A TWIST OF THE KNIFE

PETER JAMES

MACMILLAN

CONTENTS

12 BOLINGBROKE AVENUE

It was a pleasant-looking mock-Tudor semi, with a cherry tree in the front garden and a stone birdbath. There was nothing immediately evident about the property to suggest a reason for the terror Susan Miller felt every time she saw it.

'Number 12' – white letters on the oak door. A brass knocker. And, in the distance, the faint sound of the sea. She began to walk up the path, her speed increasing as she came closer, as if drawn by an invisible magnet. Her terror deepening, she reached forward and rang the bell.

'Susan! Susan, darling! It's OK. It's OK!'

The dull rasp faded in her ears; her eyes sprang open. She gulped down air, staring out into the darkness of the bedroom. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered hoarsely. 'The dream. I had the dream.'

Tom settled back down with a grunt of disapproval and was asleep again in moments. Susan lay awake, listening to the steady, endless roar of the traffic on the M6 pouring past Birmingham, an icy fear flooding her veins.

She got out of bed and walked over to the window, afraid to go back to sleep. Easing back the edge of a curtain, she stared out into the night; the large illuminated letters advertising IKEA dominated the horizon.

The dream was getting more frequent. The first time had been on Christmas Eve some ten years back, and for a long while it had recurred only very occasionally. Now it was happening every few weeks.

After a short while, exhaustion and the cold of the late-October air lured her back into bed. She snuggled up against Tom's unyielding body and closed her eyes, knowing the second nightmare that always followed was yet to come, and that she was powerless to resist it.

*

Christmas Eve. Susan arrived home laden with last-minute shopping, including a few silly gifts for Tom to try to make him smile; he rarely smiled these days. His car was in the drive, but when she called out he did not respond. Puzzled, she went upstairs, calling his name again. Then she opened the bedroom door.

As she did so, she heard the creak of springs and the rustle of sheets. Two naked figures writhing on the bed spun in unison towards her. Their shocked faces stared at her as if she were an intruder, had no right to be there. Strangers. A woman with long red hair and a grey-haired man. Both of them total strangers making love in her bed, in her bedroom. *In her house*.

But instead of confronting them, she backed away, rapidly, confused, feeling as if it were she who was the intruder. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm so sorry. I'm—'

Then she woke up.

Tom stirred, grunted, then slept on.

Susan lay still. God, it was so clear this time – it seemed to be getting more and more vivid lately. She had read an article in a magazine recently about interpreting dreams, and she tried to think what this one might be telling her.

Confusion was the theme. She was getting confused easily these days, particularly with regard to time. Often she'd be on the verge of starting some job around the house, then remember that she had already done it, or be about to rush out to the shops to buy something she had just bought. Stress. She had read about the effects of stress, in another magazine – she got most of her knowledge from magazines – and that it could cause all kinds of confusion and tricks of the mind.

And she knew the source of the stress, too.

Mandy. The new secretary at the Walsall branch of the Allied Chester & North-East Building Society, where Tom was Deputy Manager. Tom had told her about Mandy's arrival a year ago, then had never mentioned her since. But she had watched them talking at the annual Christmas party last year, to which spouses and partners were invited. They had talked a damned sight too much for Susan's liking. And they emailed each other a damned sight too much.

She had not been sure what to do. At thirty-two, she had kept her figure through careful eating and regular aerobics, and still looked good. She took care of her short brown hair, and paid attention to her make-up and her clothes. There wasn't much else she *could* do, and confronting Tom without any evidence would have made her look foolish. Besides, she was under doctor's orders to stay calm. She had given up work in order to relax and improve her chances of conceiving the child they had been trying for these past five years. She *had* to stay calm.

*

Unexpectedly, the solution presented itself when Tom arrived home that evening.

'Promotion?' she said, her eyes alight with excitement.

'Yup! You are now looking at the second youngest ever branch manager for the Allied Chester & North-East Building Society! But,' he added hesitantly, 'it's going to mean moving.'

'Moving? I don't mind at all, darling!' *Anywhere*, she thought. *The further the better. Get him away from that bloody Mandy*. 'Where to?'

'Brighton.'

She could scarcely believe her luck. In their teens, Tom had taken her for a weekend to Brighton; it was the first time they had been away together. The bed in the little hotel had creaked like mad, and someone in the room below had hollered at them and they'd had to stuff sheets into their mouths to silence their laughter. 'We're going to live in Brighton?'

'That's right!'

She flung her arms around him. 'When? How soon?'

'They want me to take over the branch at the start of the New Year. So we have to find a house pretty smartly.'

Susan did a quick calculation. It was now late October. 'We'll never find somewhere and get moved by then. We've got to sell this place, we've got to—'

'The Society will help. They're relocating us, all expenses paid, and we get a lump-sum allowance for more expensive housing in the south. They're giving me the week off next week so we can go there

and look around. I've told the relocations officer our budget and she's contacting some local estate agents for us.'

*

The first particulars arrived two days later in a thick envelope. Susan opened it in the kitchen and pulled out the contents, while Tom was gulping down his breakfast. There were about fifteen houses, mostly too expensive. She discarded several, then read the details of one that was well within their range: a very ugly box of a house, close to the sea, with a 'small but charming' garden. She liked the idea of living near the sea, but not the house. Still, she thought, you spend most of your time indoors, not looking at the exterior, so she put it aside as a possible and turned to the next.

As she saw the picture, she froze. *Couldn't be*, she thought, bringing it closer to her eyes. *Could not possibly be.* She stared hard, struggling to control her shaking hands, at a mock-Tudor semi, identical to the one she always saw in her dream. *Coincidence*, she thought, feeling a tightening knot in her throat. *Coincidence. Has to be. There are thousands of houses that look like this.*

12 Bolingbroke Avenue.

Number 12, she knew, was the number on the door in her dream, the same dream in which she always heard the distant roar of the sea.

Maybe she had seen the house when they had been to Brighton previously. How long ago was that? Fourteen years? But even if she had seen it before, why should it have stuck in her mind?

'Anything of interest?' Tom asked, reaching out and turning the particulars of the modern box round to read them. Then he pulled the details of the semi out of her hands, rather roughly. 'This looks nice,' he said. 'In our bracket. "In need of some modernization" – that's estate agent-speak for a near wreck. Means if we do it up, it could be worth a lot more.'

Susan agreed that they should see the house. She had to see it to satisfy herself that it was not the one in the dream, but she did not tell Tom that; he had little sympathy for her dreams.

*

The estate agent drove them himself. He wore a sharp suit, white socks and smelled of hair gel. 'Great position,' he said. 'One of the most sought-after residential areas in Hove. Five minutes' walk to the beach. Hove Lagoon close by – great for kids. And it's a bargain for this area. A bit of work and you could increase the value a lot.' He turned into Bolingbroke Avenue, and pointed with his finger. 'There we are.'

Susan bit her lip as they pulled up outside number 12. Her mouth was dry and she was shaking badly. Terror was gripping her like a claw; the same terror she had previously experienced only in her dreams.

The one thing that was different was the 'For Sale' board outside. She could see the cherry tree, the stone birdbath. She could hear the sea. There was no doubt in her mind, absolutely no doubt at all.

She climbed out of the car as if she were back in her dream, and led the way up the path. Exactly as she always did in her dream, she reached out her hand and rang the bell.

After a few moments the door was opened by a woman in her forties with long red hair. She had a pleasant, open-natured smile at first, but when she saw Susan, all the colour drained from her face. She looked as if she had been struck with a sledgehammer.

Susan was staring back at her in amazement. There was no mistaking, it was definitely her. 'Oh my God,' Susan said, the words blurting out. 'You're the woman I keep seeing in my dreams.'

'And you,' she replied, barely able to get the words out, 'you are the ghost that's been haunting our bedroom for the past ten years.'

Susan stood, helpless, waves of fear rippling across her skin. 'Ghost?' she said finally.

'You look like our ghost; you just look so incredibly like her.' She hesitated. 'Who are you? How can I help you?'

'We've come to see around the house.'

'See around the house?' She sounded astonished.

'The estate agent made an appointment.' Susan turned to look at him for confirmation, but could not see him or Tom – or the car.

'There must be a mistake,' the woman said. 'This house is not on the market.'

Susan looked round again, disoriented. Where were they? Where

the hell had they gone? 'Please,' she said. 'This ghost I resemble – who . . . who is . . . was she?'

'I don't know; neither of us do. But about ten years ago some building society manager bought this house when it was a wreck, murdered his wife on Christmas Eve and moved his mistress in. He renovated the house, and cemented his wife into the basement. The mistress finally cracked after a couple of years and went to the police. That's all I know.'

'What . . . what happened to them?'

The woman was staring oddly at her, as if she was trying to see her but no longer could. Susan felt swirling cold air engulf her. She turned, bewildered. Where the hell was Tom? The estate agent? Then she saw that the 'For Sale' board had gone from the garden.

She was alone, on the step, facing the closed front door.

Number 12. She stared at the white letters, the brass knocker. Then, as if drawn by that same damned magnet, she felt herself being pulled forward, felt herself gliding in through the solid oak of the door.

I'll wake up in a moment, she thought. *I'll wake up. I always do.* Except she knew, this time, something had changed.

NUMBER THIRTEEN

For 353 days a year – and 354 in a leap year – N.N. Kettering put the fear of God into restaurants around the world. On those dozen remaining days, something put the fear of God into him.

A number.

Just a simple, two-digit number.

Thirteen.

Just the sight of it was enough to make beads of sweat appear along his brow. And he had a vast expanse of brow, providing ample accommodation for whole colonies of sweat beads.

Nigel Norbert Kettering hated both his first names. When he had first started out as a restaurant critic, for a small English provincial newspaper, he decided a degree of anonymity was a good thing – and it gave him the opportunity to lose those two bloody names. For the past two decades, N.N. Kettering had been, undisputedly, the most influential restaurant critic in England, and in more recent years, his eagle eye and sharp palate, and even sharper writing, had made him a global scourge.

Kettering analysed everything. Every single aspect of any meal he ate. From the table at which he sat, to the quality of the paper on which the menu was printed, to the glasses, the tablecloth, the plates, the balance of the menu, the quality and speed of the service, and, far above all else, the food.

This attention to every detail, even to the quality of the toothpicks, had taken him to the top of his profession – and the top of the list of people many of the world's most renowned chefs would have liked to see dead.

His daily online postings, the *Kettering Report,* could make or break a new restaurant within days, or dramatically enhance the reputation of an established one. No amount of Michelin stars or Gault Millau points came close to the rosette rankings of the *Kettering Report*. Of course, he had his favourites. Before it closed, El Bulli in Spain

regularly received a maximum score of ten. So did The French Laundry in Yountville, California, and The Fat Duck in Bray, Vue du Monde in Melbourne, and Rosemary in Sardinia, and the Luk Yu Tea House in Hong Kong for its dim sum.

But there were legions of other establishments, hailed as temples of gastronomy by some of the greatest newspaper critics, which received from Kettering a scornful three, or a withering two. One of the greatest French chefs committed suicide after Kettering downgraded his rating from a nine to a devastating one in the space of a single year.

In the current harsh economic climes, few people would risk the expense and disappointment of a mediocre night out without first checking the latest opinion online at Kettering's site.

N.N.'s appearance at a restaurant was enough to render the most seasoned maître d' and the most assured sommelier quivering jellies, and when whispered word of his presence reached the kitchen, even the most prima donna of chefs turned into a babbling, begging wreck.

Some years ago, his identity had been revealed by a tabloid newspaper. Now, he no longer bothered to book his tables under an assumed name. Every restaurateur in the world had N.N. Kettering's photograph pinned discreetly to an office wall. Besides, the man was hard to miss. He was tall and lean, despite all the food and wine he packed away, with an elongated neck, on top of which perched his egg-shaped head, his eyes distorted behind round, bottle-lens glasses and his short black hair brushed forward, rather like a modern take on a monk's tonsure, the fringe barely reaching the start of his high, sloping brow.

He was always dressed the same – in a dark, immaculately tailored suit, white shirt and red or crimson tie – and sat ramrod straight, with perfect posture, as if he had a ruler jammed down the back of his jacket. One great London restaurant owner had described the sight of his head rising above the menu he was reading, accompanied by his beady glare, as being like staring into the periscope of a submarine. Fortunately for this man's establishment, N.N. Kettering never got to hear the remark.

Of course, Kettering's tastes became more and more esoteric. One year, the appearance of snail porridge on the menu of The Fat

Duck caused him to devote two whole pages of lyrical praise to Heston Blumenthal's skills as a chef. The following year, he devoted an unprecedented three-page review to a single dish at El Bulli – chef Ferran Adrià's creation of oysters with raw marinated rabbit brains.

And his demands for greatness and excellence became ever higher.

Almost uniquely among restaurant critics, N.N. Kettering employed no assistants. He ate lunch and dinner out seven days and nights a week. Sometimes breakfast, too. Food was his life. He had never married, never even had a girlfriend – or boyfriend. And he always paid for every meal in crisp, new banknotes. He never accepted anything free.

He never tipped.

He felt fulfilled. As if he had been put on this planet to be the custodian of its restaurants' standards. He was married to tomorrow's restaurants. His reviews were his babies.

Once, early in his career, in a rare interview, he declared, 'The best number for dinner is two – myself and a good waiter.'

But not on the thirteenth of any month.

On the thirteenth of any month, it all changed.

From as far back in his life as he could remember, N.N. Kettering had been a triskaidekaphobic. He had a morbid fear of the number thirteen. And the worst possible date was a Friday the thirteenth. Because not only was he a triskaidekaphobe, he was also a paraskavedekatriaphobe.

Someone who has a total fear of the date Friday the thirteenth.

He knew that the number thirteen was out to get him. It was around him all the time. It was there on car number plates. It lurked in the number of grains in the breakfast cereals he ate. In the number of berries he added to his cereal. In the number of mouthfuls he took to eat his breakfast, and his lunch, and his dinner. In the number of steps he would take from a taxi to the restaurant. In the number of steps from the front door of the restaurant to his table.

He would never sit at table thirteen. He would never choose the thirteenth item on a menu. Nor on a wine list. Nor anything that was a multiple of thirteen.

Whenever it was a Friday the thirteenth, he would prepare himself in advance. All kinds of danger lurked out in the world. So it was best

not to risk it. Stay home. But home was dangerous, too. He had read that the place where you were most likely to die was in your own home, especially your kitchen. So, on every Friday the thirteenth he stayed in bed, in his small flat in London's Notting Hill. The night before, he prepared everything he would need up until midnight the following day. He would spend the time reading, and watching television – mostly food programmes – and visiting, anonymously of course, a number of networking sites and online discussion groups about restaurants.

So it happened, on one such Friday the thirteenth, a cold February day when he was logged on while in bed, that he found by chance a new discussion group on the Web, made up of some of the world's greatest chefs. He had eaten in every one of their restaurants – a few of them he had praised, but the majority he had trashed. He watched the discussion in fascination, as they were talking about a restaurant he had never heard of. And not just talking about it. Raving about it.

This demented him! He knew every significant restaurant in the world, surely? He had eaten at all the ones that had any kind of a reputation. Yet here, suddenly, was a reference not just to a restaurant, but to one these particular chefs agreed unanimously was the very best in the world. No restaurant sourced better cuts of meat. No restaurant handled an entire range of offal with such inventiveness. He became hungry just reading the descriptions of the sauces, the tenderness of every bite, the juxtaposition of flavours. He was salivating.

And the bastards did not give away the name.

Frustrated, he posted, under his Internet pseudonym, *ChefStalker*, the words: 'Hi everyone, what's the name of this place? I thought I knew every restaurant worth eating in on the planet!'

To his dismay, the discussion ended abruptly, without any reply.

He realized there was only one thing for it. He would email some of the chefs, selecting only the ones he had praised, revealing who he was, knowing that was almost bound to lead to an invitation.

To his joy, he was right. Two days later he received an email, although, curiously, anonymous:

Dear N.N. Kettering,

Thank you for your interest. This establishment about which you are enquiring is in fact a private dining club. We would be

> delighted for you to join us as our guest the next time we hold one of our dinners – Friday 13 May. There is one condition: that you never write about this club, either before or after your visit. Some things are just too good to be shared. You will receive your formal invitation, and the address, on the night of 12 May. We look forward to greeting you. Bon appétit!

He stared at the email. *Friday 13 May.*

He had never in his life, since leaving school, left the safety of his home on a Friday the thirteenth.

His first inclination was to reply, explaining that he was grateful for the invitation, but that he could not accept.

But then he thought again about all the words of praise he had read. Many of them from chefs who, he might have thought, had experienced every taste sensation there was to taste, but who raved unanimously.

God, how he loved the mystique of restaurants. He remembered so vividly the first restaurant he had ever entered, when he was just ten years old; it was called Verry's. He was with his parents, in busy, noisy Regent Street in London. The door had swung shut behind them, and they were in a new world, dimly lit, oak-panelled, with a quiet hum of chatter, tantalizing smells of garlic and grilling meat and fish. A man in a tuxedo, with an Italian accent, had greeted his parents as if they were his long-lost friends, then had shaken his hand and led them courteously along a line of red leather banquettes to their table.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Crystal glasses were laid out on a crisp, white tablecloth. A silver dish lay on it, filled with frilly curls of butter. Another silver dish appeared, stacked with Melba toast. Then he was presented with a burgundy leather-covered menu, filled with delights. A few minutes later, a green leather-bound wine list, as thick as a bible, was placed in his father's hand.

Waiters swept past with silver trays laden with food. Others hovered around their table. It was like being on a new planet, in a new universe. From that moment onwards, Nigel Norbert Kettering knew that he wanted to spend his life in this world. But, even at ten, he noticed things that were not right. Little imperfections. The waiter forgot a side order of haricot verts, and had to be reminded twice.

His father muttered that his steak was cooked more than he had asked, but seemed too in awe of the waiters to complain. So, to his father's embarrassment and his mother's astonishment, little Nigel stuck up his arm and summoned the waiter. Five minutes later the offending steak was duly replaced.

That was his start. And now, aged forty-four, he had succeeded beyond all his dreams. And there were still some restaurants he entered that held that same, magical promise of Verry's all those years ago.

And now there was one that sounded as if it would top them all. But his invitation was for a Friday the thirteenth. He emailed back, asking what other date options there were. Within minutes he received a reply: 'None. We assume you are declining. Thank you.'

Almost as fast as his fingers could move, panic causing beads of sweat to appear all over that brow of his, he typed back: 'No, not declining. Thank you. I'm accepting.'

*

The next three months passed slowly, feeling more like three years. Everything in every restaurant irritated him. Gormless, moronic waiters sanctimoniously reciting the day's specials as if they had personally line-caught or wood-roasted the damned fish or meat with their bare hands. Eating starters of bi-valves tortured to death in unpleasantly flavoured oils, or pasta resembling origami creations made during handiwork classes at special needs institutions.

He bankrupted a dozen Michelin-starred establishments and closed four restaurants before they had even opened their doors to the great unwashed.

But finally the great day arrived.

And just how great was it?

He stared at the email printout from the night before, in which he had finally been sent the address. It was the place that just about every ranked chef considered to be the finest eating establishment in the world. It was Number 13, in West Audley Street in London's Mayfair.

Number sodding 13.

He came close to telling them to take a hike. To stick their stupid invitation up the place where the sun doesn't shine.

Thirteen.

The number he had spent his entire life trying to avoid. And now he was in a taxi, cruising down Park Lane, getting ever closer.

Salivating.

Thinking about all those descriptions of grilling meat and offal in sauce combinations he had never dreamed possible.

Looking forward to trashing it! To making fools of all those great chefs. To destroying fifty reputations in one single posting on his site later that evening.

He was less than amused when the cabbie read the meter and turned to him. 'That'll be thirteen quid, gov.'

N.N. Kettering counted out the money exactly. And took pleasure in the driver's scowl when he asked for his receipt, with no tip. No arsehole driver who mentioned the number thirteen was going to get a tip from him.

Then he walked up the steps to the door and stared at the shiny, brass digits.

13.

He began shaking. Then hyperventilating. He nearly turned and walked straight back down the steps.

Only the descriptions of the food that lay beyond this portal kept him there. He lifted his hand to the bell, and forced his index finger to dart forward and jab it.

He was still considering his options when the door swung open and a tall, gaunt, formidable-looking figure in a tuxedo and white gloves, hair as slick as a frozen pond, with a matching frozen smile, bowed. 'Sir?'

N.N. gave his name.

Moments later he stepped forward, into an oak-panelled corridor, and the door closed behind him.

'This way, sir.'

He followed the man along the corridor, which was lined with framed oil portraits. Some of them he recognized as high-profile food critics. He passed one of A.A. Gill from the *Sunday Times*. Another of Fay Maschler from the *Observer*. Then one of Giles Coren from *The Times*. One of Michael Winner. Then several he recognized from other countries. Then he was bowed through a door.

He found himself in a grand, windowless dining room, in the centre of which was an oval mahogany table, at which sat twelve people. One place was empty at the centre on one side – his.

The thirteenth place.

As he clocked the faces of each of his fellow diners in turn, he realized he was in the presence of twelve of the highest rated chefs in the world. Highest rated, that was, by all food critics other than himself.

He had trashed all of them – viciously. Brought each of their establishments to their knees. They were all smiling at him.

His instinct was to turn and run. It had been years since he had eaten at a table with company. He really only liked to eat alone. But they were all rising to their feet. The one nearest him, whom he recognized as Jonas Capri, from Sydney, Australia, said, 'N.N. Kettering, we are honoured.'

He did not know what to reply or if he even wanted to reply.

Another of the great chefs spared him the problem. Ferdy Perrin, from Haut Mazot restaurant in Switzerland, once famed for its lamb – before the *Kettering Report* – shook his hand warmly. 'You cannot imagine the honour we are feeling here tonight. That you have agreed to come and eat our creations. It is our hope that you will leave this evening with a changed opinion of our abilities. We are grateful to you that you give us this chance.'

'Well,' he said, for the first time in many years feeling just a little humbled. But before he could say anything else another chef stood up.

His name was Jack Miller, from Miller's House in Tampa, Florida. 'See, N.N., we want you to know we have no hard feelings. Maybe when you came to my restaurant we were having an off night. I'm not here to convince you to change your review. I just want you to have one of the greatest eating experiences of your life, here tonight. What you make of it will then be up to you to decide.'

N.N. saw that the walls were hung with more paintings. He recognized Gordon Ramsay. Anthony Worrall Thompson. Albert Roux. Wolfgang Puck. Alain Ducasse. Raymond Blanc.

He took his seat. A vast array of cutlery and glasses lay in front

of him. One glass was half-filled with an ochre-coloured white wine, another with water.

He was still thinking what to do when a side-door opened and four waiters entered, dressed head to foot in black, holding massive silver platters, on which sat tiny demitasse cups topped with froth. Within seconds one had been distributed to each diner.

The gloved man who had brought N.N. Kettering in appeared to duplicate his tasks as both doorman and headwaiter.

'L'amuse-bouche,' he announced. 'Cappuccino de testicules.'

Each of his fellow diners began to spoon this dish up with gusto. N.N. Kettering raised the first mouthful to his lips and sniffed. The bouquet was sensational. He placed one sliver, no thicker than a communion wafer, in his mouth and the flesh dissolved on his tongue like butter. It was so good he dug his spoon in again. And again. And again. Scraping every last milligram of flavour from the sides of the tiny, ribbed cup. He could easily have eaten seconds. And thirds. He found himself even wanting to lick the inside of the cup clean.

'Fantastic!' he said. '*Incroyable!*' he added for the benefit of the French chefs present. The others demurred.

He had eaten pigs', lambs' and bulls' testicles before, but never, remotely, with this complexity of flavours. These were the best ever. Wow!

'The secret is in the marinade,' the chef on his right said, a man in his late thirties with close-cropped hair, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans.

'I would argue also the quality of the produce,' said the chef opposite them, a rather studious-looking man in his sixties, wearing a cardigan.

'That goes without saying,' said a third.

N.N., long conditioned to observe every detail and nuance in a restaurant, noticed the discreet wink that passed between two of the chefs. It seemed to carry on around the table, from chef to chef, a sort of chain wink, from which he was excluded.

Now they all seemed to be concealing smirks from him.

He noticed a printed menu, picked it up and glanced down it. There were twenty-one courses. The menu was written in French, but he was fluent in the language so it was easy to translate. But,

even so, there were several words he struggled with. The first set of courses were all offal. Goujons of brain was to follow the testicles. Then sweetbreads – the pancreas and thymus. Then tripe – the intestines. Liver. Kidneys. Then . . . something else, but his French failed him.

With even more ceremony than the previous dishes, a miniature covered silver tureen was placed in front of each diner, signalling that one of the highlights of the meal had arrived. The lids were removed to reveal a wonderful, sweet aroma of chargrilled meat, cinnamon and coriander. The dish was a rich, dark cassoulet of beans, chickpeas and the thinnest possible slices of what N.N. Kettering assumed was sausage. But when he forked one into his mouth, although the taste was undoubtedly pork, and delicious, it had a strange, flaccid, rubbery texture that reminded him of squid. It was definitely, he made a mental note, a triumph of taste over texture.

The dish was eaten in complete silence, and Kettering became increasingly uncomfortable with each mouthful he took as, one by one, he ruled out all other body parts, leaving him with just one possibility. He shuddered but at the same time felt very slightly aroused.

After that, the menu continued through a series of meat dishes, different cuts from the leg, rump, shoulder. The animal was not stated and he became increasingly curious to know. Lamb, Cow, Deer, Pig? Ostrich?

But when he questioned any of his fellow diners they just smiled and replied, 'Every dish is a unique surprise. Savour it, don't destroy it with analysis.'

The French chef in the cardigan turned to him and said, 'You are familiar with the words of your great poet, Pope? "Like following life in creatures we dissect, we lose it in the moment we detect."'

So he did his best. With almost every mouthful he took, one of the numerous wine glasses on the table was filled or refilled. Whites, reds, pinks, all different hues, all steadily melding into a blur.

Then the highlight of the meal arrived: a roast, presented on a miniature campfire of burning fennel twigs, and he knew instantly from the smell and the sight of the crackling that this had to be roast pork. As he tucked in, whether it was the wine or the sheer joy of

eating one magical dish after another, he was sure, quite sure, that this was the finest roast he had ever eaten, and probably ever would. He was starting to feel very happy, very contented. He was starting to like these chefs. Next time, he decided, he would give them all good scores. Enough so that perhaps they might invite him again . . .

Even on a Friday the thirteenth.

Because the date was turning out not to be so bad after all.

'This is the best pork I've ever eaten!' he proclaimed through a mouthful of perfect, crunchy crackling.

'Long pig,' said the chef opposite him.

And suddenly, as if a fuse had been tripped, all the good humour in the room seemed to evaporate. There was an awkward moment of silence. Several faces turned towards the man who had said, 'Long pig.' A ripple of glances passed from one chef to the next.

Then N.N. was conscious that everyone was looking at him, as if waiting for him to react.

A shiver rippled through him. *Long pig.* He knew what the words meant, what long pig was.

Suddenly his head was spinning. He began to feel sick. His eyes moved, in turn, to each of the twelve pairs of eyes around the table. Each stared back at him coldly.

'Long pig' was the term cannibals in the South Seas and in Africa used to describe white men. Because their flesh tasted like pork.

He stood up abruptly. His chair fell over behind him, crashing to the floor with a sound like a gunshot. 'I have to go,' he said.

No one said a word.

He ran from the room, back along the portrait-lined corridor, and reached the front door. He yanked the handle. But the door did not move.

It was locked.

The key was missing.

He turned and saw the maître d' standing behind him, his arms crossed. A bunch of keys hung from a leather fob on his belt. 'You haven't had dessert yet, sir. It would be very impolite for you to leave without dessert. We have the finest desserts you will ever have tasted.'

'I have to go,' he said again. 'Please open the door.' Blind panic was gripping him now.

'I'm afraid not, sir.' The maître d' took a step towards him.

N.N. Kettering had never headbutted anyone before in his life. But he headbutted the maître d' now. It was a clumsy attempt and he did not dip his own head enough, resulting in him striking the maître d' forehead-on and smashing both the bottle lenses of his own glasses, without which he was almost blind. Nevertheless, it was effective enough to make the maître d' fall to his knees with a dazed grunt.

N.N. grabbed the key fob and tugged with all his strength, ripping it away from the man's belt. He turned back to the door, tried one, then another, then another. He looked over his shoulder and, through a blurry haze, saw a posse of his dining companions storming down the corridor towards him.

He tried the fourth key, desperately, and it turned.

The door opened and he stumbled out down the steps and ran blindly across the pavement, straight into the road. Straight into the path of an eleven-and-a-half-ton double-decker bus.

It struck him at almost thirty miles per hour, catapulting him a short distance down the road. Then it braked to a slewed halt. It seemed in the brief silence that followed that the whole of London had come to a halt.

The paramedics, who arrived on the scene within minutes and lifted him carefully onto a stretcher, were unaware, just as N.N. Kettering was, of the irony that it was a number 13 bus.

*

Two days later, N.N. regained consciousness briefly. Just long enough to hear a murmured conversation right beside him.

A male voice said, 'Any luck with next-of-kin?'

A female voice said, 'No, doctor, we've not yet been able to trace any relatives.'

'Any change in his condition?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Well, let's keep him on life support for a while longer. But I don't think we're going to see any change. He has massive internal injuries, and his Glasgow coma score remains at three. He's clearly brain-dead, poor sod. Nothing more we can do. Just wait.'

The man's voice was familiar, but N.N. struggled to remember where he had heard it before. Then, just before he lapsed back into unconsciousness for the final time, he remembered.

It was the voice of the maître d'.

*

Two days later, the duty intensive care registrar was doing his ward round. He noted that one of the beds in the unit was now vacant. It was bed number thirteen.

The sister was staring at it sadly. 'You OK?' he asked.

'Every time we lose someone, I feel like a failure,' she replied. Then she looked at the sticking plaster on his forehead. 'Are you all right? Cut yourself?'

'It's nothing. He looked back down at the empty bed. 'Always remember the first rule of the Hippocratic Oath: "Do no harm." Right?'

She nodded sadly.

'It would have been harmful to keep him going. What kind of quality of life would he have had if he had lived?'

'You're right,' she replied. 'None. I suppose sometimes we have to thank God for small mercies. He'd have been a vegetable if he'd lived.'

'You know, nurse, I've never liked that word, "vegetable",' he said. 'Why not a "piece of meat"?'