“Where can I take you?” said the taxista, picking up the mate gourd in his lap and taking a quick sip through a metal straw as he glanced at me in the rearview mirror.

I flipped through my planner, wishing I’d thought to memorize my new cross streets. “Avenida Santa Fe y . . .” How many times had I looked at that map on the internet? “Santa Fe, y Bulnes,” I said, brushing a bead of sweat off my temple. I rolled down the window. January was to Buenos Aires what August was to Miami, and stepping out of Ezeiza airport and into the ten a.m. sunshine felt like walking into a sock, or falling into a vat of broth.

“Bueno.” The taxista nodded. “Santa Fe y Bulnes.” He pulled away from the curb, cruising past the other cabs parked in the arrivals area—mostly Fiats and Renaults, yellow on top, black on the bottom, they looked like toy cars that might be swept away by a strong wind. “Santa Fe y Bulnes,” the taxista repeated, glancing at me again in the rearview mirror, a coy smile hovering in the lines around his eyes, which were deep-set and dark brown. “We might get caught in a traffic jam, ¿sabés?”

I slid closer to the open window, wondering how he could stand to be wearing a long-sleeved shirt. “Bueno . . .”

“Bueno no es,” said the taxista. Good it’s not. We pulled up to the parking booth. “¡Che, Juan! ¿Como estás, viejo?” He handed the attendant a few pesos, and the wooden barrier arm rose in a slow, unsteady upward slice, as if reluctant to let us leave the airport. “The piqueteros,” he said to me, waving around his mate gourd as we drove away from the parking booth and coasted along the curves of the road to the airport exit, “are marching downtown.”

“They are?” I stuffed my planner back in my purse. “Do you know why?”

“Who knows?” The taxista sipped his mate—the green-tea-like beverage that takes up more shelf space in Argentine grocery stores than coffee and tea combined—through a silver bombilla until he made a slurping sound. “Piqueteros have a right to express themselves,” he said, setting

the mate on the console, in front of the gearshift. “But I also have a right to drive the streets of my city in peace, don’t I?”

He grinned at me in the rearview mirror, where he had hung a wooden rosary, and a ribbon in Argentine blue and white that fluttered when he merged onto the autopista, which was empty but for a few other taxis. I gazed out at the pampa, shimmering in the midday heat, an ocean of tall grass stretching to the blue-brown horizon. I could comprehend its vastness no more than I could comprehend that I was here, at last.

“What are you doing in Buenos Aires?”

I looked out the window, not knowing how to answer him. We were driving past a villa miseria (shantytown), where the sun glinted off the corrugated tin roofs and clotheslines sagged between cinder-block huts. Just beyond the villa was a billboard with a slogan painted over the stripes of the national flag: “Argentina: un país en serio.” Argentina: A Serious Country.

I wiped another drop of sweat off my temple and thought back to the Night of the Inviolable Oysters.

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“You’re too slow!” the Sorceress shouted at me from the pass-through window, her normally stoic brown eyes magnified and wild behind her rimless glasses. “You can’t even shuck an oyster!”

The Sorceress was a forty-year-old, stringy-haired, pot-bellied chef who was addicted to painkillers and probably under their influence when she decided to name her high-end San Francisco French-Asian fusion restaurant “Vertigineuse.” I called her the Sorceress because anything she cooked—white gazpacho, foie gras with mango butter, seared hamachi wrapped in shiso leaves—was impossible to stop eating, whether I was hungry or not.

Now she was trying to woo a dozen VIPs at table 11, starting with oysters on the half shell. I tried to wedge the knife into the shell’s wavy

crease without mangling its contents, but the oyster kept its mouth shut, tightening its seal. The Sorceress rolled her eyes. In that unshuckable oyster, she was seeing all of my ineptitude.

“What are you going to do,” she said, pressing her palms into the small of her back, ignoring the plates the other line cooks were setting before her for inspection, “when we really get busy?”

I had no idea. I swept a dozen oysters into my apron, grabbed the shucking knife (short, thick, and dull, designed to pry, not to cut), left three fig-gorgonzola-caramelized-onion flatbreads in the pizza oven, sprinted past Bob at the sauté station (who was pirouetting between foie gras on the flat top and corn nage on the stove), past Rob at the grill (roasting racks of lamb, finishing wild salmon), and past the Sorceress, who hissed at me—“You have one minute!”—as I flew by.

I raced down the hall, into the prep kitchen. “Raúl!” I said, holding out my apron to show him the oysters. “¡Ayúdame, por favor!” Raúl was our lead prep cook. He put down his boning knife, pushed aside the cutting board with the tuna he was filleting, and scooped the oysters out of my apron and onto the stainless-steel counter in a single motion. Like everyone else in the kitchen, he pitied me—I was too slow. Unlike everyone else in the kitchen, Raúl was kind.

He should have been where I was, cooking on the line, learning the cold station, plating salads and desserts. Raúl had played semiprofessional soccer in Guadalajara until he tore a ligament in his knee. He never wasted a movement. His knife skills were equal to or greater than Bob’s and Rob’s. Yet after three years working two jobs in San Francisco kitchens, he didn’t speak more than a few words of English—so he stayed in the back of the restaurant, prepping. But he could shuck a dozen oysters in forty-five seconds, a screaming chef in the background, a placid smile framing his perfect teeth.

Hours later, after the VIPs left, the Sorceress went home, and Vertigineuse closed for the night, I was sitting at the bar, sipping Johnnie Walker Black that Ray, our freckle-faced, swan-necked headwaiter, was pouring as though he owned the place.

Everyone adored Ray. Every night, before opening, he would make espresso drinks for the entire kitchen staff, to each person's specifications. He could sweet-talk any cook on the line into redoing a dish if a customer was unhappy, and he could take the temperature of a table in seconds. My grandma would have called him a caviar personality.

"What happened in there tonight?" said Ray, looking down at my hand, which was wrapped in an Ace bandage.

I sighed. "Same thing that happens every night. I burn flatbread. I mess up the tuille. I overdress salads. Or underdress them. And this"—I pointed to the bandage—"is from the blowtorch. I'm not allowed to do crème brûlée anymore."

"So," said Ray, half smiling, raising one of his bow-shaped eyebrows, "you want to fire yourself?"

I tried to laugh as I turned away from my red-faced reflection in the mirror behind the bar. "The Sorceress hasn't paid me in two months, so I'm kind of fired anyway."

"What do you mean she hasn't paid you?"

"You know the restaurant is losing money," I said.

Ray nodded. He knew, and he wasn't worried. He would always be able to wait tables somewhere.

I leaned over the bar, lowering my voice. "She asked me if I could wait to get paid, and I told her yes. I didn't think it would be two months, though." I downed the rest of the whiskey, closing my eyes as the boozy warmth of it spread through my stomach.

"Oh, girl." Ray clucked his tongue. "That ain't good!"

"You know I'm not gonna be a line cook. I know I'm not gonna be a line

cook. I probably don't even deserve to get paid." I drummed what was left of my fingernails on the side of my glass. "But I'm trying to learn every job in the business, so I'll know what I'm doing when I open my restaurant."

"You sure about that, honey?" Ray glanced at the Ace bandage again as he refilled our glasses. "You really want to open a restaurant?"

I had gotten the idea to open a restaurant—rather, I had fallen in love with the idea of opening a restaurant—in the middle of a dismal semester of graduate school in New Jersey, where I was working toward a master's degree in community development and spending several hours every day watching the Food Network and testing recipes on my roommates. On my birthday, I took myself to Philadelphia and splurged on lunch at the White Dog Café, Judy Wicks's restaurant cum social change project. Halfway through a bowl of green garlic soup, I was ready to follow in Ms. Wicks's footsteps. To hell with SWOT analysis and human development indicators, I thought. I could do a lot more immediate good in the world by feeding people Dad's milk bread, or Grandpa's fennel sausage (which, as a professional butcher, he only knew how to make in hundred-pound batches), or our New Year's lasagne, from a recipe Grandma got from an Italian grocer in L.A. and only gave to Mom after my parents had been married for five years.

By the time I blew out the candle on my sour cherry cheesecake, I had a vision: my restaurant, as a West Coast riff on the White Dog. We'd grow our own herbs. We'd serve wine from the barrel, like they did in Italy, in little glass pitchers. Customers could pay what they wanted. And all the tables would be round, so conversations could flow.

"All that education, to work in a restaurant!" said Mom.

"You sure that's what you wanna do, kid?" said Dad.

I put my master's degree on hold, moved to San Francisco, and dove into the restaurant business. I washed dishes. I waited tables. I worked as a barista at Java Supreme, where I learned how to properly use an espresso machine. I became a hostess at Greens, the San Francisco

Zen Center's "world-famous" vegetarian restaurant, where the customers didn't mind when they found worms in their salads ("Well, now we know it's organic!"), where I worked my way up to managing Greens to Go, their takeout café.

Meanwhile, I filled notebook after notebook with ideas for my restaurant: we would put cheese and olives and marinated vegetables on the table as soon as guests sat down, like they did in Portugal, so people would have something to munch on while reading the menu. We would organize recipe contests for customers, and add the winning dishes to the menu for a month. And I would make focaccia, in a wood-burning adobe oven in the center of the dining room. I thought about applying to the California Culinary Academy.

"Before you spend fifty thousand dollars on cooking school," said a chef named Nano, who drove me down Lombard Street on his motorcycle and introduced me to the glories of Super Quesadillas Suizas (giant flour tortillas griddled to order with avocado, sour cream, queso fresco, carne asada, and as much tomatillo salsa as we wanted) at El Farolito at one a.m., "you should cook on the line."

Nano helped me get a minimum-wage job in the Sorceress's kitchen at Vertigineuse, where he had once worked as a sous-chef. It was a location in limbo, between the old money on Nob Hill and the drug-addicted poverty in the Tenderloin. In the last ten years, three restaurants had failed in that very spot.

"All that education, to chop mushrooms!" said Mom.

"As long as you enjoy what you're doing," said Dad.

I hoped Vertigineuse would be the last job I took before I wrote my business plan and started raising money for my restaurant. (I was still searching for a name. "Gusto" was the best I'd come up with so far.) Yet ten months into cooking on the line, instead of getting that crazy high that made Bob and Rob cackle with glee when they were slammed with orders, I was still panicking, losing what little ability I had to prioritize. One night, Bob, who always looked ready for a fight, even in clogs and

checkered chef pants, took me aside, trying to help. “When you’re in the weeds, you gotta focus,” he said. “Take thirty seconds, look at everything you gotta do, and figure out what has to happen first. Make a plan. Then go!” It sounded easy. “OK!” I nodded. “I’ll make a plan!”

But everyone needed their chawan mushi and their spicy eggplant napoleon and their oysters on the half shell now. Ten months in, I had to face facts: Bob and Rob moved at a different speed than I did. As much as urgency inflamed them, pulling them into that high-pressure kitchen dance that line cooks live for, it paralyzed me. So I’m not a line cook, I thought. That doesn’t mean I can’t run a restaurant.

However, on the Night of the Inviolable Oysters, with the burn smarting under the Ace bandage as I pedaled my three-gear beast of a bike down Nob Hill, through pockets of fog and over asphalt glistening with two a.m. dampness, I thought about Ray’s question—“You really want to open a restaurant?”—hoping the answer was still yes, willing it to still be yes, but knowing it was no.

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