

It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chefs working around the clock. What a kitchen that was, with birds in every state of undress; some still cold and slung over hooks, some turning slowly on the spit, but most in wasted piles because the Emperor was busy.

Odd to be so governed by an appetite.

It was my first commission. I started as a neck wringer and before long I was the one who carried the platter through inches of mud to his tent. He liked me because I am short. I flatter myself. He did not dislike me. He liked no one except Joséphine and he liked her the way he liked chicken.

No one over five foot two ever waited on the Emperor. He kept small servants and large horses. The horse he loved was seventeen hands high with a tail that could wrap round a man three times and still make a wig for his mistress. That horse had the evil eye and there's been almost as many dead grooms in the stable as chickens on the table. The ones the beast didn't kill itself with an easy kick, its master had disposed of because its coat didn't shine or the bit was green.

'A new government must dazzle and amaze,' he said. Bread and circuses I think he said. Not surprising then that when we did find a groom, he came from a circus himself and stood as high as the horse's flank. When he brushed the beast he used a ladder with a stout bottom and a triangle top, but when he rode him for exercise he took a great leap and landed square on the glossy back while the horse reared and snorted and couldn't throw him, not even with its nose in the dirt and its back legs towards God. Then they'd vanish in a curtain of dust and travel for miles, the midget clinging to the mane and whooping in his funny language that none of us could understand.

THE PASSION

But he understood everything.

He made the Emperor laugh and the horse couldn't better him, so he stayed. And I stayed. And we became friends.

We were in the kitchen tent one night when the bell starts ringing like the Devil himself is on the other end. We all jumped up and one rushed to the spit while another spat on the silver and I had to get my boots back on ready for that tramp across the frozen ruts. The midget laughed and said he'd rather take a chance with the horse than the master, but we don't laugh.

Here it comes surrounded by parsley the cook cherishes in a dead man's helmet. Outside the flakes are so dense that I feel like the little figure in a child's snowstorm. I have to screw up my eyes to follow the yellow stain that lights up Napoleon's tent. No one else can have a light at this time of night.

Fuel's scarce. Not all of this army have tents.

When I go in, he's sitting alone with a globe in front of him. He doesn't notice me, he goes on turning the globe round and round, holding it tenderly with both hands as if it were a breast. I give a short cough and he looks up suddenly with fear in his face.

'Put it here and go.'

'Don't you want me to carve it, Sir?'

'I can manage. Goodnight.'

I know what he means. He hardly ever asks me to carve now. As soon as I'm gone he'll lift the lid and pick it up and push it into his mouth. He wishes his whole face were mouth to cram a whole bird.

In the morning I'll be lucky to find the wishbone.

There is no heat, only degrees of cold. I don't remember the feeling of a fire against my knees. Even in the kitchen, the warmest place on any camp, the heat is too thin to spread and the copper pans cloud over. I take off my socks once a week to

THE EMPEROR

cut my toe-nails and the others call me a dandy. We're white with red noses and blue fingers.

The tricolour.

He does it to keep his chickens fresh.

He uses winter like a larder.

But that was a long time ago. In Russia.

Nowadays people talk about the things he did as though they made sense. As though even his most disastrous mistakes were only the result of bad luck or hubris.

It was a mess.

Words like devastation, rape, slaughter, carnage, starvation are lock and key words to keep the pain at bay. Words about war that are easy on the eye.

I'm telling you stories. Trust me.

I wanted to be a drummer.

The recruiting officer gave me a walnut and asked if I could crack it between finger and thumb. I could not and he laughed and said a drummer must have strong hands. I stretched out my palm, the walnut resting there, and offered him the same challenge. He coloured up and had a Lieutenant take me to the kitchen tents. The cook sized up my skinny frame and reckoned I was not a cleaver man. Not for me the mess of unnamed meat that had to be chopped for the daily stew. He said I was lucky, that I would be working for Bonaparte himself, and for one brief, bright moment I imagined a training as a pastry cook building delicate towers of sugar and cream. We walked towards a small tent with two impassive guards by the flaps.

'Bonaparte's own storeroom,' said the cook.

The space from the ground to the dome of the canvas was racked with rough wooden cages about a foot square with tiny corridors running in between, hardly the width of a man. In each cage there were two or three birds, beaks and claws cut

THE PASSION

off, staring through the slats with dumb identical eyes. I am no coward and I've seen plenty of convenient mutilation on our farms but I was not prepared for the silence. Not even a rustle. They could have been dead, should have been dead, but for the eyes. The cook turned to go. 'Your job is to clear them out and wring their necks.'

I slipped away to the docks, and because the stone was warm in that early April and because I had been travelling for days I fell asleep dreaming of drums and a red uniform. It was a boot that woke me, hard and shiny with a familiar saddle smell. I raised my head and saw it resting on my belly the way I had rested the walnut in my palm. The officer didn't look at me, but said, 'You're a soldier now and you'll get plenty of opportunity to sleep in the open air. On your feet.'

He lifted his foot and, as I scrambled up, kicked me hard and still looking straight ahead said, 'Firm buttocks, that's something.'

I heard of his reputation soon enough but he never bothered me. I think the chicken smell kept him away.

I was homesick from the start. I missed my mother. I missed the hill where the sun slants across the valley. I missed all the everyday things I had hated. In spring at home the dandelions streak the fields and the river runs idle again after months of rain. When the army recruitment came it was a brave band of us who laughed and said it was time we saw more than the red barn and the cows we had birthed. We signed up straight away and those of us who couldn't write made an optimistic smear on the page.

Our village holds a bonfire every year at the end of winter. We had been building it for weeks, tall as a cathedral with a blasphemous spire of broken snares and infested pallets. There would be plenty of wine and dancing and a sweetheart in the