

THE
LANGUAGE
OF
FOOD

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'Novelettes of romance. Have you none of those for me?' I blink and try to compose my thoughts. Has he even read my letter? Or the fifty poems in my best copperplate that I delivered, by hand, six weeks ago? If not, why did he write and invite me to meet him? To my chagrin, I feel my throat close up, my bottom lip waver.

'Yes,' continues Mr Longman, speaking as if to himself. 'I could consider a gothic romance.'

I brace myself, biting down on my wavering lip. A spark of something – fury? Irritation? – leaps inside me. 'Some of my poems have been published more recently, in the *Sudbury Pocket Book* and the *Ipswich Journal*. I am told they are good poems.' My burst of audacity surprises me. But then Mr Longman shrugs and his eyes slide to the ceiling, which is low and sagging.

'It is no good bringing me poetry! Nobody wants poetry now. If you cannot write me a little gothic romance ...' His palms are open and splayed upon his desk in a gesture of helplessness.

I stare at his empty palms and feel my insides – my spirit, my audacity – being scooped out and cast away. Ten years of labour – in vain. The emotion, the effort, everything that has been sacrificed in the writing of my poems, all for nothing. Perspiration runs in rivulets down the sides of my ribcage and I feel a shortness of breath as if my throat is constricting. *The painful beatings of a breaking heart are hush'd to stillness ...*

Mr Longman scratches noisily at his head and continues staring at the ceiling. The soles of his shoes tap at the floorboards beneath his desk, as if he has forgotten my presence. Or perhaps he is deciding whether I can be trusted to write a gothic romance. I give a discreet cough which sounds more like a harried gulp. 'Sir, could I possibly have my poems back?'

He claps his hands and jumps to his feet so abruptly the gold chains of his fob watch jangle and the silver buckles on his shoes rattle. 'On second thoughts, I have sufficient novelists at present. So do not bring me a novelette.'

'My manuscript? Did you not receive it, sir?' The words limp from my throat, barely audible. Is it possible he's lost my poems? Carelessly mislaid them among his maps and papers? And now he is about to dismiss me ... empty-handed. Not even the promise of a commissioned novelette. *I told you so*, whispers my voice of doubt. *Imposter ... imposter ... Surely your puny efforts at poetry have been put upon the fire ...* I scan the room, instinctively seeking out a grate, a wisp of my verse among the ashes.

All of a sudden Mr Longman claps his hands a second time. I look at him, wondering if this is his manner of dismissal. But he is staring at me, his eyes alight, his hands clasped. 'A cookery book!'

I frown in confusion. The man is both rude *and* obscure, I think. Who on earth does he think I am? I may be thirty-six and unmarried, my dress may be streaked with sweat, but I am no aproned household servant.

'Go home and write me a cookery book and we might come

to terms. Good day Miss Acton.’ His hands splash over the detritus of his desk and for a moment I think he is hunting for my poems. But then he gestures at the door.

‘I do not – cannot – cook,’ I say lamely, moving like a somnambulist towards the door. The inside of my head is dulled with disappointment. Every bit of bravura slipped clean away.

‘If you can write poems, you can write recipes.’ He taps on the glass face of his pocket watch and puts it to his ear with a grunt of irritation. ‘This infernal heat has lost me valuable time. Good day!’

I have a sudden urge to be gone, away from the monstrous stench of London, away from the humiliation of having my poems spurned for something as frivolous and functional as a cookery book. I hurry down the stairs, tears crowding in my eyes.

Suddenly Mr Longman’s voice rings out: ‘Neat and elegant, Miss Acton. Bring me a cookery book as neat and elegant as your poems.’