

*“O happy Burgundy, which merits
being called the mother of men since
she furnishes from her mammaries
such a good milk.”*

—Erasmus

1

His head was spinning. For three hours now, he had been sitting at the table between the wife of the ambassador to the Netherlands and a film star whose name he dared not ask for fear of offending her. He vaguely remembered having seen her in a period piece where she played the harpsichord in a château full of mirrors and china. He had to lean in a bit to exchange a few words with the guests across from him. Bunches of red and yellow tulips cluttered the tables. People smiled at each other between the stems.

The dinner was sumptuous, as elegant as it was generous. You could read the satisfaction on the faces of the guests. As the feast continued, attitudes relaxed, looks of collusion replaced polite nods, and witty remarks cut the air with great panache. After savoring a duck pâté accompanied by a Bourgogne Aligoté des Hautes Côtes, perch supreme served with a chilled and fragrant Meursault, and crown loin of veal sprinkled with green peppercorns, along with a 1979 Côte de

Beaune Villages, the guests thought the meal was finished. But this was underestimating the hospitality of the venerable knights of the Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin. A cockerel and morel fricassee seasoned with Chambolle-Musigny added to the feast, and no one had trouble finishing it. Meanwhile, the Cadets of Bourgogne, decked out in black caps and wine-merchant aprons, had accompanied the arrival of each dish with a great many wine songs, comical tales, and jovial melodies. Beaming, with sparkling eyes and gleaming whiskers, they bellowed verse after verse at the top of their lungs.

Always drinkers, never drunk,
They go along their way
And thumb their nose at fools who grump.

Always drinkers, never drunk,
They happily proclaim
Their credo without shame.

Always drinkers, never drunk,
They go along their way!

The cheese course was announced. Platters arrived filled with creamy Epoisses washed in marc brandy and aged on rye straw, a soft farmhouse Soumaintrain cheese, mild Saint-Florentin that gave off the scent of raw milk, lightly salted and

creamy Chaources, and supple La-Pierre-qui-Vire. Accompanying them were small rounds of goat's milk cheese, including an especially full-bodied tomme du Poiset. To top it off and honor this Chapter of the Tulips, the hosts had elegantly slipped in some soft Dutch cheese with amber and orange hues. Benjamin Cooker prepared a nice plate for himself, enhancing it with a 1972 Latricières-Chambertin that sensuously tickled his taste buds.

Here come the Cadets of Burgundy,
Sowers of life and of sun;
Lovers of water are mad.

Here come the Cadets of Burgundy,
A bottle in each hand!
Open the door to some fun
Here come the Cadets of Burgundy,
Sowers of life and of sun!

The chamberlain stepped to the podium. The association's slogan—Never whine! Always wine—was inscribed above it in gothic letters.

He tapped the microphone, waited for the brouhaha to subside, and greeted the assembly. He congratulated the chef for the excellent dinner and declared the meeting of the Chapter of Tulips open. Then, in a solemn voice, he briefly praised Benjamin Cooker, introducing him as the most

recognized wine specialist in France and one of the most sought-after winemakers in the world. He spoke of the *Cooker Guide*, whose publication all vintners dreaded, and emphasized that the most recent edition had excellent evaluations of certain Vougeots. Finally, he invited the inductee to join him on the stage, next to the members of the association whose gold and red vestments shimmered in the spotlight.

There was a ripple of applause. Leaning on the edge of the table, Cooker rose slowly. He emptied his glass of water, discreetly loosened his bowtie, tugged down the jacket of his tuxedo, and made his way between the tables. He felt the weight of all the eyes turned toward him and slowed his pace a bit for fear of getting tangled in the train of an evening gown or tripping on a chair as he made his way to the dais. He was welcomed with a quotation recited with good-natured pomposity. The crudeness of its kitchen Latin made all the guests laugh.

Totus mundus trinquat cum illustro pinot

Imbecili soli drink only water!

So, Brother Cellarer, fill our cup

Because, as the saying goes: *in vino veritas*

Cooker was handed a chalice. He emptied it and proceeded to the dubbing, which fell somewhere between schoolboy farce and ritual

solemnity. He swore fidelity to the wines of France and Burgundy and then bowed his head while the grand master of the order tapped his shoulder with a vine shoot.

By Noah, father of the vine
 By Bacchus, god of wine
 By Saint Vincent, patron of vintners
 We dub you Knight of the Tastevin!

Cooker was then invited to take the microphone. He looked over the assembly, and a silence as thick as a wine coulis filled the room. One last clearing of the throat, and his voice resounded under the enormous girders of the wine warehouse.

“Grand Chamberlain of the Order of the Knights of Tastevin, Grand Constable and all of you, knights of the brotherhood, ladies and gentlemen, good evening!”

“First, let me tell you right away how excited I am to be here among you tonight. Could I ever have imagined that I would be crowned with such laurels within the walls of this distinguished château that has so often inspired me? As a child romping in the vineyards of the Médoc and learning to swim in the water holes of the Hourtin pond, I could not see myself playing or living in any place other than that corner of the world, where vineyards were loved with so much passion. For a long time I thought that good wines

were made only there, because you know that the natives of Bordeaux are a bit chauvinist, and my grandfather never drank anything other than his own wine. I found out later that his wine was far from the best, but I must admit that for me, it still has a particular bouquet. It seems that we often pattern our lives after those first impressions of childhood.

“I like to recall that it was a child of your land, a son of Burgundy with visionary talent, who contributed to protecting the Port de la Lune from English invasions. The shores of Bordeaux owe so much to the three fortresses built by Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban. That was another time. The world may never be at peace, but wine abolished our borders long ago. I have traveled extensively in lands even farther from my culture than Burgundy, and I have learned that wine is a universal language. Each time a man raises his glass and empties it, I know what cloth he is cut from, what stuff he is made of. I can guess his disposition, sometimes his sense of humor, his reserve, his impatience or his sense of moderation, his wit or lack of tact. No need to talk further: the drinker reveals himself and sometimes shows what he would like to hide. The older I get, the more I believe that this is one of the greatest revelations of wine.

“To tell you that it is an honor to be named Chevalier du Tastevin in a setting as glorious as

the Vougeot château would be a little banal and superficial. For me it's a sign of friendship more than an honorary distinction. I have too many good memories, between Côte de Nuits and Côte de Beaune, too many faithful readers and vigilant winemakers between Chalon and Mâcon, not to show my pleasure and my great joy in this moment. Finally, since I must conclude, and I promised not to talk too long, I will quote one of your own, Jean-François Bazin, who does honor to the Burgundian parlance and wrote this: 'The Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin is like a ray of sunlight in the darkness of the cellars!' So this is what I say: I'm here in broad daylight, even if I incur the wrath of all my friends in Bordeaux."



The dining room of the Hôtel de Vougeot was still empty at this early-morning hour. With his mind still reeling from alcohol, excitement, songs, and laughter, Benjamin Cooker had slept little. A cool, almost cold shower had restored his calm, and he had stretched his legs walking among the rows of vines that bordered the establishment. In keeping with an old habit, the winemaker had taken a

room in the hotel's annex behind the courtyard. He was pleased with room number nine, whose window with small panes of glass opened onto the vineyards of Vougeot.

"Did you sleep well, sir?" a waitress named Aurélie asked, dipping an Earl Grey teabag into a white porcelain teapot.

"Well, let's say I closed one eye from time to time, miss."

"Did you see what happened across the street? Some kids covered the whole café with graffiti."

Cooker went to the window, parted the lace curtains, and wiped the condensation from the glass. On the facade of the Rendez-vous des Touristes, black letters were clumsily scrawled in spray paint between a wall thermometer and some empty window boxes. He squinted.

*Domine exaudi orationem meam
et clamor meus ad te veniat*

Cooker read the phrase in a whisper. He had studied Latin in his youth.

"It's such a shame to dirty everything that way," Aurélie grumbled, heating up the teapot. "Especially to write such nonsense."

Cooker sat down before his plate and observed the hotel employee. He had known her as a girl and suddenly realized that she had become a woman in the two years since he had last seen

her. Her ruddy cheeks had become more defined, and mascara accentuated her long black eyelashes. Her hair was pulled back and showed off her forehead. The somewhat awkward and pudgy apprentice who used to hide her eyes behind long bangs was now a lovely waitress whose precise gestures and alluringly delicate nose added to her charm.

“I know it’s those boys from Dijon who did it,” she went on as she placed the teapot on the table.

“Are you sure?”

“Who else could it be? The neighborhoods over there are full of graffiti like that. You wouldn’t believe what it’s like near the train station. And what really kills me is that it’s not even French. I don’t understand a word of it.”

“It’s Latin.”

“Ah, I was sure it wasn’t French.”

Cooker breathed in the aroma of bergamot and took several swallows, burning his tongue. He put his cup down and slipped his coat on.

“Have a nice day, Aurélie. I’ll hold onto my key, because I might be getting back late.”

He crossed the road and stood in front of the defaced wall of the café. The paint was dry, and only a few letters had dribbled down the yellowish stucco. He took out his notebook and wrote down the Latin phrase, taking care to translate it accurately.

Lord, hear my prayer.
Let my cry for help to reach you.

As soon as he entered the café, all conversation stopped. Cooker sat down nonchalantly at the first table and ordered an espresso. The owner brought him a small cup of very bitter coffee, which Cooker tried to sweeten with three cubes of sugar. The café patrons started talking again, but quietly and warily. Three men who looked like retirees were filling out their trifecta sheets and muttering. At the end of the bar, two young sporty types with low foreheads and protruding lower lips sipped beer and whispered to each other. They were wearing similar royal-blue tracksuits. Next to Cooker, a homely couple sat across from each other in silence; the woman, whose triple chin spilled over the collar of a knitted vest, was shooting sidelong, slightly fearful glances across the room, while her husband was picking his nose with satisfactory results.

“May I borrow your newspaper?” Cooker asked.

“Go right ahead!”

He carefully pushed aside his cup and opened *Le Bien Public* on the table. The snowstorms in the Nuits-Saint-Georges were the lead story in the paper. Cooker perused an article on local sandblasters and the weather forecast for Easter week. On page three, he happened upon his picture, in black and white, which took up two columns.

The slightly overexposed photo, taken during his speech, made him look like a jovial and cunning horse trader at a country fair. It did not at all resemble him and made him smile, as did the article's headline: "Winemaker Cooker gets toast, is spared roast at multicourse Vougeot fête."

The couple—farmers, Cooker presumed—watched him without uttering a word. The chatter at the bar grew livelier. "They're real bastards from the city pulling that shit." Gray coils of cigarette smoke floated upward in the harsh ceiling light.

"Worse than dogs lifting their legs!"

"What do you mean, René?"

From his vantage point, Cooker could see a fine foam moustache under the nose of one of the beer drinkers.

"They write their crap like they piss against a wall!"

"Ah, I get it now."

The café owner turned on the radio. It was a nostalgic channel that seemed to crackle from beyond the grave. A duo from the seventies chirped with optimism in the sputtering of the radio.

"It's taking the cops long enough to get here, as if they had anything else to do."

Then they took out a game of dice and a green felt cloth.

"All the same, if I catch those little shits—"

Everyone counted their tokens without paying attention to the refrain, in which “Venice” rhymed with “Paris.” The barely snuffed-out cigarette butts continued to smolder in the ashtrays.

“The cops?”

“Hell no. The little shits who wrote all this trash—we’re gonna smash their faces in, believe me!”

Cooker turned to the couple and said, “Excuse me for interrupting. Did that happen last night?”

“The scribblings?” grumbled the old woman. “We saw them this morning. Definitely weren’t there yesterday, were they, Emile?”

“Can you tell me where Vougeot’s priest lives?”

“There ain’t no priest in Vougeot and no church, neither.”

“As a matter of fact, now that you mention it, I can’t remember seeing a bell tower,” Cooker said, pursing his lips. “I hadn’t even paid attention.”

The woman rubbed her triple chin and looked at him intently. “In Vougeot, you don’t get married, and you don’t die.”

“That seems rather reasonable to me,” Cooker smiled as he stood up. He left two euros on the table, nodded politely, and took his leave.

He walked back up the main street toward the river. Slabs of frozen snow edged the road. On the parapet of the bridge that spanned the Vouge, the same black writing ran across the cement.

*Non abscondas faciem tuam a me;
in quacunq̄ue die tribulor*

Cooker took out his fountain pen and jotted down the phrase before translating it.

Do not turn your face from me
In my day of trouble.

He continued walking to the small locks that constricted the river, abruptly transforming it into a narrow channel. He stopped for a moment to look at the walls on the water's edge, which were covered with thick patches of moss. Then he turned around to go to the grocery store. He bought the paper, a box of cashews, and a postcard. It was only upon leaving the store that he noticed the graffiti running the length of a low wall near the ancient washhouse.

*Inclina ad me aurem tuam:
in quacunq̄ue die invocavero te,
volciter exaudi me.*

Again he reached for his notebook and transcribed the phrase diligently, despite the biting cold, which was numbing his fingers.

Incline your ear to listen
When I call,
be quick to answer

A gust of wind stung his face, and he pulled his collar up to his ears. In the distance, crows squawked in the vines. Their stricken cawing dissolved in a milky sky that was so low it merged with the snow-powdered earth.

Cooker shivered.