

# Mise en Place

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**An extract**

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## Chapter 1

If Louise hadn't explicitly requested in her will that her death be celebrated with a family dinner, I wouldn't be buttoning up my chef's jacket or putting on my toque today. Thursday has been Restaurant Victoria's closing day for years. But Louise is and always will be my favourite sister. I can't refuse her, even now that she's dead.

Monday afternoon three days ago.

I had just furiously demanded that a plate of al dente asparagus with poached quail egg be returned to the kitchen when the Reverend Mother phoned with the message that Sister Augustine, otherwise known as Louise, had departed peacefully the night before. It was coincidence more than anything that I was the first family member to hear the news. The Reverend Mother had tried to reach mother first. But mother, who's ninety-two, didn't answer. Mother doesn't answer half the time because half the time she turns off her hearing aid. After that fruitless telephone call, the Reverend Mother called Ivo, the oldest of the four of us, and also the wisest. At Ivo's she met an answering machine. Since she considered it godless to leave a message about the death of a loved one on a tape, she immediately clicked off and tried to reach the next family member on the list. It turned out that Jeanne's telephone number no longer belonged to Jeanne but to a young couple, the girl of which was taken aback and passed the telephone to her boyfriend. Her boyfriend seems to have blasted 'God is dead, Long Live God' into the mouthpiece before he slammed down the receiver again. At least that's the story the Reverend Mother told me when she finally got me on the line; me, the youngest of the Werners, already sixty-two myself.

At the moment the telephone rang, the clock that's been hanging crookedly above the serving hatch for years showed one o'clock. At one o'clock in the afternoon and eight o'clock in the evening, tension peaks in the kitchen. These are the moments of truth, the moments when, every day again, we have to pass the test. Everything and everyone swelters from the intensity. My fifteen-man brigade – from the dishwasher to the sous chef – is immersed in concentration. And among them are those in whom this high degree of mental and physical exertion causes a kind of trance. In me, for example. Usually.

One of my workers, a trainee chef, answered the phone. 'Chef, telephone, a woman, she says it's about a serious and urgent family matter,' he shouted across the kitchen, after which he placed the receiver next to the telephone and went on with his work: he was blanching fine shavings of lemon, lime, grapefruit and orange peel for a light, sourish sauce to accompany the pan-fried sea bream.

The asparagus shoots were perfectly cooked; not a second too long, not one degree too high. They were wonderfully arranged on the big white plate – like splayed fingers, the very picture of order and delight. But under my direction no plate goes to the dining room that isn't perfect, and this one

wasn't perfect: the poached egg, garnished with freshly grilled lobster, was messy. The coagulated white had been sloppily trimmed, the shape and structure lacked the seal of perfection. 'Start again. Not only this entrée. All the entrées for that table. Everyone's served at the same time in this restaurant. I'll deal with the one responsible for this mess later, and the guilty one won't know what hit him.'

After that outburst, and still cursing the fool who was jeopardizing my reputation with his carelessness, I walked reluctantly to the phone. It was Monday and, unlike hairdressers, we're open on Mondays. All the tables were occupied. Everyone had ordered à la carte, and you could see on the maître d's face that they were difficult orders. Everyone wanted a different meal. The pressure was on. And still someone was phoning me for private reasons.

I meant to give the woman on the other end of the line an earful too, but as I walked towards the telephone I sensed a bitter taste in my mouth. The kitchen telephone has a different number than the restaurant telephone and is exclusively for the use of insiders: suppliers, staff and colleagues. And for family members in case of emergency. I feared the serious family matter was about my mother.

But it wasn't about my mother.

It was about my youngest sister.

My favourite sister.

They say it takes a while before the seriousness of a situation sinks in. I didn't know it until last week, but apparently I'm an exception to this rule. I registered the seriousness of the situation so quickly that I – who could withstand the drama of an imperfect poached egg – immediately collapsed, with the receiver still in my hand.

My sous chef, a stout fellow with the recipe for shrimp croquettes tattooed on his chest, noticed something was wrong. He didn't panic. With a few words and as few gestures he gave instructions to the three station cooks. Strangely enough, when I saw his expert reaction, a sense of pride shot through me. This is what every top chef seeks, and what, together with a healthy dose of whisky, keeps us going: the intense professional concentration of the second man. A sous chef who's capable of controlling the brigade – that complex organisation underlying every successful restaurant – and of ensuring that, no matter what happens, top-quality cuisine continues to emerge, in the same way as life outside – despite the worst disasters – always goes on. I often say this, and on Monday afternoon it was confirmed: consistent haute cuisine is the ultimate proof that human frailties don't exist.

Not a single member of the kitchen staff, apart from that irreverent fellow who messed up the eggs, lost their concentration. As in the army, everyone stayed focused on his specific task. My second-in-command immediately took over my duties. I was standing – it goes without saying – in the access area, the most important place, the key position between the dining room and the kitchen, the place where the orders come into the kitchen and the meals leave it. On the threshold between the hell where perfection is created and the heaven where that same perfection is served up and savoured. I love that hell. More than the heaven.

'Take over from me,' I shouted to Simon, my sous chef, completely unnecessarily. He nodded, gestured that he had everything under control, spooned a touch of seafood foam into a tall narrow glass filled with bouillabaisse, approved the dish after the next kitchenhand had placed it correctly on a plate, and put all of that onto a silver tray in the hatch, where the maître d' promptly whisked it away and took it to the right table. But by that time I was already stumbling out through the back door.

I sat for a long time on the little stool where my smoking colleagues puff on their cigarettes. Leaning with my back against the outside wall, I stared out at the flourishing vegetable garden a

few metres away. Only half an hour earlier I'd plucked a basketful of courgette flowers, cut about twenty rhubarb stalks and snipped a generous handful of fresh herbs – orache, sorrel and bronze fennel. Freshly cut ingredients perfectly prepared at the very last moment: that's the principle on which my kitchen is founded.

For the first time in my life I neither saw nor smelt the well-ordered luxury of my vegetable garden. Even the new season vegetables – the turnip tops are fabulous this year, not to mention the cauliflowers – left me cold. The only thing I saw was the afternoon sun suspended like an egg yolk in the much-too-clear sky and acting like nothing had happened.

That's when I started to cry.

## Chapter 2

Louise was sixty-eight, six years older than I am, when she drew her last breath on the night of Sunday to Monday. The doctor who formally declared her dead says she died of a brain haemorrhage and also says it 'may be a good thing' she died right away because a brain haemorrhage can have a drastic effect on the ones who have to deal with it and an even more drastic effect on the family members who then also have to deal with it.

I had quickly come to see the nuns with whom Louise shared her life as family. It's hard for me to imagine that those who've dedicated their lives to serving their fellow humans-in-need wouldn't have embraced the task of caring for my paralysed sister.

According to that same doctor, who wasn't the nunnery's regular doctor but a locum who did the weekend shifts, Louise would almost certainly have lost her power of speech. How could this man ever have known she'd already lost this from birth?

When it turned out, after Louise was born, that she couldn't hear and didn't make any noises, it never occurred to father and mother that anything could be wrong with their child. They thought their daughter was a late-bloomer and firmly believed late-bloomers eventually turn into long-bloomers.

It didn't work out quite as they'd hoped.

By the time she was five, their daughter could still only utter the syllable 'ma' followed by a stream of garble, and there was no longer any doubt she would never be able to hear anything.

For a while father and mother were at a loss.

Eventually they sent Louise to a special school. It was somewhere isolated. After the first special school they sent her to a second special school. It was even more remote. After the second school, with its adjoining sheltered workshop, she left for the nunnery. That was right in the centre of Heverlee in southeastern Belgium, but far from the world all the same.

Our parents always had an ambiguous attitude towards Louise. They were extremely proud and ashamed at the same time. Louise was kept indoors. And when she did venture out into the world, mother would throw up a wall around her. It was, for example, absolutely forbidden to gesture wildly in public, and if she did have to go to a public place, father and mother advised her to act as if there was nothing the matter with her. If a stranger spoke to her on the street, she was supposed to do what all girls in that situation should do: shrug her shoulders and disappear as fast as she could. Any questions Louise had to ask, she should ask at home – *they aren't any smarter than we are out there*. But nor would mother ever allow her to be referred to as 'deaf-and-dumb'. Long before the term was invented, the Werners (it was hammered into us from childhood) had to say 'hearing-im-pair-ed'. When people reacted, as they often did, with 'Oh, you mean deaf-and-dumb', we simply ignored them – *people don't know any better*. And eventually we didn't even hear those who automatically raised their voices when they uttered the word 'deaf-and-dumb' or 'hearing-

impaired' and started to articulate so emphatically that the metal fillings in their teeth showed; it no longer even made us laugh.

I never call my sister Sister Augustine.

Louise.

I haven't seen Louise for a long time. And, as often happens when family members have to die during those long periods when you haven't seen them, I blame myself for all kinds of things.

I should have visited her more often.

I could have written her letters. Though I'm more of a recipe writer and even then I don't get much further than jotting down ingredients and combinations. Avocado + crabmeat + tomato timbale. Oysters + tempura.

I could have sent her a card now and again. I should have called her on her special phone. Should at least have told her more than once that she was my favourite sister.

I could have brought her food. Her? The whole nunnery!

I certainly shouldn't have forgotten her birthday so often.

I should have maintained our relationship.

And why have I, who made cooking his profession, never prepared a lavish meal for the whole family?

That's the way it goes between brothers and sisters. Their paths diverge. Each goes his own way. Louise went the way of the nunnery almost fifty years ago. And I answered the call of gastronomy. That all-consuming kind of life tolerates no distraction. A profession isn't a choice; it's a lack of choice. This is something that's overlooked much too often. How else could I have persevered in my profession and at my level if I hadn't been convinced that I – and no one else but me – had a personal culinary mission to accomplish in this life? Where would I – in these, the highest realms of gastronomy – have been able to find the time for a life outside the kitchen? For friends, hobbies and family? For Louise? You can't make time on the side the way you can a pudding.

Louise is no longer here. But her presence is formidable; death can make someone larger than life. The image of her keeps flickering before my eyes, like a giant neon light. In every shape and form, often as clear as day, as if she were standing right in front of me. Except her facial features aren't accurate. I don't know how she looks now. How she looked last week. Last year. Five years ago. Ten.

My favourite sister.

I don't even remember why I called her my favourite sister.

Not because she was the youngest sister. And certainly not because I pitied her for her handicap. Because it isn't compassion that forms the basis of our special bond but something of a very different nature. There's a very clear, demonstrable reason for our exceptional relationship. Of that I'm sure. Only I can't think what it is; it's buried under the rubble of my memories. The only thing I can remember, very vaguely, is that we shared something, something very concrete, something other brothers and sisters don't have and that transcended our ages.

I had visited Louise now and then. Long ago, and nearly always between Christmas and New Year's, on those days when the sense of duty between blood relatives reigns supreme.

I would follow her into the visitors' room, where a dozen or so Formica tables were placed in a circle and a cross draped with palm branches hung on each wall. We used to settle ourselves at one of those tables and sit together in silence. The silence between Louise and I never sounded

embarrassing. Usually I had a selection of tasty treats for her with me; she hid these, with a delighted smile on her face, under the skirts of her habit. 'For later,' she gestured, then, if I remember correctly, she giggled.

Fortunately, the gastronomical traditions of both country and religion were honoured in the visitors' room. Gracing an oak table were five glass cake stands covered with paper lace doilies on top of which perched beautiful, delicious and elegant-looking fruit tarts and cakes baked by the nuns.

Head chefs who are in charge of exceptional kitchens and get flushed every day from the stress greatly appreciate the simple, well-prepared and hearty fare of farmers and ordinary people. In the same way as the existence of the seasons has a comforting effect – they recur annually and bring the same ultra-fresh culinary delights with them year after year – the smells and simple existence of succulent traditional fare bring inestimable spiritual and physical comfort. For that reason alone I could never thrive in the Netherlands, a country where that kind of comfort doesn't exist.

My preference was for the sponge cake covered with apricot compote and generously decorated with whipped cream rosettes and thick chocolate shavings. There was something defiant about it in terms of taste and appearance. Amid this conservative and restrained environment, it reminded me of a transvestite. Transvestites aren't my thing but in my younger years, at the end of service, I used to frequent just such a lively haunt in Brussels, where 'women' paraded up and down the bar in high-heel stilettos. This flamboyant display had a better effect on me than any calming medication would have, and at night I would dream those ladies were dancing between the pots and pans above our stoves.

Usually I had two servings. One from the extravagant sample and one from a more homely creation. For the latter I preferred the tart with the thick layer of crumbly pastry filled with apples, raisins and walnuts and enhanced with a dash of cinnamon and a shot of calvados.

Louise always chose the chocolate cake. It's almost incomprehensible that she managed to stay so thin all her life. Sometimes I watched her polish off three pieces one after the other.

## Chapter 3

Sometimes life outside the kitchen requires firm action as well. Women understand this better than men. At three-thirty on Monday when, still in a daze, I was leaning with my back against the brick wall, Christine came and sat down beside me. Her stool creaked. 'This can't go on,' she said, and she was right. Snot was dangling from my nose. I caught it with my tongue – it had a sweetish taste that I couldn't immediately identify; it might even have had a touch of aniseed in it; yes, I thought I detected the distinct flavour of anethole in my snot (I'll have to check that later).

Christine offered me a handkerchief. My wife has always been more practical than comforting by nature; that's partly why she's my right-hand man in the dining room. In our restaurant, as in every good restaurant, the relationship between the kitchen and dining room staff can hardly be called warm; even the term 'cold' would be an understatement. But occasionally a waiter does trust a station chef, or the other way around, and then they exchange thoughts and opinions. Especially opinions. Sometimes such an opinion seeps through to me. I learn that the dining room staff are more afraid of Christine than the kitchen staff are of me. I learn that they accept her authority with more difficulty than mine. Without me, there'd be no Michelin stars; without Christine, there might be. They think. But I know better. I need her. The dining room needs her. And so does the restaurant's bookkeeping. My wife coordinates the figures, and nowadays that's almost as difficult as coordinating the jobs in the kitchen and designing the meals. The dining room staff think Christine's a bitch. I've heard the word 'witch' used too. And tyrant. They imitate her voice and her tone: 'How on earth can you Hoover or scrub the floor if you don't bend over? You have to look dirt straight in the face. Come on, on your knees!'

For Christine the best is never good enough, and it's impossible for her to be dysfunctional even for just a moment. She can't walk past a table in the dining room without letting her critical finger slide over the surface. She checks if there are any fingerprints on the silver, china or crystal. Her glance slips under the tables to see if the flannel has been properly tied around the table legs and monitors that there are no creases in the tablecloth. She measures the distance between the plates and the cutlery, and between the pieces of cutlery individually. If they're not exactly the same, her finger goes up in the air: 'Who set this table? Here! Now! Do it again!' She checks whether each piece of cutlery is perfectly straight, and if the bottom end lines up precisely with the edge of the table. She re-arranges the bread and butter plates whose top edges don't align – to the millimetre – with the upper edge of the dinner plates. She measures – sometimes with a measuring tape but more often with her trained naked eye – whether the backs of the chairs are exactly thirty centimetres from the edge of the table. She looks under the round table to make sure none of the guests will be bothered by a table leg. A glass or a silver butter dish is only polished when she can see her own reflection in it. If the surface of the butter in the dish hasn't been smoothed to perfection, she's incensed, and the one responsible for this gross imperfection can start his or her work all over again under her watchful eye. They tremble in her presence. For her, as for me, there's no difference between essentials and details. Every detail is essential. That's the essence of our perfection.

After she'd sat beside me for a while – I have no idea for how long – she got up and ordered me to go inside with her. I obeyed. I still have the tendency to obey my wife. When I got up, I noticed that my backside had left miniscule beads of sweat on the plastic seat. Using a different handkerchief (or was it a serviette?) than the one I'd used to dry my nose, she wiped off the moisture with one confident stroke.

The afternoon service was finished. Everyone had gone home. The kitchen shone as if nothing had happened. The floor was so clean you could eat from it. And Christine did something she'd hardly ever done before in her life.

She hung a handwritten cardboard sign on the door handle of Restaurant Victoria: CLOSED 12 -18 MAY DUE TO FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES.

## Chapter 4

There wasn't even a gathering organised for the reading of Louise's last will; the Reverend Mother concluded the affair by telephone before she'd really even begun. She did it on Monday evening, in a second telephone conversation, after she'd been kind enough to first allow us to recover from the sad news. The tone in which she rattled off Louise's last wishes differed very little from the one my station chefs used to place their orders: sixty soles, two containers of Venus clams, six kilograms of lamb chops, five oxtails, ten kilograms of Ratte de Touquet potatoes ... Her rattling fell on deaf ears. Fortunately, the next day I and all the members of the Werner family received a copy of that final will. It was delivered (apparently nuns too can be very efficient and businesslike) by courier to our homes.

It's ironic that after her death my sister, who couldn't talk, should be the one to make herself heard so explicitly and irradicably. I recognised Louise's handwriting instantly. Her last will is three pages long.

The shock is palpable from page one.

On that page Louise announces that she wants a 'party' on the eve of her funeral. That cheery word occurs repeatedly throughout the will, and each time she places it between quotation marks.

She wants me to organise the 'party'. According to her, the location is obvious and not subject to discussion: in the prestigious Restaurant Victoria, one of the country's top five restaurants,

nationally and internationally renowned for its exquisite cuisine and delicate balancing of tradition and innovation.

At first I was indignant, then I became angry. How dare she saddle me with her posthumous wishes? Then obstinacy triumphed. I thought: I simply don't want to cook. I don't want to organise any party, not even the one between quotation marks. I just want to spend the evening before the funeral in my armchair. Doing nothing. Thinking about nothing. Except her. When someone in a family dies, abstinence is the only appropriate thing. That's what you want to do in the presence of your favourite sister's body. You couldn't care less what meal or which wine you should serve.

After her opening sentences, she reveals her guest list. The names of her VIPs adorn the middle of the unlined page and are so erect and neatly aligned one under the other that she must have held a ruler vertically on the page. Her careful handwriting makes me rebellious. There's something abhorrent about this beautiful script.

Mother

Ivo and Natalie

Elizabeth, Jos and Harry, accompanied by their partners

Jeanne and Partner

Victor and Christine

The nuns Gwenola, Yvonne, Godelieve and Maria

The names of the guests are more logical than they are surprising. Louise invites all of her next-of-kin and their spouses.

Our mother.

Ivo and Natalie – her eldest brother and his wife.

Elizabeth, Jos and Harry – these are Ivo and Nathalie's children, though I must add that 'children' sounds too young for these fifty-year-olds, who've all paid off their mortgages and are grandparents themselves now.

Jeanne – my eldest sister. Jeanne is allowed to bring her 'Partner'. I think it was very thoughtful of Louise to use this neutral term, even though it is written with a capital letter. Because the name and sex of Jeanne's Partners tend to change. Of course the Werners don't talk about that – because the things you don't talk about appear not to exist.

Also present will be Christine and I. We've been ordered to act as host and hostess.

The fact that four of the nuns will be present reinforces me in my belief that over the years they came to be seen as family members. Sister Gwenola is the Reverend Mother; she would have to be with a name like that.

The second page of her will:

Gillardeau Oysters au Gratin with a Sabayon Sauce

and Roasted Scallops with Bay Leaves

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Aromatic Vegetable Bouillon with Rice Paper Ravioli stuffed  
with Mint and Coriander and seasoned with a dash of Argan Oil

\*\*\*

Braised Pig's Neck with Freshly-Picked Herbs served at room temperature  
and garnished with Curls of Foie Gras

\*\*\*

Sea Bass in Puff Pastry with Guérande Sea Salt

\*\*\*

Complete Cheese Tray of the House

\*\*\*

Grand Dessert à la Victoria

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Coffee or Tea, with *Digestif*

Every ordinary mortal would have been perfectly happy with a Sunday variation of a weekday three-course menu. Toast with real caviar from the Caspian Sea. Cassoulet made exclusively of fresh pork (hock, sausages, ham, rind), because the old Werner clan is still wary of mutton. Liège waffles with apricot sauce and a dash of Grand Marnier. Just to give an example.

It's completely beyond me and I still can't believe it, but the party menu Louise comes up with reflects an extremely refined palate, and the six meals she wants served at her 'party' have all been on Restaurant Victoria's bill of fare over the years.

But Louise has never eaten in Restaurant Victoria. Even though many years ago I did invite her a few times. She even refused the guest table in the room adjoining the kitchen, saying that nuns and Michelin-starred restaurants don't go together. That she wasn't a cardinal or a bishop.

I read and re-read the menu. By absorbing it a thousand and one times, I hoped to gain a deeper insight and get a little closer to the essence of my sister.

Louise had even borne the season in mind when she drew up her menu. As if she'd known when she was writing her will that she'd die in the spring and that it would be a shame to deny her guests the delicacies of that early season.

'Kindly serve a suitable wine with each course,' it says, of all things, at the bottom of the second page.

Oenologically, it would seem, she was less well informed.

And beneath that: 'Under no circumstances are Victor and Christine to spend the evening in the kitchen. At my expense they can hire enough staff to arrange to buy this special evening off.'

And then there's the third page. It's very short and makes me more nervous than all the other pages. She begins with the comforting message that Sister Gwenola is in possession of an envelope that will cover all the costs of the 'party'; then she continues with this unnerving paragraph: 'Before coffee is served, Sister Gwenola will hand you a diary. I want you to read my diary. From Victor, my dear Victor, I emphatically ask forgiveness.'