

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Frances Metzman

The Right Seasoning

Charles Sampson's life ran on the juices of his stomach while his wife, Rose, was alive. Food had fulfilled him, rounding his belly and marking events in his life, much like keeping a diary. Rose's death six months ago changed everything. Now food tasted like dust in his mouth, and he'd lost thirty pounds.

As he paced his small box of a living room, he noticed the worn blue carpeting and the washed-out beige wallpaper with the edges curled away from the wall. It occurred to him that every room in his house had been neglected for years with the exception of the gleaming white-tiled kitchen equipped with state of the art appliances.

He recalled watching Rose's sensual movements as she prepared meals, and hungered for her. At mealtimes, his robust wife became a svelte, stunning movie star. Even lovemaking often took place in the kitchen – on the table, and even more exciting, on the hard, cool floor.

A week ago, he'd spoken to his manager about taking time off. During the discussion he'd been unable to focus on his boss' physical presence as he droned on and on, the words flapping out of his mouth like sheets on a clothesline.

"Take some time off, even a month, Charles," his boss had said. "Grieving takes a long time.

Charles felt grateful that no mention had been made of his recent shoddy accounting work, something that distressed him. Numbers now bunched up before his eyes, swimming like a huge school of minnows. He had lost his bearings since Rose passed away. She alone had grounded him with the magical world she'd created with her culinary skills.

Whenever he entered his home the aroma of fish steaming in wine sauce or the blipping sound of a thick pot of pea soup on the stove aroused him. He had to compose himself before entering the kitchen as they always ate first. Once he saw Rose behind the butcher block smiling at him, their home instantly became insulated from the frenzied outside world. His love for his wife was like chocolate mousse slithering down his throat.

"Time off will help get your head on straight," his boss had continued blathering, cocking his head as he stared at Charles. "You're only forty-six, and you have to get on with your life." Then he patted him on the shoulder and left.

Easy advice, Charles thought. Loneliness had brought him to the edge. Everything filled him with dread – blue skies, sunshine or mannequins in store windows. He walked in as straight a line as he could, fearing that zig-zagging across the street might cause him to drown.

He recalled Rose's meat thermometer that registered the stages of doneness. How nice if he had such an instrument to gauge his emotional health on any given day so that he'd know when to stay home and when to go out.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

When Charles was twenty-two fresh out of college, he had joined the Riche and Sumner Accounting Firm. He had approached his work in a plodding but meticulous way. Any semblance of a personal life had gone on hold. His lunches had consisted of slapped together salami sandwiches and his dinners purchased from supermarket salad bars.

He labored at his job for ten years, his sparse social life never bothering him. At that point, he began leading investment seminars, and that's when his life turned around. He met Rose. Her job was to check in clients. Although not attractive in the traditional sense, Rose had intelligent black eyes, a well-proportioned shape to her thick body and a crooked, sweet smile that stunned him. Her dark, shiny, black hair hung loosely down to her shoulders. At the end of the seminar she had stood very close to him. The room shook.

"You were quite dynamic up there on the podium," she had commented. He immediately asked her out.

They went to one movie and a restaurant afterward. Then she invited him to her apartment for dinner. Never before had his uninspired palette been so delighted. His enthusiasm encouraged Rose to cook dinner every night from then on. Charles experienced a spiritual uplifting like never before in his life. Four months later, he proposed. Only the fear of scaring her away stopped him from proposing earlier.

For the fourteen years Charles was married to Rose, her exquisite meals propelled his life into discoveries of distant new stars in an unending universe. Rose had given special meaning to the numbers on his spreadsheets. Halfway through a work day morning he'd unwrap his wife's home-baked anisette biscuits and dunk them into hot coffee. The semi-sweet, sopping cookies fell apart in his mouth like a gentle kiss. Then he'd go back to work like a demon.

Lunch happened promptly at noon every day. Out came the Italian loaf of crusty bread filled with the buttery-soft, buffalo-milk mozzarella topped off with sautéed, red peppers. By the end of the day, he felt energized knowing dinner time was fast approaching. The nights Rose prepared cheese gnocchi in a blush sauce and tender veal paprika for dinner called for champagne and a bubble bath together.

All new accounts were celebrated with a rich creamy rum cake that melted like silk scarves fluttering across his tongue. All the edibles came out of gleaming shiny copper pots and cast iron skillets. He had the notion that these sumptuous dinners coated their vital organs like a buffer against disease and that they'd live forever.

At times, Charles felt blessed they had no children to disturb their tranquil, exquisite world. He tapped his now flat stomach as he recalled Rose's thick, competent hands chopping, slicing and dicing from a large collection of herbs and spices grown in her garden. The scent of oregano, marjoram, basil and parsley dogged his dreams, but since Rose's demise the pleasant dreams turned into a repetitive nightmare of a four foot tongue, lashing at the tasteless air.

Two weeks into his sabbatical, Charles sat at his kitchen table sipping watery coffee. Then he moved restlessly around the large kitchen. He

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

touched the smooth unused butcher-block counter tops that he continued to oil weekly. He sniffed the air for any vestiges of cooking smells still imbedded in the plaster walls, but the fragrances had grown dim. He ran his fingers over the rough bricks of the oven he'd built for Rose to bake the crusty breads. She told him the hard water out of the tap made a difference.

Each brick seemed old and tired now, but once a week the kitchen came to life when he stoked the fire. The warmth brought Rose's spiritual presence into the room. He'd approach the spot that contained the most intense heat and encircle the space with his arms. Then, moving his feet in a sensual rhythm, he felt his wife's body close to him, undulating, following his precise steps.

"Rose," he whispered while he whirled around. "I can't live without you."

And then, they made love against the cool, white tiled wall. Rose seemed to touch his skin in the way she used to and breathed life into him.

After the fire died down, Charles would sit on the floor until the oven grew cold. Then he'd place his cheek against the smoky scented door sometimes falling asleep in that position.

Now he stared at the shelf between the refrigerator and the stove that held the marble urn filled with Rose's ashes. The air shimmered. On the same shelf, a short distance away, sat identical urns of Rose's mother and grandmother. He had promised Rose to always keep their remains together. Nearby were jars of her prized spices and herbs. Where else would he put Rose but in her beloved kitchen.

From his living room window, he stared at the property surrounding his modest bungalow. The house sat on a neat, small square of lawn. In the past, he saw the exact boundaries of his property, like reading a map of his life. Now the sharp definitions blurred, making him feel unhinged.

The doorbell rang. He saw it was his neighbor, Donna. Her husband had died three years ago.

"Coming," he yelled through the door although he didn't move.

Donna had suggested that removing Rose's clothing would help the grieving process. Charles went along, reluctantly because he didn't see grieving as a process. The loss was more – he'd lost the inner core of himself along with his sense of taste, touch and smell.

Charles could not foresee any romantic entanglement with Donna, a woman who made tuna noodle casseroles, meatloaf flavored with ketchup and white bread toast. Donna, a handsome woman and approximately the same size as Rose, always reminded him of fries, fast foods and nuked hot dogs. Even her hands smelled of bland, antibacterial soap. Breathing deeply he recalled how Rose's hand always retained a hint of onions and garlic, scents he dearly loved. He slowly opened the door.

"Hi, Donna."

"You've lost more weight, Chuck." She pushed past him carrying an anemic looking chicken pot pie. He cringed at both the food and her calling him Chuck. Rose always called him Charles.

Donna busied herself at the refrigerator easily finding a spot on the

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

shelf for her pie. Her frown told him she was doing a silent inventory of the bleak landscape of wilted lettuce and half-eaten, frozen dinners on a plastic tray.

Charles found those unappetizing meals better than the gray and white food Donna served. Even his cat refused to eat anything she cooked. Rose, in her crisp, white apron had always created multi-colored hues around herself; vermilion filled the room when she cooked red sauces, dots of purple spun through the air when she stuffed eggplants. Surrounding Donna, he only saw bleached white; white hands and a pasty, white face – despite her attractiveness.

All he wanted to do at the moment was resurrect Rose's spirit that disappeared in Donna's presence. Once more, he wanted to prance around the whirling spiral of heat, summoning a life filled with bright colors and fragrances. He wanted to make love to Rose. But his body felt sucked dry with Donna nearby.

"Would you like to eat now?" Donna asked.

"Can we work first?" He toyed with the idea of claiming illness after they finished. He did not want her pot pie. "Oh, I don't mind." She motioned for Charles to lead the way. He walked down a hallway to the master bedroom. It almost seemed blasphemous to allow Donna to enter. Charles opened the door and steeled himself as they stood in front of a large closet that spanned an entire wall. Donna tried to pat his cheek, but he ducked his head.

"I know you miss your Rose," she said. "You'll be fine."

She pressed his collar down. He recoiled. It made no difference to him that his shirts were not ironed anymore.

Charles watched her from the corner of his eye. Strands of gray ran through her brown hair, and her dull blue eyes scanned the clothing.

Charles removed dresses from hangers while Donna climbed a ladder pulling out hats and handbags from a top shelf. When she wasn't looking, he inhaled the faintest fragrance of rosemary from a sundress. Tears burned his eyes.

No way could he give the wardrobe to strangers. Charles stared at the bed and, a hazy image of Rose appeared and gave him an approving smile. Suddenly, Donna called for help as she pulled out a scruffy cardboard box and teetered on the top step of the ladder. He grabbed the box out of her hands. It brimmed with Rose's recipes.

Donna clung to the sides of the ladder as she descended. "Let's put that with the trash. Just a bunch of food-stained, old recipes. They'll attract ants."

Charles' mouth dried. He could barely swallow. "No." His tone was harsh.

Donna's white coloring grayed around the edges.

"These were recipes handed down to Rose from her mother and grandmother." He quickly excused himself and carried the box into the guest room, locking the door.

Once seated on the floor he flipped through recipe cards, envisioning

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

each dish. Rose's presence hovered over him and his body swelled with anticipation. Unmoving, he waited. Extraneous sounds receded. Bliss crept slowly over him, seeped into his pores. He lifted the box over his head and let the cards fall over him like gentle snowflakes. Stuck in the bottom of the box he saw a note and pulled it out. He sat up and recognized Rose's looped handwriting. His heart pounded.

When Rose was alive he never felt the need to go to the theatre or the movies. She provided all the drama in his life that he needed. Often she fluttered around the kitchen, singing beautiful love songs in a sweet, warbling voice, or told him stories about the cooking talents of her mother and grandmother.

He thought about the game they often played. Rose asked him to guess every single ingredient with each taste. He never guessed them all. She'd wink at him and say how she loved keeping him in suspense and that a woman needed an air of mystery.

"My secret ingredient is love," she'd tease him in her lusty voice.

He refocused his attention on the note clutched in his hand.

"To Charles," he read aloud. "I want you to always be happy even if I have to leave you one day. If anything happens to me there's something you have to know."

At that moment he realized Rose had a sense she might die young like her mother and grandmother. Why had he not seen that? Maybe he could have saved her. The heart attack came on so suddenly.

Suddenly, he heard Donna's impatient voice outside the door. He glanced at the note again.

"Don't go in the kitchen. I'm making you dinner," he said.

When Charles called Donna, she entered the kitchen, her hands and face looked pink and scrubbed. Charles stood at the stove stirring a big stockpot of marinara sauce.

"I packed Rose's clothes in boxes, Chuck, and brought them downstairs. I know this is hard for you." She stared at him like a child waiting for a reward. Somehow her invasiveness didn't make him angry as he thought it would. Charles waved her to sit at the kitchen table.

"Would you like to have some of Rose's clothes?" he asked, surprising himself.

Donna looked coy. "To tell the truth I loved that red floral print dress. We were about the same size."

"Go try it on." Charles squeezed his eyes shut. "I gave that to my wife for an anniversary present."

"You were such a sweet husband."

"Oh, Rose was my life, as you know." He leaned over the stove, wanting to bathe in the scent of oregano.

When Donna returned, Charles stared dumfounded at her. He eyed each tuck, fold, and pleat. Donna's presence receded into the background as the dress took on a life of its own, swaying as though a strong breeze

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

blew through the room. "Sit."

"When did you learn to cook, Chuck?" Her nasal voice hit him like icy water. When Rose spoke, each sentence came out melodious. "I learned a lot from Rose."

"What about my pot pie?"

He coughed. "I'll have it tomorrow for lunch," he lied. "I made this meal to thank you for all the work you've done. It's one of Rose special recipes."

From a small blue cup, he added several pinches of Rose's special ingredient that she had revealed in her note along with directions on where to find it. He inhaled the steam curling up the dampened wall like a man inhaling the spicy scent of his lover's body.

Donna came up behind him. He tensed and spun around.

"What is that seasoning in the blue cup? Is that what's making the sauce smell so good?"

"Rose called it gravy, not sauce," he said taking her arm firmly and leading her back to her chair. "Stay here. I want to surprise you," he said, trying to sound apologetic.

Charles forgot Donna's presence as he returned to the stove and felt Rose's hand guide him. He heated olive oil in a skillet. When the cloves had browned, he spooned them into the pot. After stirring, he ladled the gravy over two big plates of hot pasta and set them on the table. He opened the special bottle of Chianti that he had intended to give Rose on her birthday and sat down.

Donna sighed. "I wish someone loved me as much as you loved your wife."

"I think I'm coming to terms with her death, and you've helped me."

"Really?" Donna's somber expression brightened. "We'll always have her in our hearts, won't we, Chuck?" Donna spoke with determination.

She looked into his eyes, smiled and speared her fork into the pasta, chewing slowly. "This is wonderful," she said, her pace picking up speed with each forkful. When she finished, she asked for a second helping.

Charles hummed as he ate, feeling life expand in his chest once again.

He and Donna did the dishes and then chatted amiably until ten PM. He listened to her talk on about her children, and he spoke of his desire to become an accomplished cook. He walked her to the door. Charles took a step forward and impulsively kissed her parchment white cheek. At first it felt like kissing a ball of cotton. He kept his lips against her cheek until he imagined her flesh taking on the softness of baby skin.

Donna giggled and smoothed his shirt collar and, this time, he didn't flinch. "Oh, Charles, that was so sweet. I was hoping..."

She had called him Charles.

Her eyelids fluttered. That expression reminded him of how his wife sometimes looked when they made love. Charles kept shifting his body to get different views of her. Suddenly, Donna's features drifted out of alignment. A light beamed at her face like a laser that disintegrated and crum-

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

bled concrete. He blinked and watched the pieces of her face slowly transform. Soon Donna's nose took on girth and her eyes went to ink black. A beauty mark appeared on Donna's olive toned cheek, and her pencil-thin, skim milk colored mouth swelled and shaded to terra-cotta. Heat rose from his skin and his knees buckled. He wanted to shout out his wife's name, but contained himself.

Donna said she would come over the next day, and they could have the pot pie together. He agreed and asked her to wait a minute while he made sure he'd shut the burner under the pot. In the kitchen, Charles opened Rose's cool, marble urn on the shelf, reached in and removed a small handful of ashes. He poured it into the blue, ceramic cup, took it to the refrigerator, and dusted the top of the pot pie.

When he returned, to his delight Donna's voice had gained heft, took on depth. Suddenly, he took her in his arms and kissed her passionately. He took her willing hand, and with a little bit of urging he led Rose to the bedroom. Rose would never leave him – never.