cooking shelves that you caretook, Joopi.

“Please help! I need some ideas about what to make with salsify. Many thanks!”

You replied, “This question was asked and answered before.”

You nonetheless shared a few of your favorite salsify recipes.

Joopi, you looked through recipes for pepino and pumpkin curry. You trusted most the one calling for the most spices.

Joopi, you weighed yourself.

I, Joopi, needed to use, before they went bad, chrysanthemum blossoms, fieldcress, and chervil.

Therefore I made chrysanthemum blossom, fieldcress, and chervil salad.

I, Joopi, learned that the restaurant was accepting nonmember reservations; the first available dates, however, were seven seasons away.

I turned to the members’ pages.

swallowmeal: swallow by swallow.

When you, Joopi, left the refectory in the afternoon to go home, you passed through the dining hall, where the sounds of satisfied munching gladdened your heart.

“Remember,” Hegki reminded Joopi: “bananas!”

I, Odori, asked how your day was, Joopi.

You shuddered. Someone had thrown an untasted plate of food in the garbage. Someone had called the cream crackers “icky.”

Shaking your head, you grumbled, “Come here and show me a little lousy affection, damn it, you child of cheats, you.”

I took you onto my lap and tenderly made a fuss over you.

Unfortunately, the better your cooking tasted, the more you ate of it, Joopi.

To even singly distill the dribble of pallid sunshine that the refectory’s high, small windows exuded was, you discovered, Joopi, a task requiring three days and every unused receptacle in the kitchen. The end result, though by diners praised, was a disappointment to you.

There was a long queue for lunch at the serving station, and all the servers that day were new volunteers, so, Joopi, you left the kitchen to help your helpers.

“You, goodly, what will you eat?” —“The lunch, please.” —“That’s all?” —“That’s all.” —“There you go. Enjoy it.” —“Most thanks.” —“Most welcome. You, goodly, what will you eat?” —“The same, please.” —“The lunch?” —“The lunch.” —“There you go. Good eating.” —“Most thanks.” —“Most welcome. You, goodly, what will you eat?” —“I also will have the lunch, if you please.” —“Enjoy it. You, goodly, what will you eat?”

The new volunteers were, like the queued diners, dazzled and overawed into

sprightly orderliness by Joopi's authoritative and brisk efficiency.

"You, goodly, what will you eat?"

The diner was unprepared and seemed discomposd by this question.

"What have you got?"

The new volunteers, the others in line, and Joopi all winced in impotent incredulity.

Politely, with outward patience, you, Joopi, reading the menu blackboard, described the lunch for the indecisive or purblind diner.

The diner mused, "I am not, I think, altogether hungry enough to eat a whole meal. What else have you got?"

Ignoring the other diners' repining sighs, you replied, "As always, we've soup, and cookies, you see, and pudding ..."

The diner oohed. "I could eat a cookie, I think. Provided it's not too sweet ...?"

You, Joopi, drew a deep breath for courage, and told the diner the truth: the cookies were very sweet.

The diner, perhaps, drew courage from Joopi's. "Well, all the same, I *will* have a cookie. *That* one ... Most thanks."

"Most welcome."

The queue progressed with relief.

Joopi, from the refectory you brought home big bags of the hottest chilies and chili powders.

You were looking forward to something piquant for supper.

Odori, you and Marjoey, as a surprise for Joopi, made supper.

Sniffing the vapid air with pretended relish, I, Joopi, asked what you'd

purblind: having impaired vision.

vapid: insipid; savorless.

made.

“Paste pudding!” you proudly cried.

I concealed a grimace behind a grin.

Looking forward’s a present pleasure.

Joopi, you read aloud from *Bertrolu’s Fables* to me, Marjoey.

“ ‘At dawn, a sunflower, waking, lifted its head and fluttered its mane of petals to greet the daylight. It asked a neighboring lilac, “Aren’t I resplendent?”

Answered the lilac, ruffling its own abundant, perfumy panicles, “Yes, but you, with your single flower, provide less pleasure in sum than I with my many do.” ’ ”

You, Joopi, asked me, Tilani, “How many diners today complained that the vindaloo was too spicy?”

Halving my estimate, I said, “Ten perhaps. Maybe less. Not many.”

You chewed your lips.

You, Marjoey, complained, “At Leni’s they have a chopping machine.”

Said Joopi, “Machines deprive you of practice, till you become dependent on them.”

That sounded to you just fine.

The celery in the crisper was pale and curling with age.

“Today is the day,” you, Joopi, declared, “for celery soup.”

Those who applied for membership to the restaurant, Joopi learned, would be served a meal at their interview.

Unfortunately, the taste of your, Joopi’s, supper, was not as strong as the smell of skunk, which had permeated the house.

panicle: a loosely branched cluster of flowers.

Joopi, parts of the nectarine that you ate were off.

No one had brought home groceries.

“Well,” said Joopi, “it’s hashmagandy again.”

We groaned.

“Spice can always be added,” Joopi told Briskip, “never removed.”

“Come give your boombi a hug,” said Joopi.

Marjoey gladly obliged.

Joopi, your teeth felt furry.

You, despite what you knew, believed that delicious food must be healthy, Joopi.

Your tongue, Joopi, moved the food to be chewed around to your teeth, avoiding the one that twinged.

“Where did the pears go?,” Joopi, you asked.

I, Ridu, admitted, “Briskip put tons of pears in the marinade for the water chestnuts last night ...”

Tilani remembered, “I was supposed to tell you that Briskip used all the pears last night, and was sorry.”

Sighing, you mused, “*Banana clafouti* ...?”

You diced the carrots obliquely, Joopi, to make the slices less prone to rolling away.

You, Joopi, resolved that supper would be the last thing you ate each day, from now on.

hashmagandy: a stew made with whatever ingredients are to hand.

Beginning tomorrow.

You, Joopi, applied for membership to the restaurant.

“Lotus root.

Kasha.

Rice vermicelli.

Collards.

Sambuca.”

Joopi, with a cupped hand you wafted the steam towards you and sniffed its pungent aroma.

You, Joopi, resolved thenceforth to not eat unless you were really hungry.

“What tonight are we eating?”

“Leftovers.”

“No!” we cried.

For you, Joopi, leftovers were a comfort of home: a break from the task of cooking, of course, but also a cozy pleasure to eat.

Joopi, at work you thought of the parsley wilting at home.

Marjoey, you “helped” me, Joopi, chop vegetables.

“Does it hurt a plant when you cut it up?”

I prevaricated.

I, Hegki, flourished the two new multiblade spinning knives. “These will revolutionize cooking!”

Joopi was doubtful.

Joopi, at home you thought of the turnips starting to shrivel in the refrigera-

prevaricate: to speak evasively.

tor at work.

Joopi, your knife felt dull.

“Would you like to read me a story, chickpea?” you, Joopi, holding *Bertrolu’s Fables*, asked me, Marjoey.

“No thanks. Tonight I’m too tired. But maybe,” I added kindly, “tomorrow!”

You, Joopi, received a note, from the chef who had at the celebration hotel invited you to the restaurant, reinviting you to the restaurant—anytime. “We’d be proud to serve you a meal whenever you’re in the neighborhood. Please consider yourself a member already, chef!” It was signed, with *x*’s denoting kisses and *o*’s denoting embraces, “Tal.”

Joopi, at the refectory, you were not called “chef.”

You preferred it thus. The refectory, you believed, and liked to believe, was nonhierarchical.

Joopi, you showed the note to Odori.

“Either that’s just the way that this Tal signs notes,” said Odori teasingly, “or—!”

The refectory to Tilani, Ridu, and Briskip seemed to be hierarchical.

“It smells delicious. What is it?”

“Nothing but garlic so far,” said Joopi.

“Well,” said Odori, “keep up the splendid work.”

“When,” Marjoey, you asked, “will supper be ready?”

“Sooner with help,” said Joopi.

“I’m only asking to know. I’m not even really hungry,” you lied.

It pained you, Joopi, to see your loved ones recoil from cooking as from an onerous waste of time.

You, Joopi, called from the kitchen, "Supper is ready!"

Nobody came, and no one replied.

The house was as still and silent as stagnant water.

"I ate at Leni's," Marjoey said.

"Sorry, lovecake, no appetite," said Odori.

You sat alone in the kitchen, Joopi, and ate the meal that you'd made.

You, Joopi, lied to the dentist.

"Yes," you said, "pretty often."

While the dentist grinded and scraped away the decayed enamel, you, Joopi, lobbed your attention up to the ceiling, whence, by a force of gravity, it descended again to, helpless and fretful, superintend the busy and cluttered worksite your deadened mouth had become.

Briefly pressing my warm, gloved hands to your, Joopi's, cheeks, I, the dentist, praised your stolidity and your bravery.

You replied with vowels of modest gratitude.

Joopi's numb lip felt fat.

Joopi, your tongue, suspicious at first, grew used to your teeth's new feel within days.

"I couldn't get onions," Hegki apologized, "so instead got plenty of devil's dung."

You, Joopi, could tell that Briskip had used the chopping machine to chop the cardoon.

I, a new volunteer, while hurrying with the soup to the serving station, misstepping, slipped.

“The important thing,” you said stoutly, Joopi, “is no one’s hurt.”

I, Joopi, brought home a bucket of spoiling popsicles for the animals.

“The refectory’s freezer hasn’t been keeping everything frozen quite,” I explained.

Joopi, your cake was still, at its center, soft, after thirty minutes of baking. Cursing, you put a heatproof thermometer in the oven, waited, then checked the temperature.

“The oven is burning cold again, Hegki!”

You, Joopi, overheard diners praise the slumgullion.

“Finally something palatable!”

You narrowed your eyes.

“Tonight,” said Joopi, “I’m eating out—at a restaurant.”

“What will *we* do?”

“Leftovers, I imagine.”

We groaned.

First over your, Joopi’s, tongue spilled a luscious juiciness, reminiscent of rain and flowers and swelling seedpods; an aromatic and tangy wineyness followed, tinged with a woody, resinous taste, medicinal almost; then came a flood of variegated caramels, rich and smoky, as warm and snug as a charcoal fire, yet as sleek and creamy as sudsing soap; as you, gulping, swallowed at last, a citrusy tartness tickled your throat and nose. For a while there lingered an afterflavor of musty nuttiness, dank yet airy, that satisfied without

slumgullion: a watery or insubstantial hash or stew.

sating, leaving you wanting more.

You, Joopi, speared with your fork a morsel of golden, spongy meringue, which, drawn through the sparkling glaze of liqueur and syrup, you used to dab up some grains of handcrumbled cookie crust, before lifting it to your mouth and placing it on your tongue.

Apprehensively and excitedly, Tal, you watched from the kitchen door as I, Joopi, ate.

Odori, you from your book glanced up when I, Joopi, entered the bedroom. “How was the food?”

I opened my mouth to lavish a thousand words on the lush yet comfortable dining rooms, on the spacious kitchens so well equipped, on the massive, tidily brimming freezer and storage rooms, on the cooks’ collegial, virtuosic, unhurried, playful performance, and on the meal’s exquisitely strange and subtle delectability; words expressive enough, emphatic enough, however, were not forthcoming. I said at last only, “Very good.”

Joopi said, “The amazing thing is they do it all without knives. The kitchen’s completely knifeless. They call it “knifeless cuisine.” According to Tal, who lived there, it’s catching fire like dry punk in Brookstate.”

Odori, sleepy, said, “Oh?”

“And,” Joopi remembered, “boxes of pomegranates!”

Odori, sleeping, said, “Oh.”

Joopi, with grape tomatoes, blue dandelion, and pickled endives you put together a scrumptious casserole salad at the refectory.

Then, at home, you made a galoptious potpie of sparrowgrass and white beets.

punk: soft, decayed wood, used as kindling.

galoptious: delightful, luscious, delicious.

The world seemed a satisfactory place.

“Everything there is knifelessly made,” said Joopi. “They call it “knifeless cuisine.” In Brookstate right now, it’s catchinger than a cold, I’ve been told.”

Said Hegki, “They must use chopping machines?”

“No blades whatsoever. None!”

Joopi, you dipped the daylily blossoms into molasses breading, then dropped them, dripping, in frying pans, where the sizzling coconut oil received them with spitting, whistling fanfare.

“They call it “knifeless cuisine.” It’s popular now in Brookstate, I’ve heard,” said Joopi.

“It sounds incredibly inefficient,” said Ridu.

“Yes. That’s the point.”

Because the footpaths had not been properly shoveled, Joopi, you walked to work in the streets.

““Knifeless cuisine,” they call it,” said Joopi.

“How do they cut things up without knives?” asked Briskip, aghast.

“They don’t. That’s the magic. Mostly they roast things whole; once they’ve cooled, they drop them to crack them open, or slam or throw them against a wall; then, by hand, they pull them apart, and pluck them to bite-size pieces.”

Joopi, your eye was itchy. You absentmindedly rubbed it—using a finger that had been mincing chilies an hour ago.

Joopi said, “They believe that forcing themselves to take extra time enhances their concentration and, thus, attention to detail. “Knifeless cuisine,” they

catchinger: more infectious.

call it.”

“I like the sound of it,” said Tilani. “Although I guess it would hardly work in a place like this. It seems time is something there’s never extra enough of here.”

Joopi, you confected a lavender vinaigrette with olive oil, syrup, mustard, and rocambole.

“And the reason they don’t use knives is because they don’t want to hurt the vegetables?” asked Marjoey.

“Well, not exactly,” said Joopi.

“Certainly plants and vegetables feel,” Odori and Joopi had to admit. “However, they feel so slowly—a day for them is like half a second—that anything that we do is over before it even begins.”

“Like yanking a sticking plaster from off an owie?” Marjoey asked.

“Yes, but even faster than that.”

“I, from now on, intend to eat only bread,” you announced, Marjoey, “because it doesn’t have any feelings.” And bread was yummy.

I, Joopi, told you that bread and everything else we ate was derived from vegetables, grains, or plants. “We could not without them exist.”

Ridu watched Joopi clumsily tear apart with two forks a pineapple.

Marjoey gloomily meditated awhile, not long, on the fact that life upon death is founded.

In an affected bantering tone, a diner deplored the lateness of lunch.

Tilani, you redirected your own annoyance at having nothing to serve the diners toward the diners themselves. “It’s coming. Just keep your shoes on your feet.”

confect: to prepare by the combination of various ingredients.

To see how it sounded, Joopi, you said you thought you might volunteer at the restaurant perhaps once a week.

I, Odori, said, “You deserve a change! The refectory will survive without you, no doubt.”

“I meant in the evening.”

“Oh!”

I imagined grey, congealed gobs of leftovers.

I courageously reassured you that *we* would somehow survive without you, no doubt.

Singly, without utensils or plates, we grazed on the cold collation prepared that morning by Joopi.

You, Joopi, stood back and fussily contemplated the varied plateful of food that you’d been composing now for an hour.

I, Tal, recommended blanching the spinach, which would enhance its color.

You did so, plunging the spinach briefly in boiling water, then cooling it in an ice bath.

“Perfect,” we both agreed.

Marjoey, you, like a lion, cruelly masticated a lettuce leaf.

You, Joopi, picked from the chambered pulp of a pomegranate its ruby seeds.

Joopi, you fingerpeeled from a blanched tomato its loosened skin.

A worldfamous cook, and restaurant member, lauded your cooking, Joopi.

collation: a light meal.

masticate: to reduce to a pulp with the teeth; to chew.

Joopi, with trepidation you weighed yourself.

The restaurant's members, partners, and diners, local and foreign, sent it, in casks and barrels, their purest sunshine.

Because I, Joopi, enjoyed it so, I could not consider the time I spent at the restaurant to be work, and would not claim foodhours, therefore, therefor.

Tal, you lobbed to me, Joopi, cantaloupes: "One, two, three!"

I said, "Keep them coming! I think I'll double the recipe."

"Before we go home," said Joopi, "let's peel those grapefruits, so they can macerate overnight."

"What again does 'macerate' mean?" asked Ridu.

You started returning from the refectory in the evening, Joopi, a halfhour later.

Joopi, you felt no heavier, looked no heavier, but undoubtably were.

"Before we freeze them," suggested Joopi, "let's blanch those cherries to set their flavor and firm the flesh."

"What is 'blanch'?" asked Ridu, and eyed the clock.

The fact that so few were fed by the lavish meals that you, Joopi, made at the restaurant was a source of prickly compunction.

You started arriving at the refectory in the morning, Joopi, a halfhour earlier.

therefor: for that, for it.

macerate: to become softened by soaking in a liquid.

compunction: a sting of conscience or a pang of uneasiness aroused by wrongdoing or the prospect of wrongdoing.

“Let’s hurry it up!” roared Joopi.

Tilani, Ridu, and Briskip, hurrying, grumbled.

Joopi, you read aloud from *Bertrolu’s Fables*, “ ‘A plump, selfsatisfied pumpkin sat in the dirt, and, sipping its soily nutriment through its vine, slowly grew. Eupeptic and thus benignant, it turned, concerned, to its tiny neighbor, a thimbleberry, and gently chided it. “Friend, you ought to be larger! Look how the blandest breeze makes you tremble, how, in the warmest drizzle, you shiver! Who do you serve by staying so small? A family of wolves could feed for a week on plentiful me; but you’d hardly make a meal for a finch, or spider, or grub, my friend!” ’ ”

Tal and the other cooks at the restaurant were at first unsettled, but soon inspired, by your, Joopi’s, tireless efficiency.

“Tonight,” said Marjoey, “I can be Boombi. Who wants to help make supper?”

We all of us volunteered.

At the restaurant, Joopi, tearing the young green jackfruit in strips, longed fleetingly for a knife.

You, Joopi, shutting *Bertrolu’s Fables*, said, “Time to sleep.”

“ ‘ “Though I may feed but few,” said the thimbleberry, “the few I feed will be glad I didn’t, by growing larger, dilute my flavor.” ’ ”

The number of meals the restaurant weekly served grew a little larger. Its waiting list grew a little shorter.

The chopping machine was broken. You, Briskip, sharpened your knife.

eupeptic: having good digestion, or (or therefore) being in good spirits.

Joopi, you stuffed the eggplants with pine nuts, garlic, tahini, lemon, and kelp. You roasted them in the oven until they started to hiss.

“Thus is this fable finished,” Bertrolu said.

With your final morsel of sippet, Joopi, you wiped your bowl clean of soup.

sippet: a small piece of toast or bread to be dipped in soup or gravy, or used as a garnish.