

PRAISE FOR *AFTERTASTE*

**Goodreads Choice Award Nominee:
Readers' Favorite Debut Novel 2025**

Longlisted for the James Patterson and Bookshop.org Prize

“A haunting evocation of pain and pleasure, and the power of food.”

—Nigella Lawson

“This dark comedy set in the culinary world follows a Ukrainian American chef who can conjure spirits of the dead by cooking their favorite foods. Haunted by the death of his father and yearning to use his powers for good, Kostya opens a restaurant where loved ones reunite over one last meal. With carefully crafted depictions of grief and mouthwatering culinary adventures, this is the perfect novel for the always hungry and for fans of *The Bear*.”

—*USA Today*

“Lavelle’s speculative approach is intriguing enough on its own, but it’s her skillful writing that ultimately makes *Aftertaste* such an evocative (and, yes, mouthwatering) read.”

—*Elle*

“Heartbreaking and strange, this is a novel to savor, one bite at a time.”

—Apple Books

“A ghost story, a love story, and a mind-bending adventure, *Aftertaste* by Daria Lavelle turns the concept of ‘sense memory’ into a delightful ride.”

—*Real Simple*

“This story is full of love, grief, emotional roller coasters, and detailed, significant pallets of food. . . . Be prepared to find yourself snacking or even licking your lips as you flip through these pages. . . . This novel is addictive, rewarding, and delicate. The pacing is well-balanced with enough highs and lows to keep you gasping aloud in disbelief at some monumental events and twists.”

—BookTrib

“This is an extraordinary book. . . . For foodies, for lovers, for those who like a side of the supernatural.”

—*Booklist*

“Delectable . . . the exuberant prose leavens the story’s bittersweet pathos, and the novel brims with tantalizing descriptions of international cuisines. This inventive tale of food and family is likely to whet readers’ appetites.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Lavelle spins a twisty plot filled with mouthwatering descriptions of food and some very hungry ghosts. . . . A tasty variation on the supernatural thriller.”

—*Kirkus*

“*Aftertaste* is practically exploding with love, life, and flavor. I relished every word.”

—Louise Kennedy, bestselling author of *Trespasses*

“An original concept perfectly realized. Witty and poignant, surprising and satisfying, this lovely book about death is brimming with life.”

—Karen Joy Fowler, award-winning author of
We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

AFTERTASTE

DARIA
LAVELLE

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS
New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi



Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

For more than 100 years, Simon & Schuster has championed authors and the stories they create. By respecting the copyright of an author's intellectual property, you enable Simon & Schuster and the author to continue publishing exceptional books for years to come. We thank you for supporting the author's copyright by purchasing an authorized edition of this book.

No amount of this book may be reproduced or stored in any format, nor may it be uploaded to any website, database, large language model, or other repository, retrieval, or artificial intelligence system without express permission. All rights reserved. Inquiries may be directed to Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 or permissions@simonandschuster.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 by Daria Lavelle

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Simon & Schuster Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

Excerpt from *32 Yolks: From My Mother's Table to Working the Line* by Eric Ripert with Veronica Chambers, copyright © 2016 by Eric Ripert. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Excerpt from *Anthony Bourdain's Les Halles Cookbook: Strategies, Recipes, and Techniques of Classic Bistro Cooking* by Anthony Bourdain, José de Meirelles, and Phillipe Lajaunie, copyright © 2004 by Anthony Bourdain, used by permission of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

Excerpt from *Breaking Free* by Geneen Roth, copyright © 1984 and 2023 by Geneen Roth, used with permission.

Excerpt from *The French Laundry Cookbook* by Thomas Keller, copyright © 1999. Reprinted by permission of Artisan, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

"Wish" by W. S. Merwin. Copyright © 2017 by W. S. Merwin, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

First Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition May 2026

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, LLC

Simon & Schuster strongly believes in freedom of expression and stands against censorship in all its forms. For more information, visit BooksBelong.com.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Interior design by Wendy Blum

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

ISBN 978-1-6680-6159-6

ISBN 978-1-6680-6160-2 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-6680-6161-9 (ebook)



Scan here to get book recommendations,
exclusive offers, and more delivered to your inbox.

*While the ultimate message of this book is uplifting and hopeful,
the story explores heavy themes including grief and suicide.*

For James, the salt in my banquet

PART ONE

MOUTHFEELS

*My father died when I was young.
That is the central tragedy of my life.
But his spirit never left me, and that may
be the defining miracle of my life.*

Eric Ripert

32 Yolks

BITTER

THE FIRST TIME Konstantin Duhovny tasted something he hadn't actually eaten he was eleven, seated on the edge of the public pool in Brighton Beach, his heels churning grey water into foam.

He was watching the backs of the other boys—the ones he was supposed to be swimming with, but who never invited him, even out of politeness, into their circle—as they splashed about, showing off handstands and lung capacities, spouting chlorinated water a foot into the air like porpoises.

He watched them all afternoon—Mitya and Sasha and Misha K. and Misha B. (whom they kept calling Bear because of the thick, black hair up and down his back)—until, one by one, their fathers finished their waterlogged *Russkaya Reklamas*, scratched their nipples through threadbare white undershirts, and peeled their pasty bodies from the rubber loungers, signaling quitting time.

Kostya had come chaperoned by his cousin Valerik—not his real cousin, but the teenage son of Tetya Natasha, not his real aunt but an acquaintance of his mother's—who had promptly dumped him when his girlfriend whispered something about a kissing booth at the boardwalk nearby.

Don't you move, Valerik had hissed at Kostya. I'll be back.

That had been two hours ago.

As the last boy, Mitya, raised the handle of the chain-link fence, Kostya felt himself blister with jealousy. There was no one to ferry him home, just like there had been no one to slather sunblock onto his back—which he could already feel was red and tight and burnt—and just like there would be no one to teach him how to talk to these boys in a way that made it clear that he was one of them.

But then, of course, he wasn't one of them. *Their* fathers were alive.

He kicked faster at the water, kicked violently, kicked at the fathers and sons, kicked at the great cavity of longing inside himself, this way of missing someone, missing them desperately, missing every part including those he'd never known, a pocket so deep he thought that if he could only reach inside of it, worry its lining long enough, break through it to the other side, to where empty could grow full as a belly round with food, he might just find what he was looking for.

Right then, something traveled across his tongue, and Kostya stopped kicking. It coated the inside of his mouth, thick as paste, the taste—the uneaten taste—overpowering. It was savory, salty, the texture mealy, slightly sweet and fatty, something tart, barely, and then, at the tail, in the back of his throat, bitter, *bitter*, blooming like a bruise. Good, but also bad, just a little bit like shit. He wondered briefly whether one of the boys had found a way to make him ingest a turd—it seemed the sort of thing that boys with fathers could do to a boy without one—but just as quickly, the sensation vanished. Kostya smacked his lips, trying to call it back, but there was nothing left now, only a warmth spreading slowly across his tongue as he choked back tears.

It was only in the absence of the taste that he suddenly recognized what it had been.

Chicken liver, sautéed onions, fresh dill garnish, squeeze of lemon.

Pechonka.

His father's favorite dish, according to his mother, who invoked it

AFTERTASTE

infrequently and had stopped making it after he died. Kostya had never tasted *pechonka*. He just knew, like an instinct, like another sense he'd only now become conscious of, that the ghost of that dish—not its taste, but its aftertaste—had just been inside of his mouth, spirited there by the person who most longed to taste it again.

SALTY

BEFORE THAT, TWELVE months prior.

A Tuesday. Hot. Summer, simmering.

Kostya's dad tying a revolting tie, standard issue from the Metropolitan Transit Authority.

Kostya glanced over at him from the kitchen—he was always in the kitchen then—standing in one sock before the refrigerator, the door agape. He'd been there long enough to make the kefir sweat, beads dribbling down the side of the carton, the motor gasping as the temperature rose. He was studying the contents; his dad had stumped him last time, but not today.

“Close icebox,” his father tsked. “You break like this. Spoil produce. Expensive to fix.”

“Sorry,” Kostya muttered, and swung the door shut with no urgency at all, stealing a last long look at the chilled jars and tins and plastic containers marked in Cyrillic.

Kostya couldn't really read Russian (he was ten, and smart enough, but this was America, not Soviet Ukraine) so he'd memorized how the Russian grocery stores packed their wares, that the *lyulya-kebab* and rice were scooped into Styrofoam boxes; that the pickles—half-sour, full sour, pickled cabbage, brined tomatoes—bobbed gently in opaque plastic quarts;

that the salads—spicy carrot slaw, mayonnaise-thick *olivié*, earth-sweet beet *vinegret*—were contained in small, clear pints with rectangular labels; that the white paper bags growing steadily transparent with grease held meat or sour cherry or sauerkraut or poppy seed *piroshky*, and he peered around the refrigerator shelves, taking inventory. Then he sat down at the small dinette, his hands folded businesslike on the sticky plastic tablecloth.

“I’m ready,” Kostya announced.

His father was fussing with the tie and didn’t look up.

“*Papa*,” he whined, switching to Russian, “*do the game! Give me a taste!*”

Kostya hoped the effort at his native tongue might tip the scales; his dad had spent the last few weeks battling Kostya’s aversion to Russian, the language beginning to feel foreign, mealy on his tongue. Kostya just wanted to be like the cool kids in school—American, English-speaking, *normal*—and to fit in, be seen instead of ignored.

Kostya’s dad gazed with weary longing at the fridge, then up at the clock over the stove, a frown replacing his momentary consideration.

“Can’t today, Kostochka.” He sounded truly sorry. “I have new route. Can’t be late.”

“But, but!” Back to English. “Just *one* time. It’ll be quick.”

The last time they played their tasting game—his father slipping morsels into Kostya’s mouth for him to identify (eyes closed, no peeking)—Kostya had gotten four in a row right (*doktorskaya* bologna, apricot preserves, a buttered radish, a halva cube) and was on the high of a winning streak when his dad fed him an oily piece of fish on the tines of a fork.

“Easy! Sardine!” he’d yelled, triumphant, before he even finished chewing.

“*Nyet!*” his father yelled back, smacking the table with delight, and Kostya opened his eyes in stunned surprise. “Sprats!”

But that had been weeks ago.

“Just *one* time,” Kostya repeated now, his voice a donut, glazed.

His dad smiled and kissed him on the head.

“With you is never one time.”

AFTERTASTE

They started the game years ago, when Kostya was eight, in the early days of emigration. A way to remind him where he'd come from. To hold heritage in his mouth. To taste their past, an ocean away. It was Kostya's favorite thing, the bright memory he clung to when other kids, American ones, laughed at his ill-fitting clothes, his unfamiliar food, his poor grammar.

"I swear!"

"Kostochka, I must get bus."

Kostya stalked his dad back down the hall and into his parents' bedroom, where he watched him hunt on the nightstand for his name pin—*Sergei Duhovny (Driver #0727)* etched in chintzy gold lamé.

"But Papa—"

His dad sidestepped into the cramped corridor, back toward the kitchen. Kostya tailed him, relentless. He needed this now, needed it badly, needed something good. The day before, on Riegelmann Boardwalk, two boys had walked by the bench where Kostya was eating lunch, not bothering to lower their voices as they appraised his meal, the leftover *zharkoye*—soft-stewed beef in thick brown sauce—in its mismatched Tupperware an affront to the all-American beef franks in their hands. *What a weirdo*, one said to the other. *Can you hear us, weirdo? What's he eating? Looks like diarrhea.*

"*Later*, Kostya. When I come back."

"No," Kostya whined, a petulant pout materializing on his lower lip. "Now."

"*Nyet*," his father repeated firmly. "*Later*."

"There's never a later!"

His father sighed, equal parts exhaustion and apology.

"I must run. I kiss you."

"All you do is work. This is our one thing!"

"Go in your room, Kostya," his father whispered.

But Kostya didn't budge. He was toeing an edge, deciding to leap.

"Mama's right," he spat out. "We should have stayed in Kyiv!"

He'd overheard his mother talking once, in a hushed voice to her sister on the phone. A whole-pack-of-cigarettes conversation.

"Mama? What does she—"

"You'd cook! You'd own a restaurant instead of driving a stupid bus!" Kostya shouted over him. "And I wouldn't be so ashamed."

"Go in your room," his father said, louder, a crackle to his voice like onion skin. "You understand nothing."

He reached for the doorknob.

Kostya's hands formed fists, his nails making crescents in his palm. There was a bad taste in his mouth, a morning mash of unbrushed teeth and anger.

"You brought us to America," he spat out, repeating things he'd never been meant to hear. "Because you wanted to come. Because you only thought about yourself. You didn't think how it would be for me. So go, then; I don't care. *Go to the Devil!*"

It sounded different in English. Better. The way the popular kids said it as they slammed their lockers shut. *Go to Hell*. Still, Kostya felt the power of it course through him, thunder in his chest, a sudden stillness in the room.

His father stopped, his back to Kostya.

"As you say," he said quietly, and slipped through the door, his shoulders sagging with defeat.

If his father had yelled, had punished him, had retaliated in any way, it might have turned out differently, made it easier for Kostya to tell himself, days and months and years later, that his dad had known he hadn't meant it. But the resignation in his father's voice, the obvious pain that Kostya had inflicted on the person he loved most in the world, lanced him like a barb.

Even in the immediate hangover of the moment, he couldn't take his eyes off the door, kept waiting for his dad to come back and forgive him. To fix what Kostya had broken. He told himself not to cry as he tasted the salt of his own tears, like drinking in a sea. It was as if Kostya already knew—the way his father's farewell echoed in his head, the catch in his voice like a tear in time—that it would be the last thing he'd ever hear him say.

SWEET

THREE MONTHS AFTER his dad's death. Konstantin's birthday. Terrible timing.

It was fall, the leaves beginning to bronze, the air to cool, their lives to set into the strange new shape they would mold to now, Jell-O, without him.

There was a knock on the door, which was impossible, because they hadn't had a single caller since the funeral and no one cared that Kostya had turned a year older, or that his mother hadn't risen from her bed in days, or that there was no food in the fridge and precious little in the cabinets.

It was a delivery guy.

Flowers in his hand. A note.

His father had ordered the bouquet in advance, had settled it with the florist, had written out the card just like always, never expecting that he wouldn't be at the door to receive it, to present it to Kostya's mother himself.

The arrangement filled the room with thick, sweet musk. The flowers of his mother's perfume: patchouli, lily of the valley, tuberose. The same blooms his father had given her every year since Kostya was born.

Their scent seeped through the apartment; it marinated the walls. Mama smelled it from her bed and stumbled, disbelieving, into the living room.

When she saw the vase on the table, the small card stapled to it, the handwriting Sergei's—her Sergei's!—she gave a cry.

Kostya had been trying to read the note, struggling to decipher the slanted Cyrillic dashed across the square of card stock. He'd been lured by the recognition of his name—*Костя*—amid the squiggles rendered in his father's hand. But his mother snatched it away and read it and wept like she was losing him all over again, this gift from his ghost a cruel crumb.

She hurled everything into the trash—the card, the flowers, the vase cracking in two against the bottom of the bin. But Kostya couldn't bring himself to lug the can to the curb. It would stay there for weeks, the flowers rotting inside, their stems dissolving into mush, their petals withering brown, the odor indolent, more like death each day.

THAT NIGHT, AFTER he stole the card out of the trash, Kostya also stole a cake.

A Kyiv Torte, hazelnut meringue and thick, chocolate buttercream, from a bakery on Avenue U. He sat on a park bench in the dark and gorged himself on rich frosting, on the crispy crumble of stiff-peaked egg whites, on the way they ground to sweet, white dust between his teeth. He ate with his fingers, the sugar sticking to his skin, chocolate staining the palms of his hands.

It was too sweet after the first few bites, difficult to swallow, but he shoveled scoop after scoop into his mouth anyway, trying to fill something inside. He ate even as his body warned him to stop, and then he ate more, *more*, every morsel in that blue bakery box, everything, *everything*, all at once.

My Sweet, My Vera! the card in his pocket read. *When Kostya was born, my greatest gift, I did not think I could love you more, but like always, you have proven me wrong. Today is Kostochka's celebration, but I celebrate you.*

AFTERTASTE

Thank you for our perfect son, and for your love, and for our lives. More than life itself, S.

Kostya had sounded it out one slippery letter at a time, the words like sugar to a cavity. *My greatest gift. Our perfect son.* He'd never forgive himself for how profoundly he had failed to earn that praise.

SAVORY

IN THE WEEKS after the *pechonka* at the pool, it happened again.

And again.

Aftertastes appeared in Konstantin's mouth like messages. Different foods each time. More frequent. More intense. The flavors uninvited, haunting the back of his throat.

These hadn't come from his father; they were too different, too foreign. They wouldn't leave him alone.

When he finally grew unsettled enough to tell his mother, to confess how he'd tasted *pechonka* and thought—*known*—that it had come from his dad, he'd been hoping that she might understand. Might reassure him. Part of him was even hoping that this might resurrect her, snap her out of her distant stares and frequent sighs, give her a reason to leave her bed. A year had passed, and she still wore the weight of loss around her shoulders like a stone. Kostya thought that maybe, if he needed her, a *real* need, the kind only she could fill, she might finally decide to set down her load.

Plus, she was uniquely qualified.

Vera Duhovny was the most superstitious person he had ever met. She had talismans and taboos and countless compulsions that she employed to navigate around and over and through life's many wrong turns. She knew

never to sweep while a loved one was traveling, how to dispel an evil eye, that you should never gift knives. She greeted guests with bread and salt. She welcomed good spirits and warded off bad. And if she had been unfazed by Kostya's revelation, had heard of this sort of thing, it would have diffused the growing uncertainty that accompanied each new sensation in his mouth.

Instead, when he told her, her face curdled.

He could see it in her eyes—fear, doubt, dismay. She didn't believe him. She asked him, again and again, to repeat it. To explain.

Only, he couldn't explain. Not what these flavors were, or how he managed to taste them. Not the ease with which he identified their ingredients, like reciting a recipe. Not how he knew—like an expression of terroir on his tongue—that they had come from the Dead.

Instead, he tried again to explain the pool. The boys and their dads. *Pechonka*.

His mother nodded slowly, twice, and sent him to his room to lie down.

Then she called an ambulance.

No one else believed him either. Not the EMT who insisted they bring him in for a psych eval. Not the skinny intake nurse who popped her gum. Not the staff psychiatrist in the children's ward of the Gravesend Psychiatric Center, her pen clicking as she took down notes.

Two weeks, he slept on a white cot with itchy sheets, naked beneath a hospital gown. No socks.

They fed him tablets three times a day, anonymous white tranquilizers in paper cups, the kind kids filled with ketchup in the school cafeteria.

He'd never learned to swallow pills, gagged as he tried, so they watched as he dissolved them beneath his tongue instead. They melted into chalky chunks—bitter, foul—awful enough that he would have thrown them up if they hadn't made him so numb he could barely feel.

The next time the doctor evaluated him, in an office that reeked of Cup Noodles (Beef Flavor), he lied his way out of it. Said that he'd never actually tasted the *pechonka*. That he knew his dad wasn't haunting him. That ghosts

AFTERTASTE

weren't even real. That he'd made the whole thing up because his mother had ignored him after his dad died, and he'd been angry, and wanted to scare her. That he took it too far. That he was sorry.

There was a thick satisfaction to the way she believed him, to the way his distortions put her at ease, to the way fiction protected him from the repercussions of the truth. Lying was carving into a roast, and he savored it, sank his teeth into each bite.

He maintained his deception even as another aftertaste spread over his tongue, right there in her lifeless office—her photographs sepia, her plants artificial, her smile placating, never reaching her eyes.

A thick, chargrilled patty—medium-rare, oozing juice. Smear of special sauce. Butter lettuce; beefsteak tomato; white onion, lightly fried. Crinkle-cut pickle chips, Kosher dill. Toasted sesame seed bun.

The air went still around him as he tasted, the edges of the world softening away, the flavors of the Dead more real and alive than anything else in the room.

SOUR

YEARS TRICKLED BY, his life fermenting.

HE WAS FIFTEEN, walking home. Fat textbooks slung across his shoulder, pounding into his hip. His stomach clenched and unclenched, a fist. Empty.

His mom had blown the grocery money, traded their neighbor the food stamps Kostya had painstakingly applied for—hours of bureaucratic paperwork—in exchange for six cartons of Virginia Slims. He should have smoked them himself out of spite, or resold them cheap in the school parking lot, but he didn't like the taste, and didn't need any more help becoming a social pariah, thank you very much.

His abdomen moaned as he passed the Russian store—the smell of Rizhsky rye and loops of dry salami such exquisite torture—and the McDonald's—oh God, fries—and stopped at a traffic light on the corner, beneath the awning for the Olympia Greek Diner.

Kostya peered inside long enough to confirm that it was busy, most of the tables occupied, waitresses whizzing in and out of the kitchen. He pushed through the door and beelined to the coffee station, a table between

the bar and bathroom that housed pots of coffee and sugar and sweetener and single-serve pods of half-and-half.

He shoved the creamers into his bag, followed by Dominos packets, and—his lucky day—a stack of individually wrapped saltines. Breakfast of Champions.

When he got home, he was so hungry that he dumped it all into a mug, mashed the saltines and sugar and creamer together before he realized that—no! *no!*—the half-and-halves had turned.

He stared at the concoction, at the white chunks dotting the crackers, at the thin, sour whey pooling in the bottom of the glass.

He was so hungry he ate it anyway.

HE WAS EIGHTEEN.

An adult, technically. He had a job, stocking shelves in a bodega. Had a license, though there was no car to speak of. He could buy porn and fight a war and sign a lease if he wanted. But he still missed his dad like a little kid.

Kostya had always assumed it would get better, but it only got different. His pangs of loss had receded into a numb, ever-present ache, yet every new experience—each minor tragedy or major milestone he wished he could share with his father—souring him, made him feel as if his dad had just died, was dying all over again, like he always would be.

When the kids from school fucked with him at that party, it happened. When he had to convince the social worker that his mom was fine, it happened. When he walked across the stage at graduation, the superintendent mispronouncing his name, it happened. When he had his first drink, cashed his first paycheck, first kissed a girl, it happened. When he nursed his first heartbreak, his first hangover, his string of rejections from colleges and jobs and relationships, it happened, and happened, and happened again.

But that afternoon, when Kostya opened the door to find their landlord, to learn that he had sold their apartment—the last place Kostya had seen his

AFTERTASTE

dad alive, had heard his voice, had hugged him—sold it to some new guy who was raising the rent so high they couldn't possibly stay, Kostya had wept, wept unabashedly, ugly-cried. The landlord apologized, said it was nothing personal, said his dad had been a good guy, reminded him of his own father. Kostya had been about to tell him where to shove his platitudes when he felt the puff of air, the flavor materializing in his mouth—*delicate flakes of frozen limoncello, scraped with a fork, spooned into a hollowed-out rind*—and felt, without really knowing how, that the landlord was being sincere. That he really was sorry. That he'd lost someone once and remembered how it ached.

HE WAS THIRTY.

Two decades fatherless, peeled back a year at a time, the segments of a lime. He had another job now—two in fact, both of which sucked. A shitty apartment, and a Craigslist roommate who'd become his best friend. A life, or something like one.

But too often, instead of looking forward, Konstantin found himself looking back.

To when he was ten, waiting at the kitchen table.

Or nine, walking through the neighborhood at dusk, sucking the wet wooden stick of a Popsicle.

Eight, holding both his parents' hands, the thrill in his stomach as they swung him high in the air, Coney Island Cracker Jack lodged in his teeth.

Seven, lying on a patch of green grass, his dad picking wild mushrooms, peeling open their caps to show him inside.

Six. *Six*. The one he always came back to.

A Kyiv park, sunlight overhead, a pouch folded from newsprint weighted on his lap. Full of soft, overripe fruit. Sour cherries, their skin so thin, their flesh the bright red of a bleed.

"*Chereshnya*," Kostya said, placing one into his mouth, the juice squirting down his throat, wonderfully tart.

“*Nyet.*” His father shook his head. Smiled. “*Vishnya.*”

They came from different trees, he explained. Had different fruit, different pits. His father’s grandmother had grown *vishnya* in the countryside of Ukraine, the mottled bush spilling fruit everywhere, smearing the ground with red come summer. Konstantin had never met his great-grandmother, couldn’t now that she was dead, but he could almost taste her in this bag, inside each sour cherry.

“One day,” his dad told him, “I’ll take you there. To see her village, her old dacha. To taste fruit from her tree.” He spat a pit into his hand, perfectly beige, sucked clean of flesh. “*Kostochka,*” he told Kostya, “a cherrystone.”

“Like me.” Kostya had grinned.

“Like you,” his dad agreed. “My cherrystone. So much waiting in so small a thing.”

BUT THE PAST his father promised him was gone.

His future had soured, its possibilities curdled.

Now Kostya kept his secrets, his aftertastes, in the unremarkable present.

In a bland, haunted loop.

He’d stay that way awhile.

But not forever.

PART TWO

BITTERS & HEAT

*But when the past is gone, after
the people are dead, after their things are
destroyed . . . smell and taste still linger on,
like souls, ready to remind us. . . .*

Marcel Proust
Swann's Way

APERITIFS

The Konstantin Duhovny Culinary Experience

ALRIGHT, ALRIGHT! Can everybody hear me? Can y'all see me?

Let's just do a little mic check. If you're here for the Konstantin Duhovny Culinary Experience, you're in the right place. Anyone in the wrong place?

. . . .

Okay, nah. That's Food & Spirits, down the block. If you hurry you can make it!

. . . .

Everyone else, we good? Last chance to bail; we got a tight schedule.

Let's kick it!

My name's Frankie, but I'll answer to Kosh, Shaun, Shaunessey, Key, Shy, and, of course, Tall, Dark, and Handsome—I see you, ladies!—and I'll be your guide today. Like the name implies, this here's all about the culinary stylings of Mr. Konstantin Duhovny—Kostya to his mom, Bones to his buddies, KD for short.

Now if you're on this tour, I'm guessing you know a little something about what our guy's food can do, and you're itching to try it for yourself, see if all the rumors are true. Well, I'll tell you right now: they're just the tip.

DARIA LAVELLE

Bones is the real deal—feeds folks body and soul!—and we'll be making our way through his past together, retracing some footsteps, watching his evolution as a chef before we head on over to our grand finale—opening night at his brand-new digs downtown, reservations im-poss-i-ble to get. 'Less you're with me.

Now, I used to work in the restaurant biz—not just in the dining room, but in the actual kitchens, right where the fire is—so I'll get you real up close and personal with what goes down on the line. Matter of fact, I did a stint at Bones's own spot in Hell's Kitchen—we'll hop on over there in just a bit—and that means you're gonna get to hear some stories not one other food tour's got on the menu.

We're about a block away now—anybody got a guess where we're headed?

. . . .

Alright! Get it, girl! Somebody's been doing her homework.

Here's a little history for the rest of you. The Library of Spirits's been around since '02; started out as a mixology school, training up bartenders for the city's best watering holes. Really raising the bar. (Sorry, man. I had to!) It's a tiny little spot—six, maybe seven stools—and it's a speakeasy, so don't wake the neighbors. We get in through this indie bookstore right here. They got one of them trick shelves in back; I'll give y'all a chance to see if you can figure out which book gets you in.

Now our guy didn't make it to The Library till 2016, and he wasn't here to shake or stir. He was up in the back dishwashing, going nowhere fast till this one night, when he mixed a drink that changed everything.

Y'all ready? Get excited. Let's head on in.

CHAMPAGNE PROBLEMS

THE BOOKSTORE IS called Bibliomecca and the book *Fantasmagoriana, ou Recueil d'histoires d'apparitions de spectres, revenans, fantômes, etc.* The book is old and French and horrible, all of which makes it somewhat conspicuous on the shelf of brightly colored, contemporary American fiction. When you compound this with its cracking spine, grubby dust jacket, and the fact that it sticks a solid four inches past the lip of the ledge, it seems rather miraculous that more people don't stumble into The Library of Spirits by mistake.

But then, New Yorkers can be remarkably myopic.

The douche weekend manager, Kevin, once told Konstantin that Mary Shelley had borrowed liberally from *Fantasmagoriana* when writing *Frankenstein*, but he had never cared enough to confirm that fact. Kostya had no head for fiction, and no stomach at all for ghost stories. He had tasted enough phantom food over the years to hold the conviction that ghost stories had nothing in common with actual ghosts. Their writers had clearly never come in contact with a spirit; if they had, they wouldn't make every ghost into a haunt, some creepy ghoulie come back from the Dead to wreak havoc and incite fear. That was baloney. The ghosts he encountered (if you could call it that) seemed mild mannered, even sentimental.

DARIA LAVELLE

At least, that's what Kostya inferred from the flavors they left in his mouth:

Poppy-seed piroshky laced with boozy rum raisins, scoop of melting vanilla soft serve, mouthful of watered-down blackcurrant tea. Late April, walking past a funeral home in Sheepshead Bay.

Deep-dish pizza, crust crispy and layered as a croissant, pepperoni and pineapple topping, so hot it burns the roof of your mouth. Two weeks back, riding the northbound Q past Times Square.

Pork dumplings, the wontons deep-fried but eaten refrigerator cold, hint of chive, hoisin, and rice wine vinegar, kick of spicy mustard. Just that morning, stuck in Holland Tunnel traffic on his way to drop off a pallet of cheap vodka for Uncle (not his real uncle) Vanya.

These didn't taste like the throats of people looking for blood. They struck Kostya as nostalgic. Maybe they were hungry, the restaurant options in the Afterlife not quite hitting the spot. Or maybe they just communicated with whatever receiver they had available and his happened to be a tongue. He wished there were a way to ask them, to discover what they wanted him to do with these flavors they kept pushing on him, but the moments were so brief, the tastes so fleeting, that often he barely had time to register what he had been tasting before it vanished without a trace.

Most of the time, the flavors were typical—more dead people than you'd think crave some variety of sandwich—but sometimes they were entirely foreign, hailing from cuisines Kostya hadn't known existed, spices he couldn't have imagined. Even the obscurest tastes would somehow disclose themselves to him, a metaphysical-ethereal-neural miracle that let him intuit the component parts of everything he tasted.

Like the chicken wings smeared with *sambal oelek*, which scorched his throat one night as he traversed Bryant Park by Citi Bike.

Or the warm, heady *ras el hanout*, smothering the beef tagine he got as he handed the rent check to his frowning landlord on the third of the month.

Or the mouth-puckering *amchur* in the *kati* roll that visited him at the Urgent Care clinic, awaiting the results of a strep test (negative).

AFTERTASTE

He'd known the names of those flavors though he didn't know how. He had never tasted them before, had never even seen them on a menu; they were just *there*, identified, companions to the aftertastes, escort ingredients simmering beneath the surface of his consciousness, waiting to be invoked. The bubbling answers to a question.

Too bad it was the wrong question.

Sure, it was nice to know what he was eating, but he'd much rather know why, or who had sent it. What he was supposed to do with it. Without all that, it was just an odd, abnormal quirk, something he'd spent the better part of two decades hiding from people who, once they got a whiff of this thing, would almost certainly insist he be committed (his own mother included).

Not that an institution—or heavy sedation—could stop the aftertastes from coming. Sometimes just hearing about dead people triggered them. Listening to some deceased's name pronounced in reverent tones on the late-night news. Catching an overheard snippet of mournful conversation on the sidewalk. And there it would be: a message from beyond, unfurling on his tongue. Other times, there would be no prompt at all, like that morning: driving bumper-to-bumper and the idiot behind him leaning on his horn and Nirvana screeching on the radio and—*voilà!*—pork dumplings, dead ahead.

Kostya hadn't stopped thinking about them. They'd been good. Like, *really* good. The kind of thing he wished he could taste again. He thought about the filling—it had just a touch of sweetness—across three boroughs as he delivered bottom-shelf booze. He thought about who would have eaten them cold, the wonton skins soggy, as he parked the truck in Uncle Vanya's warehouse in Jersey City (*Vanya's Victuals: Proud Purveyors of Fine Food and Spirits since 1992. Cash Only!*). He contemplated the hoisin and the rice wine vinegar as he rode the PATH back into Manhattan, as he wove through the tourists overrunning Times Square, as he trudged up the steps to his minuscule apartment in Hell's Kitchen. He thought about the banality of the situation—cars, horns, traffic—and about the mad magic—ghosts, real

actual fucking ghosts—as he showered, changed, and went back out to work his night shift dishwashing at The Library of Spirits.

And he was thinking about it now as he wiped another glass dry. There were a dozen clean, wet glasses lined up on the bar in front of him, dripping onto the heirloom oak. Probably making water stains.

Kostya selected another and smiled smugly to himself.

He wasn't supposed to be in the front-of-house, and he liked sticking it to Kevin, who was absurdly easy to hate. Kevin wanted Kostya and his stained T-shirts in the back, where he wouldn't interrupt the high-end gentlemen's club vibe he'd crafted, right down to the self-congratulatory cocktail napkins (*Bravo, Old Chap!* in Edwardian Script, without any hint of irony). When Kostya complained about having to wait until the bartenders had a break in service to haul the dirty glasses back to him (which sometimes wasn't until the very end of his shift), Kevin smiled with all his teeth and said he'd be happy to let him out front if he'd look the part, which in Kevin's world meant spending more on a tailored shirt than Kostya made in a week. Kevin was a real piece of New York shit.

Duncan, the Tuesday night bartender, may have been an *SNL* sketch of a Park Slope hipster—tailored vests, Dublin accent, well-oiled beard—but that also made him look like a guy you could trust to pour your twenty-four-dollar apothecary cocktail. But Duncan had bailed when his girlfriend's water broke, so Kostya got upgraded to the bar—*Kostya*, who, in stark contrast to Duncan, looked like he could only be trusted with the kind of schlock you'd pay a buck fifty for from a Port Authority vending machine, and no promises he wouldn't keep your change.

It hadn't always been like that.

Not that he could ever have driven home handsome, but he used to be able to at least idle in the vicinity of serviceable. There was a certain appeal (boyish face; bright eyes; dark hair) that had gotten him by in the past, and he'd always felt (even if he never acted on it) that if he just lost the extra

AFTERTASTE

weight in his jowls and gut (twenty years and fifteenish pounds' worth of eating his feelings), he'd be a solid six (seven in dim lighting).

But the last few months had been rough, so rough that he really wasn't fit for public consumption: dumped (*yet* again), moping (continuously), ungroomed and unmotivated and seriously unhappy, the weight the least of his issues. His wardrobe (like the T-shirt he wore now—phlegm colored, with Uncle Vanya's sickle-and-shot-glass branding on the chest) had suffered considerably when Alexis, his ex, left him. And his body, grown soft on beer and burgers, had never done well in the standard-issue humidity of Manhattan summers, but had rebelled spectacularly since he'd stopped exercising altogether (coinciding with Alexis's departure and her custody of their dog, Freddie Mercury, whose walks had wholly comprised Kostya's calisthenics). Just now, there were dark rings of sweat migrating down from his armpits, where even the antiest of perspirants couldn't penetrate.

If Kevin were there, he would have murdered Konstantin on the spot, wrung him out with his own dishrag. But Kevin was probably doing lines of coke off somebody's bikini wax in the Hamptons, so fuck him and fuck his rules. Kostya would dry all this right on the bar, in plain sight of anyone with the balls to stroll in and order five minutes before The Library closed, fuck you very much.

OUTSIDE THE BAR, in the stacks of Bibliomecca, a man paced back and forth, casing the spine of *Fantasmagoriana*. He passed its shelf four and a half times before his itchy fingers finally gave in and tugged the book forward. As he watched the bookcase shimmy away from the wall, revealing the dim staircase down to a chamber that smelled like old money and privilege and Scotch—weren't those all the same things?—a wave of relief broke over him.

He'd promised a half-dozen people that he wouldn't drink tonight, and he'd really meant it then, but he didn't mean it now. They must have known,

he told himself, that he wasn't good for his word, not on this. Not on the anniversary. So there he was, minutes to midnight, scurrying down the steps to The Library of Spirits, three hundred and five days sober. Or was it three hundred and four?

Didn't matter. He'd have to start the count over again in the morning. If he woke up.

WHEN KONSTANTIN HEARD the click-latch of shelving, his eyes darted up from the highball he was drying, barely believing his ears.

In the six months he'd been doing this job, not one person had shown up past eleven thirty. It was an unspoken rule. Speakeasies weren't like the sleazy sports bars or collegiate watering holes where you could pop in for a single shot of Fireball on your way to your hairdresser's Uber driver's house party in Alphabet City. They were intimate spaces with exorbitant prices and cocktails that begged to be sipped, savored. He was dying to see what kind of person—money to burn, surely—would roll in at five-of only to lay down thirty bucks for a drink they'd barely get to taste. So imagine Kostya's surprise when down the steps came a guy who looked—was it possible?—rougher even than he did.

The man was a rail. Tall. With dishwater eyes shining beneath a ball cap, and a huge, sad Steven Tyler mouth.

"Uh, hey?" he said.

"Hey." It took Konstantin a second to catch himself. "I mean, hi! Hello! Welcome to The Library. Of Spirits."

Steven Tyler's long-lost twin blinked uncertainly at him. "You still open?"

He nodded at the pile of glasses.

"Yup. For the next"—Kostya consulted his watch—"three minutes."

"Cool." He slid a stool from beneath the bar and settled onto it, sniffing once, loudly. Kostya hoped he wasn't getting comfortable; what he needed