At the End of the Long Table

From a place at the table to a place in someone's life



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INTRO

I positioned the first chair exactly thirty centimetres from the wall. The second went a little closer to the table because one of the floorboards was uneven, and I didn't want anyone wobbling during dinner. I spent longer on the third chair. Not because there was anything wrong with it. I simply couldn't decide whether to place it opposite the window or leave it between the other two.

I knew it was absurd. I was thirty-six years old, I owned a ceramics studio, I had a loan for a kiln whose monthly instalments reminded me of their existence more reliably than an alarm clock, and here I was agonising over the position of a chair as though my future depended on it.

In a way, it did.

The long oak table occupied almost the entire centre of the studio. I'd bought it from a carpenter near Świdnica who had spent half an hour trying to convince me that the tabletop was too heavy for one woman. I hadn't intended to carry it myself, but I liked the fact that it looked like something nobody could easily move. After years of working on other people's commissions, I needed something permanent. A place where I decided what was made, who came through the door, and when it was finally time to close up.

Beyond the windows, November rain blurred the view of the hills. The old brick studio stood on the outskirts of a small town near Wałbrzych. It had once housed a carpentry workshop. Now it smelled of clay, wood, the warmth of the kiln, and a hint of rosemary that I was drying above the kitchen counter.

I set the last plate on the table. It had an irregular rim and a glaze the colour of dark wine. Under the lamplight, its surface looked almost velvety.

These were exactly the kinds of things I wanted to make more of.

Not tableware ordered in batches of a hundred identical pieces. Not elegant dinner sets designed to look good in catalogues. I wanted ceramics that someone would touch before taking their first bite, noticing the weight of a cup and the uneven curve of its rim. I wanted to see my creations become part of real encounters between people.

That was why I'd come up with the dinners.

Twelve places at one table. Once a month. Simple food prepared on the premises, unhurried conversations, and tableware created especially for each evening. The first dinner was scheduled for three weeks from now.

There were already nine names on the guest list.

All I was missing was a cook.

My phone vibrated on the windowsill.

"Apolonia, please, I'm begging you, pick up," Marta said before I could even say hello.

My friend had a talent for beginning conversations halfway through the story.

"If you're calling about the chairs, I've got them all now."

"I'm calling about a man who might save you."

"I don't need saving."

"You need someone who can cook dinner for twelve people without burning down your kitchen or demanding half the proceeds."

I ran a finger along the rim of the plate.

"That much is true."

"His name is Wawrzyniec Maj. Forty-one, an excellent chef, used to work in Wrocław. He's doing his own thing now. I've spoken to him. He's interested."

"What exactly does 'interested' mean?"

"It means he'll be at your place in fifteen minutes."

I straightened.

"Marta."

"Before you start, I should warn you that I sent him your proposal. Just that short description you wrote yourself."

"You were supposed to talk to me first."

"I tried for four days. Every time, you told me you had everything under control."

I looked at the nine names pinned to the corkboard.

"Because I do."

"Then treat it as a conversation with someone who wants to get to know you professionally."

"I don't like surprises."

"I know. That's why I've given you fifteen minutes' warning."

She hung up before I could answer.

I stood motionless for a moment, my phone in my hand. I'd spent six months building this place according to my own vision. Every decision had been mine, from the colour of the walls to the type of wood used for the shelves. Even when money was tight, there was satisfaction in knowing that I didn't have to convince anyone.

Now a strange man was about to walk in and start talking about food, something I couldn't prepare to the standard I expected from these evenings.

I didn't like depending on other people's skills.

Especially when I genuinely needed them.

I managed to put away the cardboard box from my latest glaze delivery, wash my hands, and tidy the hair I'd loosely tied at the nape of my neck before I heard a knock.

I opened the door.

The man standing on the threshold wore a dark coat, his hair was damp, and he held a paper bag in one hand. He didn't look like someone who had come to present his achievements. He looked more like a man returning from the market who had decided along the way to check whether a studio really existed at the address he'd been given.

"Apolonia Kłos?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Wawrzyniec Maj. Marta says you need a cook."

"Marta sometimes mistakes necessity for her own enthusiasm."

He smiled faintly.

"I know the feeling. She told me I absolutely had to see your table."

I stepped aside to let him in. He took off his coat, carefully shook the water from its sleeves, and only then looked around the room.

His attention didn't go first to the kiln or the shelves filled with ceramics.

He looked at the laid table.

"Twelve places?" he asked.

"Exactly."

He moved closer. He stopped at the end of the tabletop, where I'd placed a single cup from a collection I hadn't yet finished.

"Beautiful," he said.

"Thank you."

He reached for the cup but looked at me first, silently asking permission. I nodded. He turned it between his fingers, tested its weight, and settled it into his palm so naturally that he might have used similar pieces every day.

"It's not just about the appearance," he observed. "It feels good in the hand. Someone will want to hold on to it longer than necessary."

That was the first thing he'd said that evening that genuinely surprised me.

"That was exactly what I wanted," I replied.

"Then perhaps we'll get along after all."

He put the cup back precisely where he'd found it.

Only then did I notice that he was in no hurry to present his own ideas. He watched carefully, as though he wanted to understand the place before making any suggestions. He had a calm, low voice and fine lines around his eyes that deepened when he smiled. He wasn't the sort of man who immediately took over an entire room. And yet his presence had changed something in it.

"What have you brought?" I asked, indicating the bag.

"Bread. Cheese. Pears."

"For a job interview?"

"More for a conversation around a table. I don't like talking about food on an empty stomach."

I laughed before I had time to decide whether I wanted to show him that I liked him.

He took out a small loaf, two pieces of cheese, and several ripe pears. He arranged everything on a board I handed him. When he reached for the knife, he paused.

"May I?"

"Of course."

He sliced the bread unhurriedly, with economical movements. He made no attempt to turn such a simple task into a performance. He handed me the first slice, topped with cheese and a thin sliver of pear.

I tasted it.

The flavour was delicate, salty and sweet at the same time. Ordinary, yet unexpectedly distinctive.

"Good," I admitted.

"That's a relief. I haven't got anything more persuasive to offer at the moment."

He didn't sit down until I indicated a chair. He chose the one at the end of the table, by the window. The place I'd left empty all day, uncertain whether a chair should even be there.

"Marta mentioned that you have a very detailed plan," he said.

"I do."

"I'd like to hear it. But before we begin, there's one thing I want to know."

I set down my cup.

"What's that?"

"Is this table meant to serve your vision, or the people who will sit around it?"

I didn't like the question. Not because it was rude. Quite the opposite: he'd asked it calmly, without the slightest hint of provocation. And yet it touched something I couldn't immediately put into words.

"The two aren't mutually exclusive," I answered.

"I hope not."

Outside, the rain grew heavier. Wawrzyniec broke off a piece of bread and waited for my answer as though it genuinely mattered to him.

I looked at the man I hadn't intended to invite and at the chair I'd wanted to move against the wall barely an hour earlier.

For the first time in a long while, I felt that someone might see something in my plan that I hadn't yet recognised myself.

And that was precisely what made it feel dangerous.

Because if I let him stay at this table, would I also be able to make room for him in the part of my life where, until now, I'd never allowed anyone to enter?

Chapter 1 - Terms at One Table

The following morning, I found a note on the oak tabletop, written in Wawrzyniec's distinctive, slightly slanted handwriting.

"Twelve people. One dinner. No guests made to feel less important than the plates."

Below it, he'd added his phone number and a short message: "If you still want to discuss working together, I'll be there on Thursday at ten."

It was Thursday, 9:17 a.m.

I wondered whether to interpret this as a display of confidence or a simple oversight. Wawrzyniec had left late the previous evening, after almost two hours of conversation during which we'd managed to argue about the number of courses, the temperature of the plates, and whether it made sense to serve food on ceramics that guests could purchase. We hadn't settled anything, though. I'd merely said that I needed to think over his suggestions.

Apparently, he'd decided that one night would be enough.

My phone vibrated before I could decide whether to call him.

"I can bring vegetables for a trial run. I just need confirmation that you won't throw me out."

I smiled despite myself.

"No promises. Come at ten."

His reply came almost immediately.

"I'll take my chances."

I put down my phone and looked around the studio. Everything appeared different in the morning light than it had during his first visit. Unfinished bowls lay on the worktables, brushes were drying beside the sink, and through the half-open storeroom door I could see boxes filled with clay. This wasn't a place prepared for receiving clients. It was my place, with all its disorder, effort, and imperfections, none of which I intended to conceal from anyone.

At exactly ten, I heard a car arrive.

Wawrzyniec came in carrying two crates of vegetables. He wore a dark jumper, his sleeves rolled up, and boots still marked with mud. He didn't look particularly concerned that he was crossing the threshold for the second time into a place belonging to a woman who hadn't yet decided whether she wanted to work with him.

"Good morning, Apolonia," he said.

I stopped beside the table.

"Are we on first-name terms now?"

"Yesterday you told me you don't like being called Ms Kłos. I thought it was worth remembering."

I had no ready response. I really had told him that. He also remembered that I couldn't stand parsley being added to everything purely for decoration. I found it difficult to decide whether that kind of attentiveness was charming or dangerous.

"And what if I don't remember giving you permission to use my first name?"

"I can start again."

"That won't be necessary."

He placed the crates on a clear worktop and took out carrots, celeriac, beetroot, and several small pumpkins.

"I'd like to see how your dishes behave with hot food."

"My dishes behave perfectly well."

"I believe you. I want to know how the food behaves."

I went over to the table and took out the binder I'd prepared earlier. Inside were the schedule for the first dinner, a sample menu, a budget, and a draft of the invitations. Preparing those materials had taken more evenings than I cared to admit.

"Before we start cooking anything, we need to establish some rules," I said.

Wawrzyniec looked at the binder, then at me.

"Sounds serious."

"Because I take it seriously."

"So do I."

I opened the first page.

"The dinners will take place here. Twelve people, once a month. One shared menu, with no unexpected last-minute changes. Each gathering will be connected to a different collection of ceramics. Guests will have the opportunity to learn how the pieces are made and purchase selected items."

"And the food?"

"Obviously, it'll be important."

"I didn't ask whether it would be important. I asked what place it would have."

I looked up.

"I don't understand."

He rested his hands on the edge of the table, keeping a comfortable distance between us.

"If you invite people to dinner, the food can't simply be a way of displaying your ceramics. People arrive hungry. They bring their stories, their expectations, sometimes a bad day. They need to receive something more than a beautifully designed exhibition."

I felt the familiar urge to defend myself. For years, clients had told me that my pieces were too simple, too irregular, or not elegant enough. Now someone was suggesting that even in my own studio, I might be turning them into mere decoration.

"I'm not organising an exhibition," I replied coolly. "I want to create an experience people won't find in a restaurant."

"Then we want similar things."

"It doesn't sound that way."

"Because we've started by arguing about who gets to control the details instead of what we want to offer our guests."

I closed the binder.

"Wawrzyniec, I've known you since yesterday. I can't hand over half my venture just because you know how to make good sandwiches."

He laughed softly.

"Were they that good?"

"Don't change the subject."

His expression grew serious.

"I'm not asking for half your studio. I'm asking to take responsibility for my own work. If I'm going to prepare the food, I need the freedom to create the menu and the right to say when an idea won't work."

"And if I disagree with your judgement?"

"We'll talk. You understand ceramics, I understand cooking. We don't have to pretend we both know everything."

There was nothing condescending in his voice. That irritated me more than if he'd tried to dominate the conversation. It would have been easier to refuse an arrogant man. Wawrzyniec, however, spoke calmly, and his arguments made sense.

For a moment, we studied each other across the table.

"I have one condition," he finally said.

"Only one?"

"To begin with."

I folded my arms.

"I'm listening."

"During dinner, nobody gets treated like a potential customer. If someone becomes interested in the ceramics, wonderful. But I don't want you interrupting a conversation about the food to explain how much a plate costs."

"I'm not planning to push anything on anyone."

"I believe you. I just want us both to know where the boundary lies."

For a moment, I wanted to tell him that I alone decided where the boundaries were in my studio. Instead, I opened the binder and wrote his condition in the margin.

"All right. But in that case, I have a condition too. You don't change the nature of the event without discussing it with me. No extra place settings, no sponsored products, and no increasing the guest list because someone important wants to bring friends."

Wawrzyniec nodded.

"Fair enough."

"And no restaurant tricks."

"What exactly do you mean by tricks?"

"Smoke, foam, three leaves on an enormous plate, and a five-minute explanation of why the portion is so small."

He studied me for a moment, then burst into genuine laughter.

"Then you've found the right man. I hate having to explain to people why they're supposed to be hungry."

His laughter changed the atmosphere. I noticed that my shoulders had relaxed. It didn't mean I'd stopped being cautious, but for the first time, I allowed myself to consider that our conversation might lead somewhere other than a battle to prove who was right.

We moved to the kitchen area of the studio. Wawrzyniec asked for two dishes, a knife, and access to the oven. He made no comment on the equipment, although I knew it was far from a professional kitchen. He checked the oven temperature, examined the worktop, and asked where I kept the salt.

"On the left, in the cupboard," I answered.

He opened the correct door without another question.

"And why did you choose burgundy?" he asked, indicating the plates.

"Because it reminds me of clay after its first firing. Before everything gets covered with glaze."

"So it's not about wine?"

"Not everything has to be about food."

"True."

His answer was so straightforward that I gave him a suspicious look.

"You're not going to argue?"

"Not about everything."

He worked efficiently, chopping vegetables, arranging them on a baking tray, and mixing olive oil with salt and herbs. After a while, he handed me a spoon and asked me to taste the sauce he'd prepared.

lt was too sour.

l told him so without hesitation.

"I know," he replied. "I wanted to see whether you'd notice."

"Are you testing me?"

"I'm finding out how you talk about something you don't like."

"You could have simply asked."

"Then you'd have told me you're always honest."

l handed back the spoon.

"I'm beginning to understand why you work for yourself."

"Because I'm difficult to put up with?"

"Because no sensible person would want to be your boss."

He looked at me appreciatively.

"I've heard that a few times before."

While the vegetables roasted, we arranged sample place settings on the table. Wawrzyniec moved plates around, checked the distances between them, and studied the light falling across the glaze. At one point, he removed one of my largest serving dishes from its place.

"Let's keep this one in the centre."

"Why?"

"Because it'll make people pass food to one another."

"And what if someone doesn't like sharing?"

"Then they'll pass the dish along. That's still a kind of interaction."

I watched his hands. They were broad, with a small scar near his thumb. He moved confidently, yet handled my pieces with care. Before setting the serving dish down, he checked that there wasn't a grain of salt underneath that might scratch the glaze.

That tiny gesture affected me more than I wanted to admit.

"Are you always this meticulous?" I asked.

"No. Only when something matters."

"So the serving dish matters?"

He looked at me.

"Someone else's work matters."

I turned towards the window. Outside, the rain had stopped, and a narrow strip of light appeared between the clouds. For a moment, I didn't know what to say. Wawrzyniec didn't take advantage of my silence. He returned to the oven and checked the vegetables.

That afternoon, we sat opposite one another to taste the dish we'd prepared. The roasted pumpkin had delicately browned edges, and the sauce, adjusted with a little honey, was exactly what it needed. Against my burgundy plate, the colours looked vibrant but natural.

"This could be the first course," I said.

"It could."

"You have another objection?"

"I have an idea. I'd add something crunchy. But first I want to know what you think."

I took another bite.

"Nuts?"

"Too obvious."

"Toasted buckwheat?"

His fork stopped halfway to his mouth.

"That's exactly why you're worth working with."

I wasn't prepared for a compliment delivered like that. No exaggerated warmth, no expectation of gratitude. He simply thought my idea was good.

A few minutes later, his phone rang. I saw the name "Horyzont" on the screen before he turned the device over.

"Excuse me. I need to take this."

He went outside. Through the window, I watched him talking beneath the awning, then staring at his screen for

quite some time. When he returned, he appeared as calm as before, but he slipped the phone into his pocket more quickly than he had earlier.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"A work matter. Nothing you need to concern yourself with right now."

I didn't press him. We owed each other nothing beyond an honest conversation about a possible partnership.

Towards the end of our meeting, I wrote down three potential dishes and a list of everything needed for the first dinner. Wawrzyniec gave me his estimated ingredient costs, and I showed him the budget I didn't want to exceed.

"It's not much," I admitted.

"It's enough if we're sensible."

"I don't want to do anything by halves."

"We don't have to. A small dinner isn't an inferior version of a large restaurant."

I looked at him over my notebook.

"Do you really believe that?"

"If I wanted to run a large restaurant, I'd be looking for premises right now. Instead, I'm sitting here talking to you about twelve plates."

There was something in his words I couldn't yet identify. A longing for simplicity? Weariness with his previous work? Or merely professional calculation? I didn't know him well enough to ask.

As he gathered his things, I stopped him by the door.

"Wawrzyniec?"

He turned.

"Yes?"

"I want to try. With you."

For a moment, he looked at me without smiling, as though making sure he'd heard correctly.

"On what terms?"

"We'll prepare the first dinner together. If we both feel it works, we'll discuss the entire series. I'm not making any promises beyond that."

"Sensible."

"And I won't let you rearrange the whole studio."

"Even if I find a better place for the table?"

"Especially then."

He smiled.

"In that case, I'll have to learn to work with what I've got."

His gaze lingered on my face a fraction longer than the conversation required. There was nothing intrusive about it. Rather, an interest he made no attempt to hide. I felt that I could respond in kind, but I wasn't ready to discover where that might lead us.

"See you, Apolonia."

"See you."

I closed the door behind him and returned to the table.

Two plates remained on the tabletop, along with two glasses of water and a small bowl of toasted buckwheat we'd managed to prepare as a trial. For the first time in many months, my plan was no longer entirely mine.

I should have felt uneasy.

Instead, I sat in the chair at the end of the table and ate the last piece of pumpkin, wondering when I'd hear his voice again.

Chapter 2 - The Taste of Trust

On Friday morning, I received a message from Wawrzyniec with a shopping list for our first full menu trial. There were no unnecessary comments or displays of professional expertise. Beside each ingredient, he'd included an estimated price, and at the end he'd written, "If anything exceeds the budget, we'll change the ingredient, not the quality."

I read that sentence several times.

In my previous work, the word "compromise" had almost always meant that someone wanted to pay less while receiving exactly the same thing. Wawrzyniec seemed to understand it differently. To him, it meant finding a solution that didn't require pretending limitations didn't exist.

I replied that I accepted most of his suggestions, but we needed to discuss payment and responsibility for organising the evening.

He called ten minutes later.

"We could meet this afternoon," he suggested. "Not at the studio. I'd like to show you where I get some of my ingredients."

I hesitated.

"Is that necessary?"

"No. But it might help you understand how I work."

"Where?"

"At a small farm near Świdnica. The owners also run a shop selling local produce. We could talk over coffee."