

The Belly of Paris (Modern Library Classics)

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Part of Emile Zola's multigenerational Rougon-Macquart saga, *The Belly of Paris* is the story of Florent Quenu, a wrongly accused man who escapes imprisonment on Devil's Island. Returning to his native Paris, Florent finds a city he barely recognizes, with its working classes displaced to make way for broad boulevards and bourgeois flats. Living with his brother's family in the newly rebuilt Les Halles market, Florent is soon caught up in a dangerous maelstrom of food and politics. Amid intrigue among the market's sellers—the fishmonger, the charcutier, the fruit girl, and the cheese vendor—and the glorious culinary bounty of their labors, we see the dramatic difference between "fat and thin" (the rich and the poor) and how the widening gulf between them strains a city to the breaking point.

Translated and with an Introduction by the celebrated historian and food writer Mark Kurlansky, *The Belly of Paris* offers fascinating perspectives on the French capital during the Second Empire—and, of course, tantalizing descriptions of its sumptuous repasts. Emile Zola (1840–1902) was born in Paris and worked as a journalist before turning to fiction. With the publication of *L'Assommoir*, he became the most famous writer in France. His work has influenced authors from August Strindberg to Theodore Dreiser to Tom Wolfe.

Mark Kurlansky is the *New York Times* bestselling and James A. Beard Award-winning author of *The Last Fish Tale*, *The Big Oyster*, *Cod*, and *Salt*, among other books. He has translated numerous pieces from French, Spanish, and Italian for his anthology of food writing *Choice Cuts*. He lived in Paris for ten years but now resides in New York City. Chapter One

In the silence of a deserted avenue, wagons stuffed with produce made their way toward Paris, their thudding wheels rhythmically echoing off the houses sleeping behind the rows of elm trees meandering on either side of the road. At the pont de Neuilly, a cart full of cabbages and another full of peas met up with eight carts of turnips and carrots coming in from Nanterre. The horses, their heads bent low, led themselves with their lazy, steady pace, a bit slowed by the slight uphill climb. Up on the carts, lying on their stomachs in the vegetables, wrapped in their black-and-gray-striped wool coats, the drivers slept with the reins in their fists. Occasionally the light from a gas lamp would grope its way through the shadows and brighten the hobnail of a boot, the blue sleeve of a blouse, or the tip of a hat poking from the bright bloom of vegetables—red bouquets of carrots, white bouquets of turnips, or the bursting greenery of peas and cabbages.

All along the road and all the nearby routes, up ahead and farther back, the distant rumbling of carts told of other huge wagons, all pushing on through the darkness and slumber of two in the morning, the sound of passing food lulling the darkened town to stay asleep.

Madame François's horse, Balthazar, an overweight beast, led the column. He dawdled on, half asleep, flicking his ears until, at rue de Longchamp, his legs were suddenly frozen by fear. The other animals bumped their heads into the stalled carts in front of them, and the column halted with the clanking of metal and the cursing of drivers who had been yanked from their sleep. Seated up top, Madame François, with her back against a plank that held the vegetables in place, peered out but saw nothing by the faint light of the little square

lantern to her left, which barely lit one of Balthazar's glistening flanks.

"Come on, lady, let's keep moving," shouted one of the men who was kneeling in turnips. "It's just some drunken idiot."

But as she leaned over she thought she made out a dark patch of something blocking the road, about to be stepped on by the horse.

"You can't just run people over," she said, jumping down from her wagon.

It was a man sprawled across the road, his arms stretched out, facedown in the dust. He seemed extraordinarily long and as thin as a dry branch. It was a miracle that Balthazar had not stepped on him and snapped him in two. Madame Fran ois thought he was dead, but when she crouched over him and took his hand, she found it was still warm.

"Hey, mister," she called softly.

But the drivers were growing impatient. The one kneeling in the vegetables shouted in a gruff voice, "Give it up, lady. The son of a bitch is plastered. Shove him in the gutter."

In the meantime, the man had opened his eyes. He stared, motionless, at Madame Fran ois, with a look of bewilderment. She too thought that he must be drunk.

"You can't stay there, you're going to get yourself run over," she told him. "Where were you going?"

"I don't know," the man replied in a feeble voice. Then, with great effort and a worried face, "I was going to Paris, and I fell. I don't know . . ."

Now she could see him better, and he was pathetic with his black pants and black overcoat, so threadbare that they showed the contour of his bare bones. Underneath a hat of coarse black cloth that he had pulled down as though afraid of being recognized, two large brown eyes of a rare gentleness could be seen on a hard and tormented face. Madame Fran ois thought that this man was much too feeble to have been drinking.

"Where in Paris were you going?" she asked.

He didn't answer right away. This cross-examination was worrying him. After a moment's reflection, he cautiously replied, "Over there, by Les Halles."

With great difficulty he had almost stood up again and seemed anxious to be on his way. But Madame Fran ois noticed him trying to steady himself against one of the wagon shafts.

"You're tired?"

"Very tired," he mumbled.

Adopting a gruff tone, as though annoyed, and giving him a shove, she shouted, "Go on, move it! Get up in my wagon! You're wasting my time. I'm going to Les Halles, and I can drop you off with my vegetables."

When he refused, she practically threw him onto the turnips and carrots in the back with her thick arms and shouted impatiently, "That's enough! No more trouble from you. You're beginning to annoy me, my friend. Didn't I tell you that I'm headed to the market anyway? Go to sleep up there. I'll wake you when we get there."

She climbed back up, sat sideways with her back against the plank again, and took Balthazar's reins. He started up sleepily, twitching his ears. The other carts followed. The column resumed its slow march in the dark, the sound of wheels on the paving stones again thudding against the sleeping housefronts. The wagoneers, wrapped in their coats, returned to their snoozing. The one who had called out to Madame Françoise grumbled as he lay down, "Damn, does she have to take care of every bum? You are something, lady."

The carts rolled on, the horses, with their heads bowed, leading themselves. The man Madame Françoise had picked up was lying on his stomach, his long legs lost in the turnips, which filled the back of the cart, while his head was buried in the spreading carrot bunches. With weary outstretched arms he seemed to hug his bed of vegetables for fear a jolt of the cart would send him sprawling in the road. He watched the two endless columns of gaslights ahead of him, which vanished in the distance into a confusion of other lights. A large white cloud nuzzled the horizon, so that Paris appeared to be sleeping in a glowing mist illuminated by all the lamps.

"I'm from Nanterre. My name is Madame Françoise," the woman said after a moment's silence. "Ever since I lost my poor husband, I go to Les Halles every morning. It's a hard life, but what can you do. And you?"

"My name is Florent, I come from far away," the stranger replied awkwardly. "I'm really sorry, but I'm so exhausted that it's hard to talk."

He did not want to say any more, so Madame Françoise became silent too, letting the reins fall loosely on the back of Balthazar, who seemed to know every paving stone along the route.

In the meantime, Florent, staring at the broadening sparkle of Paris in the distance, contemplated the story that he had decided not to tell the woman. Sentenced to Cayenne¹ for his involvement in the events of December,² he had escaped to Dutch Guiana, where he had drifted for two years, filled with a passion to return to France but also afraid of the imperial police. He was about to enter the great city that he had so deeply missed and longed for. He told himself that he would hide there, returning to the peaceful existence he had once lived. The police knew nothing. Everyone would assume that he had died over there. He thought about his arrival at Le Havre, where he had

landed with only fifteen francs hidden in the corner of a handkerchief. It had been enough for a coach to Rouen, but from there he had had to make his way on foot, having only thirty sous left. At Vernon he had spent his last two sous on bread. After that he couldn't remember anything. He thought he had slept in a ditch for several hours, and he might have shown a policeman the papers with which he had supplied himself. But these images danced vaguely in his head. He had come all the way from Vernon with nothing to eat, accompanied by fits of anger and sudden despondency that had made him chew the leaves on the hedges he passed along the way. He had kept walking despite stomach cramps, his belly knotted, his vision blurred, his feet advancing, unconsciously drawn by the image of Paris, so far away, beyond the horizon, calling to him, waiting for him.

On a very dark night, he finally reached Courbevoie. Paris looked like a patch of starry sky that had fallen onto a blackened corner of the earth. It had a stern look, as though angered by Florent's return. Then he felt faint, his wobbly legs almost collapsing as he walked down the hill. While crossing the pont de Neuilly, he supported himself, clinging to the stone railings, and leaned over to look at the inky waves of the rolling Seine between the thickly grown banks. A red signal lantern on the water followed him with its bloodshot eye. Now he had to pull himself up to climb to Paris at the top of the hill. But the boulevard seemed endless. The hundreds of leagues he had already traveled seemed as nothing compared to this. In this last stretch he was losing faith that he would ever reach the top of the hill with its crown of lights.

The flat boulevard stretched before him with its lines of tall trees and squat houses. Its wide grayish sidewalks were blotchy with the shadows of branches. The darkened gaps where the boulevard met the side streets were all in silence and shade. Only the stumpy little yellow flames of the gas lamps standing straight at regular intervals gave some life to this desolate wasteland. And Florent seemed to be making no progress, the boulevard growing longer and longer and carrying Paris away into the depths of the night. In time he began hallucinating that the gas lamps on both sides of him were running away, carrying the road off with them, until, completely losing his bearings, he fell on a pile of paving stones.

And now he was gently tossing and turning on his bed of vegetables, which felt more like a soft feather bed. He raised his head a little to watch the incandescent mist spread over the black silhouettes of the rooftops just visible along the horizon. He was approaching his destination, being carried there with nothing more to do than absorb the slow-motion bumps of the wagon, and, freed from the pain of fatigue, he now suffered only hunger. But his hunger was reawakened and becoming unbearable. His limbs had fallen asleep, and he could feel only his stomach, cramped and twisted as though by a red-hot iron. The ripe smell of vegetables that surrounded him, the piercing freshness of the carrots, made him almost faint.

With all his might he pushed his chest into this deep bed of food, trying to pull in his stomach as tightly as he could to suppress its loud rumblings. Behind him, the nine other wagons piled high with cabbages, mountains of peas, heaps of artichokes, lettuce, celery, and leeks, seemed to be slowly gaining on him as though to overtake him as he was racked with starvation and bury him in an avalanche of food.

They came to a stop, and deep voices could be heard. It was customs inspectors examining the wagons. And so Florent, his teeth clenched, at last entered Paris, passed out on a pile of carrots.

"Hey, you up there!" Madame Fran ois abruptly shouted. As he didn't move, she climbed up and shook him. Florent propped himself up. As he had slept, the hunger pains had stopped, but he was disoriented.

The woman made him get down, saying, "Can you help me unload?"

He helped her.

A heavysset man with a walking stick and a felt hat, with a badge on the left lapel of his coat, was growing angry and tapping the tip of his stick on the sidewalk. "Come on, come on, faster than that. How many meters do you have there? Four, isn't it?"

He gave Madame Fran ois a ticket, and she took a large coin out of her canvas bag. He moved on to vent his anger and tap the tip of his stick farther down the line. The market woman took Balthazar by the bridle and backed him up until the wagon wheels were against the curb. Then she opened the back of the wagon, marked off her four meters of curb with pieces of straw, and asked Florent to start passing the vegetables down. She arranged them in her allotted space with an artistic flair, so that the tops formed a green wreath around the bunches. She arranged the display with dazzling speed in the dank morning light that made it resemble a tapestry with geometric splashes of color.

Other Books

New York Magazine, New York magazine was born in 1968 after a run as an insert of the New York Herald Tribune and quickly made a place for itself as the trusted resource for readers across the country. With award-winning writing and photography covering everything from politics and food to theater and fashion, the magazine's consistent mission has been to reflect back to its audience the energy and excitement of the city itself, while celebrating New York as both a place and an idea.

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