

For April 18

Just One?

by

Claude Pujade Renaud

Translated by Margot Miller

Exasperated by a morning of petty annoyances, Fabienne leaves the office and heads for her usual restaurant, *The Rendez-vous*. The food is good and the price even better. But, already, she's irritated by the waitress's question:

"Just one?"

That's obvious, isn't it? And the way she stresses *just!* She can see she's alone; it's useless to point it out. Since she's been coming in for many weeks every day at noon, you'd think the little bitch of a waitress could spare her the never-ending question! Solitary, Fabienne is, and on top of it all, not remembered. How many years will it take to be promoted to the ranks of the established, a table reserved, a pitcher of Beaujolais brought automatically with the basket of bread? Certain male clients, she had already remarked, benefit from this privilege. It's true, they do look rather old.

Fabienne is hungry. And Thursday is beef-stew day, which she likes. She enters, resigned, tries to let the question roll off her back and let herself be seated according to a higher law that decides positions and hierarchies. Just like in her office. At *The Rendez-vous* singles and couples are separated. For the former, a row of miniscule tables in the extension of the doorway. Fabienne doesn't like the gusts of cold air that come in with each arrival and departure. Undoubtedly it is legitimate to be punished for the sin of solitude. The tables for two or four are close to the radiators and surrounded by more comfortable chairs. Fabienne sits down and thinks suddenly of her taxes, to be paid tomorrow, the last day. In this regard too, a woman without a man and no children pays.

First Class Food at Laborer's Prices. The menu board, old-fashioned, hangs over the cash register. More decorative than informative, thinks Fabienne. Laborers haven't lived in this neighborhood for a long time. What's left are dull, pale faces, narrow gestures and jackets. Employees, middle managers. Like her. The rabbit in mustard sauce isn't bad, she had to admit. And the house stew on Tuesdays wasn't either. Fabienne orders the beef stew, carrot salad for a starter, no dressing, lemon if possible. The waitress, it appears, isn't listening.

"And to drink?"

"A small pitcher of Beaujolais."

It's awful, this Beaujolais. It gives her heartburn. But she's condemned to order it until it arrives on its own at her table. Perhaps, in the absence of recognition, could she get the beginning of an ulcer? This would give her an excuse to blame the wine rather than the bitter dregs of singleness.

Fabienne nibbles at the bread while waiting for her carrots. The dressing will stir up her inner acidity. She should have ordered the hard-boiled egg with mayonnaise. Tomorrow. Studies show there are more women than men: at least statistics have the good grace to exonerate her single status. Or at least to console it. And it's women in fact—colleagues, girl friends—who make you feel it the most. Or this waitress with her *Just!* With men, Fabienne had noticed, she asked, modestly: "One place?" Always betrayed by these sisters. The solidarity of women, Fabienne knows what that is.

She finishes sopping up the sauce of the stew. It's good, it will still offer her a bit of joy in this morose day. A piece of brie, good and soft, and a coffee. Fabienne is indignant at an infraction of the law, which she has just spied out: a single woman is seated in the

row for couples! How many years does it take at the *Lovers' Rendez-vous* to acquire such a privilege? Just when she has to go back to the office and put up with the prerogatives of the elders and swallow their nasty remarks. Fabienne orders another coffee, with two sugars. She collects her bill. The custom is to pay the owner, pleasant and dignified behind her cash register. The waitress has forgotten to note the second coffee. Fabienne is thrilled, a small victory for her side.

This noon, house-stew day, she tries to question the waitress:

"This woman over there, how is it that she gets a table for two?"

"She's a widow."

The tone of the waitress is definitive. She clears the table quickly and runs off toward the kitchen. So, you have to have had one in your bed to obtain, or retain, a place for two? Fabienne working a bit of meat from between two teeth, ruminates. She has had several between the sheets, distracted, hurried, quickly gone again. For the pleasure she gets out of it. She prefers food.

She observes once more the scandalous privilege. The widow didn't order the house stew; she had the pork-roast with lentils, a permanent fixture on the menu. A second plate is placed opposite her, in front of the chair that faces hers. Rabbit in mustard sauce, diagnoses Fabienne. The widow was waiting for someone? Could she be cheating on her dead husband? No, in fact, she eats with abandon. Her skin, eyes, hair and clothes are all more or less the same gray. She looks at a point above the rabbit. A look of the dead, Fabienne says to herself. Too bad there is no way to talk to this waitress who's so unhelpful. She'd have asked for further explanations.

Fabienne would like to stay in order to see if the widow orders two coffees but she

has to go, she's behind in her work from the morning and her boss is going to give her hell again. She hurries to pay her bill and leave. Just before she gets back to her office, she passes a fellow seated on the sidewalk, a cat on a leash by his side, a plate and a cardboard sign at his feet. Fabienne is careful not to read it. She can't stand these unemployed bums who try to rip you off. It's their fault management salaries aren't higher and she's got enough hassle at work without having to feed the hungry as well.

"Just one?"

The waitress asks the question without looking at Fabienne. Or hardly. The voice accentuates the *just*, as if in that word resided an indignity that belonged to women. Fabienne doesn't answer and manages to seat herself at a table close to the widow, even if the barrier of the central aisle persists in separating them, as uncrossable as that which separates men and women in Basque churches.

Now, Fabienne knows. Yesterday she managed to find out from the owner, more approachable than the waitress.

"Yes, she is a widow, recently so. Six months ago she lunched here with her husband, three or four times a week. He like our rabbit in mustard sauce a lot...

Fabienne had wondered if he's died of it.

"And then, a stomach cancer, out of the blue. Later, she came back to us. Of course, we let her have the same table. And she still orders him the rabbit, perhaps you've noticed? Since she pays for both meals...

Fabienne had agreed, one had to understand life. The rabbit idea seemed to work; after all, to each his own. Fabienne feels less alone since she's discovered the secret of the

gray woman but regrets that she never deigns to look around her. Perhaps, she's still obsessed with her man?

The waitress clears the widow's table, takes the rabbit away, intact, to an empty counter at the back. Five minutes later she reheats it and serves it to one of the single clients. The dead man's meal. Twice paid for. At the *Lovers' Rendez-vous*, it's not about small profits. Fabienne makes a note to never again order the rabbit in mustard sauce.

Coming out of the office she notices the unemployed fellow has changed locations. He is now seated in front of a delicatessen/catering shop. Much more eloquent, obviously! Unless he's trying try to profit from the heat diffused by the chicken rotisserie that turns slowly next to him? Fabienne looks at him: thirtyish, faded jeans, his cat and he both look clean, the same yellow eyes. Not dangerous, the eyes. The sign is balanced on his tennis shoes.

HE'S HUNGRY. SO AM I

Offended by what she considers blackmail, Fabienne goes into the shop, buys some bacon and tears it into bits on the wrapping paper, which she places, ostentatiously, in front of the cat. It eats politely, without energy, tolerates a caress. The man hasn't moved, looks straight ahead, as still as the widow's husband. Unless he's doing yoga? It feeds the body as well as the soul, they say, it regularizes the metabolism. The smell of grilled chicken abounds. The cat begins a methodical cleaning. Fabienne contemplates some white sausages and meats-in-aspic in the window. A stomach cramp, and she hurries to the meet the ritual question and beef stew. The latter does not compensate for the former.

The rabbit in mustard sauce is in its place, the widow seems ever more durable.

In the evening, Fabienne buys herself a slice of ham. At home, she cuts it mechanically into small bits and eats parsimoniously. She jumps up: ridiculous, this cat's dinner! And not even a can of beer left in the fridge! She can't decide if it is sadder to eat alone at home or in a restaurant. After watching a little television, she downs the last of a bottle of whisky and goes to bed. Yellow eyes pierce the semi-darkness.

The cat isn't there today. Fabienne stops:

"You're all alone?"

The man seems absent. Fabienne insists:

"What have you done with your cat?"

"He raises his yellow eyes slowly. No, grayish-yellow.

"I left him with a friend in the suburbs."

He hesitates, then goes on:

"I had to leave give up my room for good. The last two nights I've slept in a shelter.

They don't take pets."

Silence. Fabienne glances at the meat pies.

"We could have lunch together?"

He doesn't answer, collects the sign and the plate, empty, slips them into an old gamekeeper's pouch, and gets up. He follows her, slightly behind.

"You're all..."

Fabienne had entered first, Yellow Eyes masked by her body.

"No. For two."

"Following the stunned waitress, she heads for the row of tables reserved for couples, sits down with authority next to a radiator, invites Yellow Eyes to sit across from her. The owner smiles benevolently and the waitress does not waste time bringing the menus. The specialty today is *Blanquette* of veal. No, he would prefer the chicken *provençal*, understandable for as long as he's been breathing the odor of this fowl.

"Do you drink wine? The Beaujolais is drinkable..."

"No, thank you. a half-pint of beer, if it's all right with you."

His voice is smooth, his face as well. He must be younger than she imagined. No conversation. No matter. Fabienne fills up the air, talks about her job and the idiotic annoyances of her boss, half whispers the story of the widow and the rabbit. The man smiles politely. Fabienne savors the pleasure of talking while eating. She comes to life, multiplies her gestures; her hands and lips are constantly in motion; the Beaujolais seems better, at least it doesn't provoke heartburn. She suggests some cheese, "A dessert?" He thanks her, "A coffee will be fine." Fabienne orders two pieces of apple pie anyway, which she devours with jubilation. He apologizes. He would have liked to be able to pay for the coffees but this morning he wasn't given anything. Some days are like that. She understand, there is nothing to be ashamed of. She leaves him at his usual place and will come to collect him tomorrow at the same time. At work, the afternoon seems less long.

A month later Fabienne knows hardly anything more about her tablemate. A vagrant or a harmless dropout? She asked him under what category he had registered at the Unem-

ployment Office. He's allowed as how he had no skills. The questions skidded off his transparency. Lodging? No, he hadn't really looked; he managed to sleep here and there. As for the cat, still farmed out; he went to feed it each evening. His voice fills with moist tenderness: he can't live without his cat. One summer, perhaps they'd go together on a bicycle tour of the Midi and they'd sleep together, under the stars. Fabienne prefers not to think about the summer.

At ten past noon, she meets Yellow Eyes in front of the deli/caterer. At quarter past they're at their table at the *Lovers' Rendez-vous*. When he has collected a little money, he pays for the coffee, or a dessert. Rarely. No matter. Fabienne would pay anything for the pleasure of hearing as she arrived, the waitress ask:

"A table for two?"

She is two. She eats for two, or almost. He has the appetite of a bird. The day he ordered the rabbit in mustard sauce, she checked that it had come directly from the kitchen. Mostly he was happy with his half-pint of beer and his chicken. He always left a little on the plate, which he collected in his paper napkin before the waitress could take it away, and slipped it into his hunting bag. Fabienne admires this discreet dexterity. The cat's dinner is ready.

She doesn't like it when he plays dead. She teases him, he resists with his smooth air, and she sets to talking all the more. Two weeks later the weather is better and Yellow Eyes offers to buy a pizza or a quiche and to eat outdoors on a bench in the neighboring square. It would be nicer and less expensive. Fabienne says lightly that she hates picnics, benches are filthy; you get dirty and your fingers get sticky. For nothing in the world would she give up her lunch at the *Lovers' Rendez-vous*. Nor the looks of the waitress,

the owner, and the regulars. Even the gray widow looked up once over the rabbit at the new couple.

He isn't in front of the deli/caterer. Fabienne feels her legs tremble. She hesitates, then decides to ask inside. Oh yes, the man with the sign, these fellows come and go. They have to change locations if they want to make any money. No, they generally don't come back. Fabienne hears the irony in the voice and buys a slice of pear tart to assure herself a reasonably dignified departure. In the square she warms herself in the sun. It's true that in this weather a picnic wouldn't be bad. Yes, she should have come here with him more often; maybe he wouldn't have left?

In the evening, seated on the floor in her studio apartment, she picks at a mixed salad and listens to the radio. All the same, he could have told her, said good-bye, thanked her, a bombing in the Rue de Rennes, casualties, serious wounds, yes he could have told her, told her where he was going. Obviously these people don't have plans, she didn't either. Should she perhaps have offered to take him in, with his cat naturally? Take him to bed so as to have him at her table? The commentaries on the bombing went on. Of course with this incompetent government of imbeciles, all you had to do was look at the way salaries were frozen, of which she was a victim; she'd spent money like water this month. That'll teach her to hire a pseudo-gigalo. Not even. A shadow. A shadow and his cat. What an idea, too, to play it out at the restaurant of love! Her heart sank. Like her breasts. Fabienne looked at them in the mirror as she undressed. They make her want, vaguely, to cry. She stuffs away the idea and takes a sleeping pill. She doesn't want to risk seeing yellow eyes shining in the darkness.

“Just one today?”

“Yes... He died, the bombing yesterday...”

The waitress is devastated. Fabienne takes advantage of this to walk straight to *their* table. She sits down and puts her napkin in her lap with the dignity of a widow. The waitress has gone to speak to the owner, she agrees with a serious-looking nod. Fabienne savors the looks that make her exist. The waitress approaches, her face stricken, her voice a whisper of delicate nuances of condolences:

“Umm... shall I leave both settings?”

“Of course. I’ll have the pork-roast with lentils. And a chicken *provençal*.”

The waitress doesn’t linger, automatically brings the Beaujolais and the half-pint of beer with the basket of bread. Pushing the limits of anticipation, she places two plates sufficiently heated on the table. Fabienne eats with an appetite she tries to conceal, pausing after each bite—but it’s to better digest—, with her eyes fixed on the chair across from her as well as absorbed in interior suffering. She gloats, she could well move on to the chicken, but no, a little decency. It has to be paid for though, but no matter. Such rejoicing has no price. Expressionless, her glance intercepts that of the widow. Silent, feminine connivances.

Fabienne orders two coffees and, before the waitress can clear the table, discretely helps herself to the chicken thigh. She wipes it with the paper napkin and slips it in her bag. Her dinner is ready.