

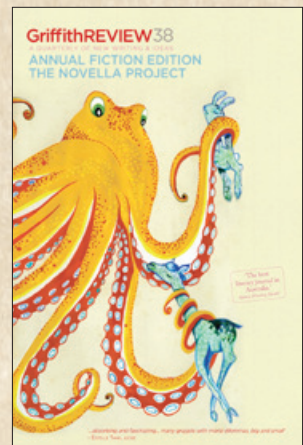
GriffithREVIEW

— S E L E C T I O N S —

River Street

Jim Hearn

New fiction from
Edition 38: The Novella Project



GriffithREVIEW38 SUMMER 2012

GriffithREVIEW is published four times a year by Griffith University in conjunction with Text Publishing. eISSN 1839-2954

Publisher	Marilyn McMeniman AM
Editor	Julianne Schultz AM
Deputy Editor	Nicholas Bray
Associate Editor	Caro Cooper, Text Publishing
Production Manager	Paul Thwaites
Publication & Cover Design	WH Chong, Text Publishing
Text Publishing	Michael Heyward, Kirsty Wilson, Stephanie Stepan
Proofreader	Alan Vaarwerk
Editorial Interns	Michelle Chitts, Coco McGrath
Administration	Andrea Huynh
Typesetting	Midland Typesetters
Printing	Ligare Book Printers
Distribution	Penguin Australia

Contributions by academics can, on request, be refereed by our Editorial Board. Details: www.griffithreview.com

GRIFFITH REVIEW

South Bank Campus, Griffith University
PO Box 3370, South Brisbane QLD 4101 Australia
Ph +617 3735 3071 Fax +617 3735 3272
griffithreview@griffith.edu.au www.griffithreview.com

TEXT PUBLISHING

Swann House, 22 William St, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Ph +613 8610 4500 Fax +613 9629 8621
books@textpublishing.com.au www.textpublishing.com.au

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Within Australia: 1 year (4 editions) \$111.80 RRP, inc. P&H and GST
Outside Australia: 1 year (4 editions) A\$161.80 RRP, inc. P&H
Institutional and bulk rates available on application.

COPYRIGHT

The copyright of all material published in Griffith REVIEW and on its website remains the property of the author, artist or photographer, and is subject to copyright laws. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher. ||| Opinions published in Griffith REVIEW are not necessarily those of the Publisher, Editor, Griffith University or Text Publishing.

FEEDBACK AND COMMENT www.griffithreview.com

ADVERTISING

Each issue of Griffith REVIEW has a circulation of at least 3,000 copies. Full-page adverts are available to selected advertisers. To book your advert, in the first instance please email Griffith REVIEW: griffithreview@griffith.edu.au



This project has received financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland

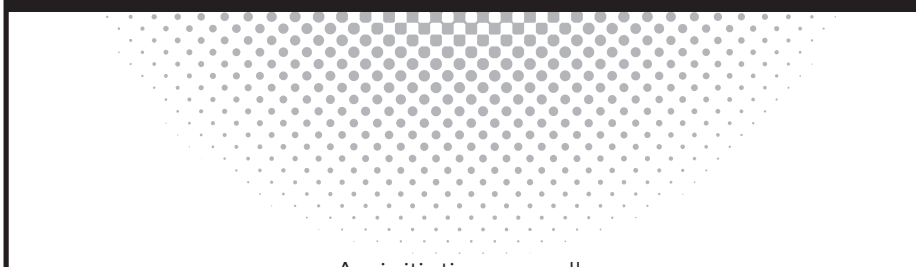


This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its principal arts funding and advisory body.

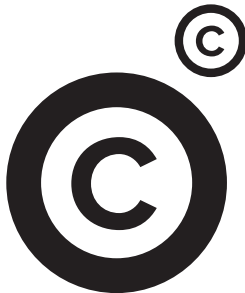


GriffithREVIEW38

THE NOVELLA PROJECT



An initiative proudly
supported by



COPYRIGHT AGENCY
**CULTURAL
FUND**

www.copyright.com.au/cultural-fund

FICTION

River Street

Jim Hearn

What is not on the open street is false, derived, that is to say, literature.

Henry Miller

There is always power in transgression.

Jason Lee

1

I STAND NAKED in the bathroom and clutch at my arm above the elbow. I pump my fist and work a sullen, pockmarked vein toward courage. I prick the vein with a loaded syringe and push it in. I draw back enough blood to marble the mixture of smack and water and push the hammer down.

The bathroom is divided into two small rooms. There isn't a door between the two rooms so much as an opening. The first section has carpet on the floor and a mirror above the dressing table. There is a soft light in the carpeted room. This part of the house is a sanctuary where I can remain undressed, exposed.

My face flushes warm from the heroin as it works its way through my bloodstream. I walk into the tiled section of the bathroom and sit on the edge

of the tub. The vitreous china and small tiles are cold. The room requires steam in order to be inviting. I set the plug in the drain of the tub and turn on both taps. In my bathroom I find peace for as long as the stone lasts.

I return to my dressing-room table and mix up another shot through a cigarette filter. Then I load up another. I like nothing more than a row of fits filled with fifty mil of smack. Each loaded syringe means time. Like poetry is a representation of time passing, a writing of the present, which is impossible to define...which always pulls back from naming that which it alludes to, so too heroin is a dream spent awake.

I drop a cake of soap into the bath and let the running water lather up the tub. I slide into the water, the heat flashing briefly through my stone. Heroin is an opioid analgesic, a derivative of morphine that comes into existence via the opium poppy, a frail, pretty little flower.

I lean back onto the cold surface of the tub where the water hasn't reached. I light a cigarette and draw back deeply. I pull the cork out of a bottle of red wine and guzzle. Carefully, I set the cigarette in an ashtray and move it out of the water's reach before sliding down under the water.

I enjoy all kinds of smoking: pipes, cigars, and different types of cigarettes, bongs and three-paper joints. After smoking smack a couple of times, I figured it was a waste: the efficiency of using a syringe, a case study in K.I.S.S.

I'm not sure if innocence exists but if it does it belongs to a time before you realise that the world is just one long river of pus. It's a time of actually believing that people are the roles they play. That a taxi driver is just some guy with an interest in getting you home rather than a greasy immigrant who pulls his cock out every chance he gets. Innocence resides in not understanding that Mr Jones the maths teacher gets a boner at the sight of little Betty's panties. Growing up requires understanding that there's fuck all Mr Jones can do to stop the blood rushing to his cock.

The bath gets filled to the top and I reach up to turn off the taps. Silence. Fuck...how sweet it is.

A lot of women don't understand that it's just not possible to get a hard on if you use heroin. You've got to time your cunt raids as a junkie. Fucking is one of the only respites when you're hanging out, but it's extracurricular

when you're off-chops. And sex, while you're hanging out, is pretty often unsatisfying because your whole body is a jumble of unpredictable nerves. You can come just looking, or not at all.

I guzzle the wine again and feel the warmth in my gut reach the warmth of the bath. I take another drag on the cigarette then stub it out. I climb out of the bath and lay a towel on the floor so I can get another shot without wetting the carpet. The worst thing about getting stoned is that the rush never lasts. It's natural for any monkey to want that sensation to keep rolling. Knowing that it doesn't is a particular kind of pain which is why some people get caught up using coke and smack. It's the closest you can get to a rolling stone, up and down, up and down. The problem is the human heart. It doesn't cope well with the ride. You gain a certain insight into how your internal organs work when you shoot heroin. You can feel them slowing down...getting tired. When they go to sleep from too much analgesic, you die. It's a fucking lottery.

My arms have a couple of coin-sized holes in them from shooting up in the crux of my elbow. It's something a lot of junkies have. It's a way of getting through the skin and other bullshit to find those lazy blood pipes. The veins get beat up...scared. Like they can't quite believe you're doing it again. Like a kid who's been slapped too often and, randomly, they take to hiding. The body is also a very resilient and adaptable organism. It can mutate and evolve, find pathways to survival despite the most fucked up injuries. The body doesn't want to die until it does and then there's no stopping it.

I leave the holes in my arms alone and put my foot up on the tub. My blood is flowing freely after a few minutes in the bath. I work the needle of the syringe into a chunky vein on my left foot, then pull back on the hammer, marble the water, and drive it home. The blood-marbled water is proof that I've entered the bloodstream.

The stone comes in over the top of the last one and settles in real nice. My body is slowing down, on the nod, the space between sleeping and being awake. Only it's different to that because the stone from opiates is more the space between being awake and finding unconsciousness. It's warm and inviting and...snap. Your head might drop down too far and hit something or you stumble against something sharp and you wake up, sort of. Only it's not like being fully awake because your body doesn't feel the pain of what

just happened but, rather, your whole person reacts to a loss of control, to a moment of embarrassing uncoordination.

I wedge myself into the doorway without a door, the space between the carpeted dressing room and the tiled bathroom, and find a sense of balance by placing my feet into a corner of the jamb and leaning my back up against the rail. It's kind of precarious because the doorjamb is narrow and I'm pretty loose. I could fall down and crack my head but it's this sort of doorjamb logic that invades my mind when I push the second fit in. There's a semiconscious knowing that to get into the bath too early could bring on drowning so I have to hold off just long enough to be confident that when I do crawl back into the nice warm water I don't fall asleep.

The water is warm and good. I feel incredibly fortunate. This amount of pleasure is always hard won. It only comes easy the first time. After that, everyone's in the jungle, pulling scams and working rorts in order to carve out their own piece of paradise for however long the dope lasts. Knowing that I have another fit loaded causes a wave of intense gratification.

I guzzle the last of the red wine and light up another cigarette. The smoke piles out of me slowly. It rises up and finds its way out of the small window above the tub. The window doesn't let in anything other than the eaves of the roof, which is about as much of the outside world as I like to see on days like these.

I was born into transgression, into violation, into stepping over the line.

I don't want to think about work. Life set me up for a grade-fucking-one, fully paid-up life membership of the working class. I left school at fifteen and found myself in a commercial kitchen and I was either too lazy or too stupid or cared too much about drugs to find a way out. Work has only ever been a means to afford days like these.

I wake up when the water fills my nose and pours down my throat. I lunge out of the bath, coughing and spluttering. I blow the water out of my nasal passage, stick my fingers down my throat, and spew up whatever's in my gut. There's no food in there. I start breathing again. I wipe my face and fingers on a towel and light up another cigarette. The warmth of fire and smoke after getting trapped in a swamp is the sweetest thing.

I've only got one shot of smack left and I have to time my last rush. There's nothing worse than waiting for the final stone of a particular session to leave your body. It's worse than hanging out. Something inside you reaches around and insists on analysing and discovering every last pocket of that stone until it's so thoroughly worked over that whatever pleasure it might have afforded you gets rubbed out. It's a mind-fuck; you've got to get set for it mentally before you rush in. I find smoking a joint works best because it relaxes my mind in a different way. I'd never take a toke before my first or second shot; that would be a waste. I want the purity of heroin in my system for as long as I can.

I climb out of the bath and dry myself off. The stone has flatlined into something pleasant rather than anything spectacular so I pull the rolled up joint out of my cigarette packet and sit on the edge of the tub. I like growing pot. There are six large plants in the back garden that the whole neighbourhood seems to know about and keeps trying to steal. I've taken to putting broken glass on the top of the fence and live wires around the plants. No one calls the cops. It seems like the rest of the world isn't actually interested in me as a person. I represent a problem that is only ever going to burden an already overburdened system. I'm an outsider. It doesn't matter if I want to be inside, snug and warm and tightly held; the system already knows that it can't provide that anyway. Getting by has always been a case of taking things into my own hands.

The brothel where my mother works isn't some sleazy junkie club; the girls, as they like to be called, all look pretty fit and nice. That's why it costs a couple of hundred to get in the door rather than fifty. I quite like going in there because at least the roles are set. No one calls anyone by their real name or creates a fuss about things. The brothel is a fantasyland where any John can walk in and feel powerful. And power is what it's all about. I've figured that much out. Some people want to be the toughest guy in the room, some want to have the most alluring cunt, some people want to be the richest or the most famous or just be the guy who tells everyone else what to do. What everyone's looking for is the same thing and that thing is power. And that's what you pay for in a brothel. It's the chance to play out that fucked-up, weirded out little power trip that echoes through the years.

The joint pops a seed and I set it back in the ashtray. I like to shoot my last blast straight into my neck. There's only ever a couple of seconds delay in the smack reaching your brain no matter which vein you use but a blood pipe on the neck...well, it's central station. I have to be careful because those veins like to jump around and freak out when I go at them with something sharp, but the effect...it's never the way I like to start a session because the risk is that I'll drop. And the problem with overdosing like that is I might end up lying across an arm or a leg and when I come to, if I do, I'll discover that the particular limb I've landed on has gone permanently to sleep. I've lost count of the junkies I've seen up at the Cross who've either had a leg cut off or an eye gone to water because they dropped in the wrong way. There's not a whole lot of sympathy in the emergency wards for junkies. The doctors have seen it all before and while some of them have given me an envelope stuffed with the latest jazz about what's going to get me straight, for most of them, junkies are just some vague pain that speaks too lowly of their education.

I sit down in front of the mirror and rub my feet on the carpet. I love the feel of the carpet so much. It's like I'm in a fancy place. The pupils of my eyes are so pinned: little dots on a cartoon face. That's one of the only telltale signs of a junkie. Most people would be surprised how many junkies they actually know. It's not something that the person using heroin talks about publicly because to use smack is to transgress. It's the secret of the using, and the hidden world it creates, that starts the love affair. It gets boring after a few months. Things get hard. Even for the rich freaks I've met along the way. And that's because the people everyone scores off are other junkies, and those dealers have their own special relationship with power. It's a fucking sideshow.

I rub at the veins in my neck. They seem okay. I don't want to get too marked-up there. Getting by in society is hard enough. I rip an alcohol wipe from a vacuum pack and rub it around a small patch of skin on the side of my neck. The alcohol brings the veins to the surface and also acts as a disinfectant. I light up a cigarette and let the smoke fill up the dressing room. Steam and smoke get trapped in the carpet. I pull the orange cover off the needle of the syringe and flick the barrel a couple of times to dislodge any air pockets. I see a vein that's pulsing nicely. I lift the syringe up to my neck and rest it parallel to the vein. The needle has to follow the path of the vein beneath the skin. It's

a parallel, rather than straight on, task. I can feel my heart pumping pretty slow, relaxed. Noises from the dripping tap, and outside the house, all have a little reverb on them. I rest the very tip of the needle against a vein and gently pierce the skin. The vein rolls away. It's tricky. The veins on a foot or an arm don't give a fuck; they're much more workmanlike. On the neck... I push through the skin and across to the vein and miss.

Only a small amount of blood comes out. I rinse it clean with the alcohol wipe, which makes the whole area pink and bright. The trouble is, if I don't get the fucker in the next one or two attempts, my neck will bruise. Some stoners get tattoos right across their throats to avoid the telltale signs of using but I've never figured out who the fuck they think they're kidding.

I roll my Adam's apple up and down and twist my head about. The great bonus of using heroin is how it acts as a general pain reliever. All the little aches that various muscles and nerves give off disappear. It's neat. This time I clutch the skin on the side of my neck and trap the vein. I push the steel needle up to the clutch of skin and push it in. I get right inside the fucker. I release the skin and let the syringe hang there. I'm inside now. It's a small battle in a life of crime but it's always nice to win. The vein jumps around. It's a serious character with important work to do. Not like those extraneous limb veins. They can be chopped off and stitched up and life goes on.

Slowly, I stand up in front of the mirror and steady myself. The game now is all about survival. I can't afford to kid myself about what's happening. There's not to be any nodding off or falling down or dropping dead. I move across to the doorjamb, balancing the syringe in my neck. I don't need a mirror. I slide down into the doorway, wedge my body in. It's like I'm slumped into the jamb but I'm not; I'm more caught. In order to fall to the ground my legs have to bend in an awkward manner and it's this motion that generally wakes me if I nod off. I have slipped off sideways and landed badly before. I have also managed to slump and not notice the fucked-up position of my legs, but all the falls have been much more graceful than a slump forward onto the dressing table followed by a random roll to the floor.

I boof it up.

The carpet on the side of my face tells me I've nodded off or overdosed and fallen to my left, which is preferable to landing on the tiles. I feel good.

Except I become aware that I'm lying on the syringe. I try to lift my head but it's heavy; a dead weight on a rubber doll. I giggle. I'm embarrassed knowing that the syringe is caught in the side of my neck and there's fuck all I can do about it. It won't be long. My shame will be placated. Being stoned certainly helps. But it's so strange how a person can become a source of shame to themselves: which part of myself knows better than another part of myself about what I should or shouldn't be doing?

I work my right arm back to life and use it to leverage myself up. I'm okay. I pull the syringe out without wanting to look at the damage. Fuck! I've got to go out and get a job tomorrow. About that there's no debate. Tomorrow... must find work. If I don't go out I won't have any money at all and the possibility of having another day like this won't be the only thing that changes. I've been up for a while. Long enough to have a pretty serious rabbit. We're in the fucking burrow, Joe, deep beneath the ground.

Using heroin is not only about the pleasure of the day; it's also about avoiding hanging out. And I won't be able to sidestep that no matter what I do. But I don't care... too many people make too big a deal about hanging out anyway. Weak cunts. Get a fucking job. It's the best way through.

I've always had a very annoying work ethic. I'm no dole-day junkie. I've pulled plenty of scams and kicked doors in to get by, but I've never been of the mindset to establish that kind of behaviour as a career. I'm a chef. I stand for weeks on end in the heat of a kitchen, sweating, a very overheated person with too much junk in his system. I like the routine of work. It takes me out of my head; there's only ever so much time I can spend in there anyway.

I sit on the carpet, lean my back into the wall and slide my knees up to my chest. I'm all right. Everything's moving. I can see out both my eyes. I'm stoked the dope is good. The fucking torment of setting up a day like this to find the dope shot through with talcum powder or glucose is murderous. I have taken the sharpest of my chef knives out of their leather case and caught a taxi back up to the Cross after getting ripped off by a hooker. She was so used up. She knew I'd be back. Even though she'd taken me upstairs to get on, like a special client, like I'm something better than a street rat... there was no one home when I kicked the door in. The pain of those days is immense.

They colour and shade the details of days like these, in ways that can only come from knowing the outer limits of shame's pleasure.

I slide my back up the wall and edge my body over to the tub. The rest of the day is going to be fine. Even though all my dope is shot up, I can relax into the stone and mope about. Everything is sweet until the morning bell. I crawl back into the warm water. I won't drown. I've won. I've cheated death again. And it's not like I want to die, there's just something good and pure about knocking on the door. It's like a weird kind of power thing...my way of coping with what the river means.

I come up for air and stretch out like a cat. I don't feel any pain or pings where I should. The alarm clock will bring those details to life. I spark up a cigarette and draw back.

The light is changing through the window. The day is shutting down. I should eat something tonight. I feel a little vulnerable. If I don't eat I'll wake up feeling like a slapped newborn. Everything will be far too pink and hungry.

I wish so much it would rain. It hasn't rained for the longest time.

I pull the plug out of the bath and hold onto the taps while the water drains. I close my eyes to the noise. It takes forever. I'm so fucking stoned. I'm so fucking happy.

Gravity sucks out the bathwater. I stay sitting in the dirt and hair. I have to wait for some of the heat to leave my body so I don't blackout as get up.

I lie down in the tub and gently roll onto my stomach. I work myself over the side of the tub facedown. I end up on all fours on the tiled floor and take a few deep breaths. I move over to the wall and use it to support myself. I wrap a towel around my waist. I throw another towel over my shoulders. Nothing spins too badly.

2

THE KITCHEN IS a fucking disgrace. The table is littered with empty bottles and cigarette butts. Dirty cups, plates and fry pans cover the bench. Teabags and spilt coffee stain every surface. I pour myself a cognac and sit down to contemplate cleaning things up.

I like drinking cognac when the sun goes down. I like the Frenchness of it. I've walked the streets of Paris; watched the sun go down at Sacré Coeur. During my training as a chef, I was imbued with a weird, tangential understanding of French cuisine and the French language, at least to the point where I knew I had to go and see things for myself. After a while, it wasn't enough to use terms like *mise en place*, *chef-de-partie*, *brunois*, *confit*, *pomme sauté*, *court bouillon*, *dépouiller*, *jus*, *fricassé*, *sous vide*...and not get inside Escoffier's way of knowing. That a person called Escoffier, the greatest chef of French cuisine, could be so influential as to export, not just his methods of cooking, but the French terminology as well, seemed more than incidental. I needed to understand those words, which, throughout my apprenticeship, became tacked onto my capacity for English.

I like Paris. Beneath the pretty architecture it's full of rich cunts but I never minded cunts with money so much as other types of cunts. I like the way the French mediate their pleasures throughout the course of a day. And a day in Paris is a 24-hour thing. Pleasure in France speaks to ways in which a person sleeps, just as much as it does to a cognac at sunset. I discovered the treasures of Notre Dame and walked the River Seine. I crossed the Pont Neuf and talked to the scammers who'd drop a gold ring at my feet before handing it to me and saying, 'It must be your lucky day.' My lucky day saw the rat with the ring in need of a sandwich; just a few Euros would do. And I watched my luck fade in his black eyes when I didn't pull out my wallet, which was emptier than he could have imagined. I'd seen him or his cousin, his brother or his twin, reach into countless wallets, rip out a clutch of bills, and run away with the river.

On the Left Bank and the Right Bank, I ate at restaurants and bistros, food markets and patisseries. Everything was good; everything was perfect. It was just as Escoffier said it should be. But it was also presented as if it were effortless to produce such perfections. Which is never the case. All the bakers and chefs and butchers and fishmongers and cheese makers and sommeliers work long and hard. Creating perfection is never easy. There are no shortcuts. The production of each element of a dish or pastry or cheese requires hard labour, time and knowledge. Such things seem to be built into the fabric of a Parisian day, hidden for the most part from view.

Waiters in Paris aren't the starving writers or poets I imagined. They're born into a trade that is highly respected among those who know, among those for whom pleasure is a science, an approach to life that speaks to the very order of things. Unlike many of the kitchens I've done time in, the hierarchies of chefs on the line in Paris aren't created to boost the ego of the guy at the top. Each position, every station, has a set of tasks that Escoffier explained as necessary for perfection to be attained.

The state of my domestic kitchen is a clear indicator that I never quite got the hang of doing things the French way. I empty the spirit from my glass and reach for the bin. I empty everything off the table straight into it. Then I throw all the cups and plates and pans and spoons, off the bench, into the bin. When nothing is left but dirty surfaces, I drag the bin outside.

I run warm water into the kitchen sink, squeeze some detergent into it, and soak a towel. I squeeze the excess water out of it and start wiping down the benches. Being stoned helps with cleaning. The next few hours could be very productive in terms of getting my house in order. There will be no more rushing highs tonight but I don't mind. I'll be nicely stoned till the lights go out.

I use another towel to wipe the benches dry. I put the kettle on and set a cup up with two teabags and plenty of sugar. I unroll a newspaper that I picked up from a front lawn last night and spread it out on the kitchen table. Getting a job is what it's all about.

I throw the dirty towels out the kitchen window. The floor will have to wait.

Having a sum of money that is more than I require for my immediate needs is not something that occurs for me often. It's not so tangential that I don't know what it feels like. If I wanted to I could work long and hard in a kitchen somewhere – or even open my own place – and get some serious folding together. I've done it before to the point where I could afford to travel overseas or buy a motorbike. But that isn't the quality of problem I have tonight. I have fourteen dollars and a weekly bus ticket until whenever the next payday is. Fourteen dollars is not much but I've been in tighter jams. Chefs never have to worry about food or alcohol. You just steal as much of that stuff as you need from whatever joint you're cooking in. My main

problem now is to find a restaurant that requires a chef within a self-respecting distance. And given that I have no coin for train fares it has to be vaguely on my bus route.

I have to do my research before I walk through the front door of any potential new employer. I don't have the resources or the willpower to chop and change kitchens if the first one doesn't work out. Which always happens anyway but I need a few weeks of solid work with money coming in to keep things rolling.

The ways in which my past overwhelms isn't something I want to run away from. I'm making progress describing what the river is. My most meaningful descriptions come from knowing that the river is flowing with pus and blood and cum and absolutely nothing else.

I pour boiling water into the cup and stir the sugar and teabags. I sit down at the table, light up a cigarette, and open the paper to Positions Vacant, Hospitality. It takes up an encouragingly large section of the page. I skip over the jobs for apprentices, barmen, baristas and chefs, and start reading at jobs for cooks. The positions for cooks are often better paying than the jobs for chefs. It has to do with the nature of the job. A lot of chefs aren't capable or interested in working as hard as some cooking jobs demand. And the cook jobs, unlike the chef positions, advertise the rate of pay to get a reader interested. It's no good rocking up for a position if I don't have the chops for it. There's nowhere to hide once the docket starts rolling in. But if I think I can do it, and prove I can during my first service at the pans, I'm generally left alone to get on with things. That approach to earning money suits me.

I drag again on the cigarette and pour a fresh cognac. The first job I circle looks good. I know the joint. It's on my bus route and it isn't a complete dive. Whenever I've gone past it, it always seems busy. It has a vibe; a vibe of general good times, rather than stiff or uptight. I don't cope too well in the uptight places.

I get a rush of adrenaline at the thought of working in a particular place. The thought of work generally is depressing, but imagining myself in a particular architecture, cooking a specific menu, gets me moving in my chair. I sip on the cognac and mull over whether I have what it takes to stomp in there and take the job. Most restaurants only start advertising for a chef after the

last one has walked. It's important to shut the interview process down. What matters, in terms of securing a job and earning a wage, is standing in a kitchen in my chef's clobber, dishing out the food.

I understand clearly that I could organise a better kind of life; a life that other people might consider more productive or normal. That I can't...is because I'm trapped in the river's flow. Everyone's a victim of something. No one I know asked to be born. No one I know asked for the life they got given. A lot of people get a better shake of things than others. That's all just pus that makes the river run. The nature of the river, the thing that makes it flow, is power. Such a force ensures that there will be winners and losers, persecutors and victims.

I double circle the cooking job. It looks promising. The other jobs for cooks, despite their advertised hourly or weekly pay, are too far off the grid. There are a few positions for chefs that tempt me with their allusions to prestige and self-esteem. They are jobs that will demand I make a better quality jus. But only the head chef positions advertise their salaries: like a few grams of smack. Life on that kind of money would be sweet if I didn't have to do the work that the job requires. It's a catch that I latched onto pretty quick.

A lot of chefs are sentimental about their childhood; their memories recall clear running water that they keep swimming back to. They attempt to resurrect those pristine springs with complex menus. It's fucking inspirational. My palate comes alive at their offerings. But their pieces of duck or spaghetti sauce have never lifted me out of the pus. I was born into pus; the water was never clear. At best, I can manage to stand up for a moment and let the river run around me. But the ripples and the flow suck me back into the slipstream. And in that rushing by, the best my imagination can reach for in terms of inspirational menus, tend to be vegetarian things: dry grains and yellow beans, salad leaves and couscous; grated beetroot, and legumes.

I got obsessed with vegan food for a while. It's a science – trying to get a bunch of things to stick together, to bind without eggs or honey, gelatin or lard, seemed a worthy pursuit at the time. It paid well too. There are a lot of people that like vegetarian cuisine. They'll go out of their way for it. Some of them think of it as a means of keeping the pus and blood and cum

from their skin, free from their throat and gut, but it's an illusion. They can reach out while they float down the river and pick at the grasses on the shore but the river won't let them out because the river is what they are. People are dead without the power of the river to animate their every thought and effort.

The cognac is good. I pour another shot. The stone is strong and clean. I'll be back to see Dave again. That it won't be for eight or ten days given I have to work a week and wait for payday won't kill me. I've been up for a while and if I were to maintain my current habit it will start to run at a price I can't afford. It's a balancing act. I've got plenty of pot and a drawer full of pills. I'll get by till payday.

I get out of my chair and make another cup of tea. The sight of the clean benches makes me so happy. The thing about using heroin is that it simplifies things. Complex and random elements of existence get abstracted and focused into a narrow, straight line. What makes up that line is different for everyone but it's the line that runs through the centre of things; a humming, buzzing power line. No one can choose what path the line takes.

I decide I don't need any extra-curricular inspiration at this point in my career and circle the job for a third time. I don't need to write down the phone number or work out bus routes. I'll march in there tomorrow with my clobber in a bag and my knives by my side. I'll insist on a trial and I'll sweat it out. When the dockets start rolling I'll stand and deliver. I'll absorb whatever chaos comes my way and bend and shape that chaos into the prettiest plates of food I can manage. I've never been sacked straight off the bat. The first service at a new joint, where all the staff are staring and judging, checking out your chops, is the most important. No one cares if you overcook a steak or burn a sauce after that. Those things happen to every chef. I can't let it happen during my first service though, because if I do, it says from the get-go that I'm not a chef's arsehole, I'm a junkie cunt who burns sauces and overcooks steak.

I need to clean the kitchen floor. I take the towel off my shoulder and push it into the sink. When it soaks up most of the water I squeeze it out as best I can and throw it onto the lino. I slide and walk the towel around under my feet. The shit and grime lift off pretty good. It's inspiring. I feel positive.

I feel right about going for the job. My head and limbs will be ringing with hate tomorrow morning but I don't care. Right now, cleaning the floor and drinking tea and cognac, everything's fine...everything's sorted.

Transgression is all about the discovery of limits, about stepping over lines. Transgression is filled with meaning. That's what makes it powerful. To transgress is not to step beyond the limit of what meaning can contain, but simply to reveal that all meanings are unstable. Lines are easily crossed, new meanings brutally formed.

It's only kinky the first time.

I take the towels outside. The stars float brightly in the pus. In Paris the sun has burnt the pus away and the morning calls of *'Bonjour monsieur, deux cafés au lait et une baguette, s'il vous plaît,'* ring out across the town. Breakfast in Paris...it's a fucking movie I'll see again.

I take the towels into the laundry. I run a sink of soapy water and throw the towels in. I walk into the garden and check my plants, which are only a few weeks off harvest.

My body is slowing down.

I walk back into the kitchen. The cognac and smack have coalesced into an overwhelming tiredness. I have done my research; I know which job I'm going for. I'm desperate for tomorrow not to be a day where I don't have what it takes to walk into a kitchen and get the job I've selected. I don't care how big a cunt the guy is who owns the joint; I don't care what he believes in or how much unpaid overtime he expects me to do in order to earn the advertised wage. I just want tomorrow to bring the lightness and heat of cooking, of stainless steel and tiles, chemicals and food.

3

I WAKE UP and my neck is burning from where I fell on the syringe. I had a very annoying dream. In it, I seemed to be stuck doing something vaguely repetitive. The task, and I already don't remember what it was, demanded that I stand above a table and repeat the same thing endlessly. I was free to look around the room but I couldn't leave the table.

Got to go and get that job.

I crawl out of bed and discover that I'm not hanging out. I'm still semi-stoned. About midday my nose will start running and I'll feel like I've caught a cold. By dinnertime I'll be suicidal.

I turn on the shower. The pleasures of yesterday have faded. There'll be new dreams, but today I'm on a mission. I won't shirk it.

The water is warm and good. If I don't pay the electricity bill soon they'll cut the power off and that is never good. I hate camping. When the essential services go and the rent's a week behind I just change suburbs. There's little point in hanging around trying to work out a payment plan or something with the bond. I'll crash on some other loser's couch for a while or pull a scam or borrow some coin off my mother. They are all pathetic options that I'm eager to avoid. This week I'm starting over. I have the power.

I towel down and march back to the bedroom.

I can do this.

Going outside is the problem. I've got no issues with hanging out in a lonely bedroom when the rent's been paid and the gas people are all onsite. There are many worse things in life than isolation in the private domain. It's the social domain that most makes my skin crawl.

I know very clearly that my drug use is a kind of violence turned in on myself. It's a powerful form of resistance that keeps me in the past.

I get dressed quickly and pack my bag with my chef clothes. I unzip my knife bag and do a cursory check that everything I need is there. A few of the slots are empty where knives or other implements are meant to be but I'll get by. This morning is not the time to get distracted with shitty games of lost and found. Today I'm on a mission and I need all the focus and power I can muster.

The power that comes from within, that burns up inside a body that is first across the line, is what I'm searching for today. The first day is always the hardest. Today I've got to go and kick some fucking heads. Today I've got to push the past aside and stare cunts down.

I step outside the door, close it behind me and walk out the gate. I'm outside, which is good; progress is just what I need.

I light a cigarette and gently run my hand over my slicked-back hair.

I look fine; I look good, everything's okay. I'll have at least a few hours of being semi-stoned before the rot sets in.

I hate fucking bus stops. I can't stand waiting for anything. Other than it being a complete waste of time, it makes me anxious as fuck. I start wanting to punch things or write on walls or disappear. There's no telling which way things will roll if I have to wait too long for anything.

'Fuck,' I say again, and look around to check that no one can hear me talking to myself. I'll be laughing next. I've got to keep things cool, stay organised in my thoughts. It's not complex what I'm doing. I'm just going to see a man about a job.

There's no one at the bus stop. I check the timetable. I spend minutes staring at it, trying to memorise when things run. It's never been information I've been able to retain in the past, but fuck me, people do. Some cunts know everything about their local bus timetables and I find that kind of shit inspirational. Not as inspirational as learning to speak French or knit a jumper, but it gets my attention at a social gathering. It's not hard to work out; there's a bus at fourteen minutes past the hour and another one every twenty minutes after that. That's information I should be able to retain.

A real greaser joins me at the bus stop. He's so pretty in his shiny fucking suit. He smells like perfume and powder. Jesus fucking Christ...get a real job.

I know it's just the shame setting in. I know his mother isn't up the road getting fucked by Johnny cab driver. And even if she was, I bet this greaser would deal with things better than me; I bet he'd march in there and save the fucking day. He'd have some investment plan or insurance scam and bring the whole family back together for Christmas. They'd open expensive presents and cry and eat and promise never to be bad again.

The bus is due real soon and I'm glad about that. That's a fucking red-letter start to the day. If the bus is late, the greaser standing next to me is in some kind of serious trouble. I don't know what's going to happen to him, but I do know he doesn't deserve it and it's probably gonna hurt.

The bus turns the bend and we both shuffle toward the sign where Johnny's gotta stop. It's cool. We're all friends here. Let's hold hands and pray.

I push my bus ticket into the green machine, which takes an age to print

out what it's got to say. Who the fuck designed this piece of shit thing? Why not a dot or a dash rather the short story this thing is banging out.

Cunts are sitting next to each other all tight and cozy. I'm starting to feel sick. I could puke over everyone. I could launch into a song. But I don't. I stand up and hang on tight and settle in for the ride; same as every other cunt that's floating down the river.

I wish I had the secret key to knowing what it takes to get a job inside an office, to wear a suit and tie to work, and disappear inside one of those high-rise buildings. What the fuck do cunts do in there all day? I've never figured it out and I probably never will. I'm just a line cook looking for a job.

'Just a fucking line cook looking for a job,' I scream inside my head.

Maybe today's the day that I'm going to up-chuck over every cunt in reach. The problem is I don't have anything in my stomach. Despite my promises to myself last night, I didn't eat anything, and now I could eat that cunt's head.

I've got to get this job. There are only a couple of stops to go. I'll get off at the next one so I can suck back a cigarette before I stomp on in there and claim what's mine.

There's nothing social about the commercial domain of hospitality. The hospitality industry exists within a queer kind of paradox that people have taken as normal. On the one hand, there's an expectation that hospitality implies some sort of generosity; on the other hand, industry demands a profit. This paradox defines what hospitality means within the logic of the market.

I get off the bus and pull out a pack of cigarettes out and spark one up. Fuck it's good.

Got to get that job.

The street that the restaurant is on is busy. It's a nice street. I've always liked it. There's just enough history not to make me sick. I've really got to eat something. I no longer care what it is. My body is dying. My blood needs something more to munch on than smack and nicotine.

'Hey, how you going?' I say to the pregnant woman standing behind the counter. 'My brother told me you might be looking for a chef.'

And straight off the bat she's being nice to me. My brother could be

anyone. He might be the cunt that comes in here every night of the week and rubs her tummy on the way out the door.

‘Yeah...’ she smiles. ‘We are.’

‘He mentioned it a few days ago and then I saw the ad in the paper and I thought I should drop in and...’

‘Who’s your brother?’

‘Oh, he comes in all the time with his wife. He loves this place. Johnny,’ I say and look all quizzical like don’t say you don’t fucking know who Johnny is.

‘Oh!’ she smiles, all sweetness and light. ‘You should have a talk with Colin.’

‘Yeah, great,’ I say. ‘I was passing by...I know I should have phoned for an interview first.’

‘I’m sure that’s all right... Colin!’ she calls out, like deal with this guy whose got a brother that could be any one of a hundred fucking people. ‘Someone here to see you.’

‘Hey, Chef,’ I say, setting up the boundaries early. ‘I’m here about the job.’

‘His brother told him about it...’ the pregnant wife trails off.

‘Yeah, Johnny,’ I say. ‘He loves it here. Well, he used to until he moved over to the eastern suburbs. He still drops in...he was here last week and heard something about you guys looking for a chef and then I saw the ad in the paper and I just really wanted to drop in while I had the chance.’

‘Yeah, no, good, glad you did,’ says Colin, trying to put a face to a name.

‘I’ve been cooking at Sorrentino’s for the last few months but they’re selling the joint and there’s a whole new owner/operator thing happening there.’

‘Really. I didn’t know they were selling,’ says Colin.

‘Yeah, apparently it’s a done deal,’ I say, shrugging my shoulders. ‘I was only there for about five months and was travelling around Europe before that for a year. I worked in some amazing places over there,’ I say.

‘Really?’ he says again. ‘You sure you want to work here?’ Colin and his pregnant wife laugh.

‘Yeah, well,’ I say looking around, like, maybe I’m not so sure either.

‘Johnny said it was the best local he’s ever had. Wishes he could move you guys out east.’

‘I’ve got a few interviews lined up for tomorrow,’ says Colin, taking back control of things.

‘I’m sure you have, Chef,’ I say. ‘I’d really like to have a trial though if that’s okay. I don’t mind just hanging around for lunch service today. I don’t want to get paid or anything, I just really want to see if I can do the job. I just live around the corner and it would be so great for me not to have to catch a train to work.’

‘Well the thing is...’ Colin says, wanting my name.

‘Jimmy,’ I say, hanging out a paw.

‘We’re selling this place too,’ he says.

‘Oh, really,’ I say, not quite able to hide my disappointment.

‘Yeah, but what we have to do is find someone who can do my job before we hand over to the new owners.’

‘Have you worked in very busy, very small kitchens before, Jimmy?’ Colin’s wife asks with a smile.

I just smile back, as sweet as I can, and nod. ‘I’ve got no problems with small and busy.’

‘We’ve tried a few people out and they haven’t really managed with service,’ Colin says. ‘It’s busier than it looks...we only seat forty-five but we turn the tables over and we do takeaway as well.’

I whistle low, impressed. ‘That busy, hey,’ I say. ‘Well I’ve certainly worked in some tight spaces before where it’s just me and the check rack. I haven’t been beaten too badly, yet,’ I say, like, maybe you guys are so fucking hot, this shithole joint is going to burn this cowboy up.

‘I’d love to check out lunch service if you don’t mind, Colin,’ I say, getting personal. ‘I reckon I’ll know if I can do it once I’ve seen it happen. I’m more than happy to just stand back and watch for a while.’

‘Yeah, no. That’s fine. No harm in that. It’s probably a good service to see things anyway,’ he says. ‘Friday’s are always busy,’ he says.

‘I’ve got to set up,’ says Mrs Colin.

‘Okay...’ I say after her, like, what’s your name?

‘That’s Rosie,’ says Colin. ‘My wife.’

‘Cool,’ I say, like, no fucking kidding.

‘Thanks, Rosie,’ I call after her. ‘So you guys are getting out?’ I say to Colin.

‘Yeah, second baby on the way. We promised ourselves we’d sell after we had our first kid but, you know...’

‘Not really,’ I say, smiling. ‘But I’m sure I will one day. You’ve been here a while then?’ I ask, wanting to keep the conversation on Colin and his restaurant, which is operating out of a kitchen a whole lot smaller than I could have possibly imagined.

‘Six years now,’ he says matter-of-factly. ‘Time for a change.’

‘You leaving town?’ I ask.

‘Just going up the coast. We bought a place up in Whale Beach a year ago,’ he says almost guiltily, like, what’s a chef doing living up there?

‘Nice,’ I say, impressed. ‘It’s been a success for you then?’

‘Oh yeah. From day one. It’s been unbelievable. Busy!’ he adds. ‘But good.’

‘And what are the new owners like?’ I ask, shifting around a little. ‘I mean, did you know them before or anything?’

‘No. We’ve had it on the market for a few months. Got a few nibbles but we wouldn’t negotiate on the price. The couple who are buying the place seem good... a couple of dykes actually. They’ve got a deli in the city as well.’

‘Oh right,’ I say. ‘And getting a chef to cover the days you work is the last piece of the puzzle?’

‘Yes, it is. I mean, we’ll be around for a few weeks, or even a couple of months if they need us. We’ll stay until everyone’s settled in. We don’t want the business to go downhill,’ Colin says.

‘No. No, wouldn’t want that,’ I add.

‘It’s been a great little business for us and I’m sure they’ll do well once they get in and start...but they’re essentially going to manage the place. There’s another chef, Glenn, who does three days a week and we need someone to do my four days.’

‘Okay. Sounds good,’ I say, like, I’m ready to start.

‘They’re big days, Jimmy,’ he says. ‘Eight in the morning till ten at night.’

Colin stares me down when he says this. This is the money shot for him. Doing the deal, and getting the fuck up to Whale Beach, requires that he find

someone who can hear something like, 'work four days straight, fourteen hours a day' and not run out the door.

'I've done worse, Chef,' I say. 'I like that it's four days in a row. Gives me a long weekend each week.'

'You'll need it,' Colin says, turning back to his *mise en place*, to his, everything in its place.

That's the second hump in the road out of the way. I don't give a flying fuck what the hours are or how busy the joint gets. I can do this job from a hospital bed if I have to. I could be fucking the kitchenhand up the arse during morning prep and still be whistling on my way out the door.

Got to get this job. Need money.

I feel a vague pain in my knees that is starting to irritate me. It's a pain that, as the withdrawal gets further along, will become so infuriating, that I'll take to lashing out in all the wrong ways. I won't do it at work. I never have. I'm not a screamer or a ranter or piss-taker. I'm just here to dish out the plates and take home the pay. And I don't like working with chefs who are screamers. It annoys the fuck out of me. Either suck it up and turn that chaos into something resembling order, or get the fuck out.

'The pans start flying at midday then, chef?' I ask.

'Bang on twelve they come for us, Jimmy,' he replies.

I can already tell he's settled into the idea of giving me a trial. He'll just let this one work itself out, let me sink or swim.

'And what time do you close for a break?' I ask.

'Last orders at three for lunch and nine for dinner. No exceptions,' he adds emphatically.

'Cool,' I say. 'And does Rosie run the floor or is she just...?' I ask, like, she's fairly up-the-fucking-duff right about now, Chef.

'She doesn't do service. She just comes in with me in the mornings and helps with the set up. Gets the register organised and does some ordering. She's been no good to us for the last six months actually,' he jokes.

'Yeah, right...so are the new guys going to run the floor themselves or...?' and he can hear where I'm going with this. The number of joints I've seen go to pus when a manager steps in, where once an owner-operator stood, is not insignificant.

‘Oh, I think they want to try and manage things for a while...they’ve got a friend of theirs who is going to run the floor,’ he says, like, maybe it could work.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I say semi-positive. ‘I’m sure it’ll all work out.’

‘The friend is going to move in upstairs I think. We just use it as a store-room now but it’s a flat, so I’m sure that could work.’

‘Yeah, no, sounds good,’ I say. And I know he just wants some Johnny to march in here and be able to do the job so he can get the fuck out. He knows what’s going to happen to the business within the first six months of him leaving. It’s going to go tits-up and there won’t be anything anyone can do about it because, from what he’s saying, no one with enough incentive to stop that happening will be within striking distance.

‘Here...let me help you out with that, Chef,’ I say, pulling a knife out from my case. ‘No good standing around doing nothing,’ I say.

‘Yeah, no worries,’ he says and slides a box of mushrooms across the bench. ‘We need to chop a box of these for service.’

‘Sweet,’ I say, as I button up my jacket and tie an apron on. ‘Love those ’shrooms,’ I say, as I push one into my mouth, chewing like an over-appreciative foodie or a starving African straight off the telly.

‘Sliced, diced or chopped?’ I ask.

‘Sliced. Like these ones,’ Colin says.

‘Cool,’ I say and reach for his steel. I run my vegetable knife over the sharpener like I bounced out of the womb doing it.

‘I guess a job like this is about the *mise en place*, Chef?’ I ask.

‘Four hours of it every morning and it’s a big four hours. You’ve got to have the gas switched on from eight o’clock and knives slicing from five past or you’re never going to make it.’

I shoulder my way into the tight space where Colin stands; bully my way right in there.

‘Oh, sorry,’ he says, a little put out.

‘Tight space, Chef,’ I say unapologetically. ‘I can see why you only use one chef.’

There’s no good just standing on the fringes waiting for things to work out. It’s important at this stage of proceedings to take some ownership of the

space. Within the next four hours I have to shut the interview process down if I want to stroll in at eight o'clock tomorrow morning and start earning some coin.

I feel the various nutrients within the flesh of the mushroom hit my gut and become rapidly absorbed into my blood stream. There's some serious emergency style breaking down of food matter happening. It's survival time, but I don't want to start shovelling too many things into my mouth because that wouldn't be cool. That would be weird and I've got enough weirdo type problems to deal with in my private domain without dragging them into work with me.

I slice those mushrooms like a factory-line robot. I blitz them into submission. Knife skills are very important when someone is assessing a chef's ability. Nothing will give a chef good knife skills other than time spent chopping. As I get through each dozen or so mushrooms I slide them off my chopping board and into a container.

'Can you do pastry, Jimmy?' Colin asks.

'Not my favourite section, Chef, but I've done enough to know my choux from my puff.' And it would be as weak as piss, in any circumstances whatsoever, to admit to a love for pastry. That's just the way it is. This job isn't for a pastry chef so it's important to all the chefs that have ever gone before me to acknowledge that cunts who end up in pastry aren't real chefs. They're cunts. It's not a logical thing. It's just the way it is among chefs in the hierarchy of the kitchen. Line chefs are the worker bees, busy with everything and able to stroll in and out of any section and do what's required with enough panache to send it out on a plate.

'We do five desserts every day, which are out the front in the fridge. Did you see them on the way in?'

'Yeah, the cake fridge looked good, Chef. You do all those?' I ask.

'Glenn and myself do whatever's required on the day. We never have to do everything. It's about prepping two or three desserts rather than making only one. At worse, you might have to do three cakes and pull a couple from the cool room.'

'You sell that much every day?' I ask.

'Every day. It's busy, Jimmy,' he emphasises again.

‘Yeah, well... I’m sure if you’ve got the recipes and I get to see you make it I’ll be able to work it out pretty quick, Chef,’ I say.

‘You’ll pick it up, you think?’ he asks, like, here’s hoping sunshine.

‘I’ll give it my best, Chef,’ I say.

There are two skills that a line chef requires in order to be able to slide in and out of whatever kitchen is offering a decent wage: a photographic memory and an ability to absorb chaos and churn that chaos into order, into pretty plates of food. I don’t believe that anyone’s got a perfect photographic memory, or that such a thing exists, but it’s important to be able to see someone do something and then be able to repeat that process. It’s no good, after you’ve done your apprenticeship, to muddle about trying to get everything right over four or five attempts. A capacity to watch, learn, and repeat is a very similar skill to whatever it is that makes a person streetwise. If you get robbed or bashed down a back alley at the Cross, you learn from that experience to avoid the street next time; or you take a knife and a bucket of bravado if you have no choice. It’s vital to learn things quickly. But the skill is only acquired after sufficient time spent in a bunch of kitchens because what comes from that experience is the ability to reduce each section of the kitchen to a few basic principles. Pastry section, which scares too many chefs because they never spent enough time learning the basics, requires an understanding about two things: an appreciation that it is divided into wet and dry ingredients, and knowledge about the importance of temperature in both the preparation and cooking processes.

‘You start off with pastry in the morning, Chef?’ I ask, adding, ‘when the kitchen’s cool?’

And he’s relieved to hear that. I’m beginning to feel the love.

‘That’s right,’ he says. ‘You have to do it first thing. You obviously need the oven on... there’s no air-conditioned glass cage,’ he laughs. ‘But I just open the windows up and get it done by nine. It never takes more than an hour to get the basics out of the way. I generally decorate over the course of the morning in the cool room.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ I say, with enough confidence to suggest I know what he’s talking about.

Things go wrong in pastry because of the temperature of eggs, butter,

flour and machinery. Basically, everything needs to start off cool. Lots of things will need to be heated or melted or combined, but if everything starts off warm and runny, you're in a world of pain. Nothing's going to rise or set or combine in the ways it needs to.

There are many things that I don't understand in regards to the science of how things work in kitchens. I've got other hobbies that take up far too much of my time to give those things the attention they deserve. I never wanted to be the world's greatest chef; the hospitality industry chose me and I've just done my best to get on with things and earn a crust; try and sort out what the river means.

'Where'd you work in Europe?' Colin asks.

'A couple of places in Paris,' I say, as I scrape a pile of sliced mushrooms into the container. 'I spent about a year travelling around Europe and I wanted to spend as much time as I could in France, get to the bottom of some of Escoffier's tricks, you know?' I say, like, isn't that something every chef wants to do?

'Sure,' says Colin, but I can tell straight up he hasn't bothered himself.

'One of the restaurants had a Michelin star and the other one was just my local where I used to hang out most days and ended up working in the kitchen.'

'Michelin star,' Colin repeats, semi-impressed.

'Yeah, but it's no big deal over there... I mean it is, everyone wants one, but there's about a million joints that have got one. There are so many restaurants, and so many good ones, that you might go past two or three little places that have stars on their door on your way to the Met.'

'It's the home of it all I guess,' says Colin.

'Yeah, well, it was good to learn a few of the basics off the people who invented the language... and it's the language thing that I wanted to get to the bottom of as much as anything else,' I say.

'You learnt to slice all right, too,' Colin says.

'What's next?' I say, sliding the last of the mushrooms off my board and into a container.

'The kitchenhand starts in a minute,' Colin says, looking at the clock. 'Eleven o'clock every morning, either Lisa or Joe come in, and get everything back to a semi-respectable state so we can do lunch.'

‘They stay right through?’ I ask.

‘No, there’s a couple of young kids who do the nights. Joe does a couple of doubles, he’s full-time, but other than that, we use local kids who come in asking for work. They generally find a replacement among their friends if they have to leave.’

And Joe walks in right on cue looking like every other piece of kitchen scum I’ve ever worked with.

‘Joe,’ Colin calls.

‘Morning, Chef,’ Joe calls back.

‘This is Jimmy,’ Colin says. ‘He’s doing a trial with us.’

‘No worries,’ Joe says, adding another greeting to his first one. ‘Morning, Chef.’

‘Hey, Joe,’ I say. ‘Pretty busy place I hear.’

‘Can get a bit hectic,’ Joe muses as he runs a sink and fires up the dishwasher.

‘Let me know if I do anything wrong,’ I add.

‘No worries,’ Joe says, like he’s seen it all before.

‘He’ll have no trouble doing that,’ Colin says.

‘Good,’ I say, ‘wouldn’t want to get off on the wrong foot. What’s next, Chef?’ I ask, not wanting to draw attention to the idea that, in my world at least, I’ve already got the job.

‘You can slice a bag of onions if you like,’ says Colin, before predicting my next question. ‘Diced.’

‘*Oui*, Chef,’ I reply and go out the kitchen door to the storage area. ‘Mind if I check out the cool room, Chef?’

‘No, that’s fine,’ Colin replies.

I slide the cool room door open. In an instant, the familiarity of the smell overwhelms me. I dry retch into my sleeve. All the prepared food is so organised, so fucking neatly arranged it makes me sick.

It’s the pragmatics of life, what it takes to survive, to pay the rent and keep the gas switched on that sickens me. I hate fucking camping. I’m no hippie. I don’t want to downsize into some tent in a forest. I just want some fucking time and space to do what I have to do. All this surviving is killing me.

Colin steps into the cool room behind me.

‘Looks organised,’ I say.

‘Has to be,’ says Colin, like I’ve really got no idea what I’m about to get myself into.

‘Glenn’s pretty organised then?’ I ask.

‘You’ll have no problems there. He’s been with me for three years. He’s solid,’ Colin assures me. ‘Basically, this is the system...’

Colin takes a deep breath and explains what’s on each shelf. He’s done this so many times over the last few years as he’s trained and trialled other chefs, that the sound of it, the pure repetition about the order of things, is almost more than he can bear.

My knees have seized up and I begin to cry. I keep my back to Colin as I reach up and around the cool room shelves, feigning an obscure form of interest.

Colin drones on about nothing in particular.

How I hate everything about the river. It crashes over me in the most unexpected ways. It is consuming me. I stand, like some weird, modern day slave, crying in a cool room, while all around me the world is laughing.

‘It’s so...organised,’ I repeat, as if...I’m almost breathlessly astonished. ‘It’s all about the *mise en place*, right?’ I say to Colin.

And I must be freaking Colin out because he says, ‘I’ll grab the onions then,’ and walks out.

The thing about any cool room is that it’s divided into sections. Larder, protein, pastry, sauce; they are the main four sections of any commercial kitchen, doesn’t matter what the cuisine is or which part of the world the head chef is from. After enough years spent on the pans, in a wide enough variety of kitchens, cooking, which is simply the art of turning raw ingredients into representations of pleasure and perceptions of value, becomes one thing. Every dish, outside of pastry section, can be reduced to protein, vegetables and starch. Every sauce that goes with every dish is a combination of those things as well. It was weird the first time I really understood that; the first time I saw through all the representations and all the effort and menus and recipes and sweat. It’s so fucking basic it kills me.

I realise in this moment that I’ll never be a great chef, simply because I don’t have memories that are nostalgic in nature. The river was never clear

for me. I don't know why. Because cooking chose me at fifteen years of age, it is only ever a means of survival, an extension of the pain that powers my journey through the pus and blood and cum.

Hospitality is about survival.

I got enculturated into knowing the value of what it means to survive from a very early age. The most hectic, most fucked-up, waiter-frenzied service in the world, is small beer compared to where I come from. I've always been able to keep a sense that the service I was cooking would end; that in an hour or so, everything was going to be all right and the river of pus would calm the fuck back down. Don't panic; and don't lose a sense of knowing that the utter lack of control that I feel during the peak of a service will pass.

I have no sense of how long I've been standing in the cool room. I'm overwhelmed with a sense of needing to dice those onions. I walk out and slide the door closed behind me. I head back into the kitchen, pick up my knife, and slice the bag open that Colin brought in for me.

'Everything all right?' Colin asks.

'Yeah, no, sorry about that,' I reply, as I tip the onions into a bucket. I start topping and tailing them, slicing each one in half.

'Just had *déjà vu* I think.'

I'm super keen to move things on. 'You been here long, Joe?' I call over to the broken piece-of-shit at the sink.

'Long enough,' Joe replies as he sloshes pots into his sink.

'Bye, Honey,' Rosie calls into the kitchen at Colin.

And Colin walks out from his position by the stove and goes to have a chat with his wife.

'Bye, Joe,' she says, and then smiles and waves at me.

Fuck knows what Colin is telling her. What could he say 'There's a fucking psycho in the kitchen and I don't know how he got in here?'

'You look like you're hanging out,' Joe says, like someone might say, Pass the pepper, cunt.

'Yeah, just hanging out in the kitchen,' I reply. And I say it in such a way that implies I've got no problem walking over there and finding another use for my knife.

'Don't know why you'd do it to yourself,' Joe says all wise and world-weary.

'Do what to yourself?' Colin asks as he walks back and claims his place in front of the stove.

'Oh, Joe thinks I should cut the onions under running water,' I say.

'Yeah, right,' Joe snorts.

'We need the whole bag diced?' I ask Colin.

'Yep. That will be enough for the week,' Colin replies. 'I've just got to go out to the car with Rosie for a minute,' Colin says, grabbing his keys and wallet. 'And then we'll clean up and get ready for service.'

'*Oui, Chef,*' I reply.

And Joe just nods and snorts into the sink.

The thing about the social life of kitchens is that it's just an illusion of sociability. People drink and smoke together, shoot the breeze and put up with whoever is sharing the space at a particular time, but it's a set of social interactions that are filled with the hierarchies and petty resentments of the commercial domain. The lines between what constitutes the social, private and commercial domains overlap and bleed into each other, but in here, in the heat, grease and grime of a commercial kitchen, what passes for social is the same as in any prison. People either get on with each other or they go to war. Everyone is just thrown together by the currents of the river.

Joe and I are going to get along fine. He's so beaten down and turned in on himself that he doesn't even know how much he needs to talk with someone. His head is raging between over-activity and a shut-off prison. The way he made me as a junkie in the first five minutes of meeting me is an invitation to party. He won't do smack, and there'll be all sorts of weirded out reasons why he won't, but he'll have his poison. And I'm looking forward to sharing some of it with him.

'What's your poison, Joe?' I ask.

'Dirty pots and pans,' says Joe, like, fuck-off cunt, I'm better than any junkie scum.

'You a porno freak?' I ask.

'Fuck off, junkie,' snarls Joe. And it's a good snarl. He stares right into me with a look that's heavy with meaning. Maybe his mummy shoots smack or

his little niece died from an overdose – it hardly matters – but I look forward to the reasons why junkies are the lowest of the low, spilling out of him.

And then a waitress strolls into the kitchen like sex on legs. I keep slicing and dicing while I check out everything I can about her tits and her eyes and her face and her ears and her...

‘Lee, this is Jimmy,’ says Colin as he strolls back into the kitchen. ‘He’s doing a trial with us.’

‘Hi, Jimmy,’ Lee waves over at me.

‘Hey,’ I say.

‘Lee helps out in the kitchen some nights too, washing up,’ says Colin like it’s no news at all.

For me, it’s like someone saying they’ve found a cure for cancer – and I just know I’ve got all types of cancer – but seeing Lee, well, I’m all set to be part of the solution again. Life’s okay, life’s not so bad. Shit, things might even turn out all right. Maybe I don’t have to be such great friends with Joe after all.

‘Well you sure do make a cuter kitchenhand than Joe, Lee,’ I say, slicing as I do.

And Lee giggles and Joe snorts and everyone goes about their business.

4

THE THOUGHT OF fucking Lee inspires me. I’m walking home; I’m feeling all right. I’m feeling better than I should. It’s dark. For the most part, cunts are home, tucked up in front of the television. There’s no nightlife to speak of, no one walking the streets and hanging out. Another night in suburbia. I spark up a cigarette. My nose is running with water. My knees have rocks in them and my calf muscles are rolling up and down in angry spasms. They really need a shot of smack. It’s not negotiable for them. They’re insisting and angry and hurt that I’ve removed the one true thing they need.

I must drink more water.

Lunch service was busy. I stood back and watched Colin churn it out. He was on autopilot for the most part. The organisation of his *mise en place* was inspirational. He didn’t have to move from his station. When something ran

out, he bent down and pulled another container of whatever it was he needed from his reach-in service fridge. After watching him for an hour, I knew I would be able to do the job.

The menu at Café Dolce is a hybrid of French and Italian. It's the Old West getting chopped, sliced, diced, mixed up, pan-fried and served as a hybrid cuisine of the New West. There are six pasta dishes on the menu that are all al-a-carte, or cooked in a pan to order. There are five main dishes that use cheap cuts of protein. Lee does the desserts. There were a couple of other waitresses on the floor but none of us are going to be close.

The way Lee's arse moves when she walks got me more animated than I've been in months.

I've decided to go on a total abstinence model. I'm off the lot. No pot, no pills, no drinking and no smack. I'm clean. It's day one but I'm doing it. I need to keep walking.

Dinner was fine. Colin let me have a go on the pans and I didn't leave the station. The menu is written up on a piece of paper above the stove anyway, which lists every ingredient in every dish. He commented a few times, less of that, more of this, don't forget the snow peas. I stood and delivered.

Joe hates me so bad it's killing him. There's something so pathetic driving that guy...it's going to be a real gas drilling down and finding out what it is. And Lee is keen. I don't know why. I've never figured out what makes two people click, but when it does I've always rolled with it.

I can't afford to rush it with Lee. I'm not in a good way.

Houses glow beneath the streetlights. Screens flicker with representations of the river; representations that the people watching hope will make sense of things. Everyone's a member of the audience. That's what people in the New West are, consumers of time, eager to be entertained. People have forgotten that they are part of something more vulnerable than that: part of a river that's rolling through space; part of something so utterly random that... maybe that's why we all watch in the first place. It's easier than swimming in the pus and the blood and the cum. It's easier to consume leisure time than to mix it up on the streets, celebrating what it means to be alive in this fucked-up moment of the river's flow.

There's a party going on somewhere. Freaks who have found a home up

at the Cross will be going about their business with all their usual bravado. The lights will still be on when I get through my latest detox. Some of the faces will have changed. Junkies are in and out of jail quicker than a cattle press up there. It's a comedy.

I turn into River Street, which is quieter and darker than the rest of the streets along the way. The walk only takes about twenty minutes. I decide to walk home every night. I won't be doing it in the morning. There's only one thing worse than catching a bus at morning peak hour and that's walking along outside of it. Because no one has anything better to do than stare out their windows; it's like you're on display. Besides, I don't like to turn up to work in a sweat. I like to start the day clean and fresh.

Lee is nineteen. She's only been at the café six weeks. Workplace loyalties haven't been set in stone. She'll still be the object of gossip rather than at the centre of things. She's looking for adventure. I'm looking to get clean and straight and free from drugs. It's a paradox that's going to have a happy ending for both of us. We'll find what we're looking for. Joe will look on with all the bitterness of every other piece-of-shit kitchen scum I've ever worked with.

I fucking blitzed dinner. I haven't been in a job where it's necessary to work the pans in such a dynamic way for a while. The adrenaline surged at six o'clock and didn't stop coursing through my system until the final order. I'm still high. Getting to sleep is going to be a real pain. I don't need Valium. Valium is cheating. I'm clean.

I slide the key into the lock of my rented terrace. The darkness of the joint washes through me. I've really got to clean this place up, smoke the fucker out. There's an energy happening at 124 River Street that is not inspirational. It's dark and moody and deep. And I know that's just what Lee is looking for but I'm not only that. At least I can't afford to be. Being nothing more than a dark prince has left me stone broke with a rabbit I can't outrun. If I was on the way up, or in the first few weeks of a session, no problem, come on in. But I'm not. I'm at the end of a long run. I'm hurting. I feel like it's my first day at school. Everything is sunny-side up; everything is raw.

I turn on the shower and let the steam build. I strip off and sit on the edge of the tub. My boney chest is breathing hard from the walk. Every muscle and every wound is screeching. My blood is fighting with itself. It's rushing about

my entire body, searching for what it lacks. Each nerve ending is a twisted knot of hate and rage. They know what they want; they don't care about money or shame or Lee. They want a shot of smack in the neck.

I feel better under the shower. The water pounds my head. I won't get out until the river runs dry. I promise myself I'll change the sheets. If I'm going to do this, I've got to set things up like a hospital. Except for the fourteen hours I'm at work.

Colin was impressed enough with my efforts to put me on a paid trial starting tomorrow. The first day is always the hardest. The only person who can fuck things up now is me. No one he interviews can trial until Colin's sorted out whether I can do the job or not. It's mine to lose.

I soap up real good. I wash my hair and blow as much water out of my nose as I can. It keeps running faster, the more I clear it.

I've been in worse fixes. I've detoxed on the streets without any coin. And waking up hard beneath a shrub in a park, in a doorway or train station, is never fun. There's no romance. There are no pillows or blankets or privacy, no toilet or bathroom or hot running water. Everything is on display when you wake up on the streets. And cunts stare. It's just what cunts do. I've tried to learn to turn things around before I end up on the street, to get a plan going and stick with it. I've learnt to employ my survival skills the best I can.

I brush my teeth and shave my face. I crouch down and try and placate my screaming legs. I really don't know why legs need heroin like they do. Their hunger always takes me by surprise. For the most part I spend my life unaware of my legs. Then I hang out and my legs get a speaking part. It's a role so filled with desperate need that sometimes it drives me outside and onto the street and up to the front door of a stranger's home. From there, those angry legs lash out and kick the door free from its locks. Kick, kick, kick...fucking kick, smash. They all come good. Angry legs are an awesome weapon. Inside the stranger's home, electronic items get picked up and tucked away for a quick jog to the hockshop. Then it's onto a bus or into a cab – depending on whether the stranger was an Apple freak or not – and up to the dealer's house or the Cross. The legs of every junkie are a weapon and a curse.

I crouch down in the shower and plant my feet until my arse touches the tub. It stops the blood flowing to the lower half of my legs. I stand up and

the blood runs freely and quickly to my toes. I try to wash the fuckers out and keep my legs inside the house and off the streets until the morning bell.

The hot water begins to wane and I turn off the taps. I like to get out of the shower steaming. I grab two clean towels and wrap them around me. I sit on the edge of the tub and catch my breath. I smell good. I smell like shampoo and soap and toothpaste. Total abstinence. What a gas.

Pleasure isn't all about using drugs or eating food or consuming things. There's an obscure pleasure that comes from abstinence. It's the pleasure of willpower, of defeating the flow of the river. Like how a teenage girl with anorexia gets stoned pushing things around on a plate – resisting her screaming hunger – so to, hanging out has its own rewards. You've got to have a decent pain threshold, which far too many cunts don't, but if you do, abstinence is a game of pleasure versus pain.

I get off the tub and walk out of the bathroom. The hallway is lit up with red light globes.

I pull the sheets off my bed and grab my one clean set. I'm going to look after myself now, enter into a little self-nurture. I'm going to get clean, stick with the job, and fall in love with Lee. I've got a plan. Things are not nearly as dark as they were this morning.

I change the pillowcases and make the bed. I dry my hair, turn off the lights, and crawl inside the clean linen.

I start shaking. I'm cold. I pull the blankets tighter. Fuck it. Who am I kidding? I get up and walk out to the kitchen to get a jug of water. I'm going to sweat pus tonight.

I drink a litre of water standing at the sink. I refill the jug. I open the drawer that contains all my ancillary drugs: Valium, Rohypnol, Codeine, Oxycontin, pot... I could get nicely stoned. I grab a plastic bag and throw the drugs in it. I tie the bag up tight and open the drawer where I throw my writing. The drawer is filled with notebooks and pens, scraps of paper and random things I've written on. There's no order to what I write, no cataloguing or cohesive narrative. It's strictly cut and paste. Write and rave and toss it in.

The ability to meld chaos into order during service is a completely different skill to the cooking that's required in order to prepare a restaurant's

ingredients for service. Being a line cook, or a-la-carte chef, is a skill that's less common than being able to cook a decent sauce or take apart a side of beef. You're either born with a capacity to suck up the stress and churn out the plates, or you get yourself into a kitchen with so many chefs on the line that, what everyone is expected to do in order to get through a hectic service is so little that any Johnny can squeeze on the line and not make a fool of himself.

I'm a cowboy, a line cook that comes and goes from places as it pleases me. I've been sacked plenty of times but only for the junk on a couple of occasions. I mainly walk for weirdo types of power relations. After a while in any job, the junk consumes me, at least to the point where I'm just a robot surviving on the line. And in that way, work becomes a trap. A set of steel jaws that keeps me from doing what I feel I must. What it takes to keep a roof over my head and pay the bills stresses me out to the point where I have to use drugs. None of it makes any sense at all without heroin to grease the wheels. Why the fuck would you bother? And then the heroin becomes a habit that means I can't afford to leave work, even if everyone is pissing me off. Writing myself to sleep is my only consolation.

Most jobs work out all right. Most places have a Lee or a Caroline or a Jane...or, at the very least, a miserable cunt called Joe.

The social life that comes from getting a job is a real gas. The relationships have none of the poetry of friends on the street, but because everyone's a prisoner in the same joint at the same time, you figure you may as well try and get on with the people.

All suffering ends eventually. Breaking any habit is hard. Doesn't matter if it's picking your nose or playing with your cock. What's required to build awareness around acting on a habit is difficult. But it's not pleasure free.

I watched a bird die once. It got hit by a car and couldn't fly. The best it could manage to do was roll around awkwardly and try and do what it had always done. Watching the bird come to terms with its new reality was sad. I couldn't understand why it was unable to comprehend that the game had changed. There was going to be no more flying around, digging up worms, or fucking Mrs Bird. The grille of the car had put an end to all that. But the bird kept trying to change the reality of its situation. And then it stopped

flapping and hopping and just looked around at things for a while. Then it died. It was instructive. When the bird stopped resisting its habit of flying and gave into its new reality, the bird found peace. The pus that animated it vaporised into nothingness. I don't think birds wonder about things the same way people do. I'm sure they feel things, have senses, and communicate with other birds and animals, but they don't represent what it means to have those capacities. They just feel them and sense and whistle them and let the river take its course. Which is the reason I keep dragging a pen and paper out of the drawer. I'm a homo sapien, which means I'm an animal that was born with a capacity to wonder about my place in the world, to wonder what all the pus means. I figure it's the only thing that separates me from the birds and the dolphins and the ants and the cows: an ability to wonder about my place in the world and somehow represent those wonderings. To not write those things down or paint them or sing them – or to not wonder about anything at all – seems to me the greatest crime of all.

I throw the pen and paper inside the drawer with the drugs. I feel so low. I understand clearly, like the sun is bright, that I brought all this on myself. No one else stuck needles into my arms, my feet, my neck. No one forced me to be a chef that moves from place to place. I can do anything I want. That's why I'm getting straight. To prove to myself how powerful I am...what I'm capable of achieving. It's a bullshit challenge but so is climbing a mountain. No one insisted anyone should climb the highest peak, except the person that did. Everything's a metaphor, a representation of a capacity to wonder. What if, what is, how should I, what will happen when...all just questions that speak to the same evolutionary ability to wonder what the pus and blood and cum is all about.

Day one is the hardest. It's survival of the fittest. I can do this. I walk into the bathroom and try to recall yesterday's pleasures. The carpet in the dressing room seems old and out of date; the tiles and dripping water, a recipe for mould. None of these things matter when I'm stoned. All the small problems of life are obsolete. There's nothing to consider except the flow of the river. And why should a person give a fuck about mould? Why is the world set up in such a way that mould, and the removal of mould, is a billion-dollar industry? So much time and energy and money are spent on the idea of mould and its

eradication. It seems such a strange thing – that life in the river shouldn't somehow have a place for mould in bathrooms.

I need to sleep tonight but I can feel the rage beginning. My biggest problem now is trying to find a way of dealing with the anger. It's going to burn my insides out. I will become so incensed at the smallest transgression, so immolated with contempt, that no one around me is safe. I will lash out. There is nothing I can do. There is no possible way to somehow not embody the process of detoxification. The drugs need to find their way out of my bloodstream. They will do so in their own time. My legs will insist I change my mind about not heading out onto the streets.

Addiction is habit gone mad. People think it's a disease, or an inescapable certainty, that if they take the first of whatever is their poison, there's no going back until all the poison in the world is gone. It's all bullshit; using any drug is just a difficult habit to break. What's also difficult is not replacing that habit with something equally destructive. It may even be the most difficult of things to avoid, but people do it. Habits come and go.

I spark up a cigarette and put the kettle on. There won't be any sleep. I may have to watch the Earth roll around to greet the sun. The sun doesn't fucking rise. Cunts are obsessed with the idea of being at the centre of things. There is no fucking centre. There will be no fucking peace on Earth and the reason why is because what drives the river is power. And power insists on sorting shit out through the only means at power's disposal: conflict, argument, debate and war. There is no *outside* the river. Everything is caught in the river's flow, which churns with power and a constant flux of meanings. Peace is just an air bubble. It's nice while it lasts. People who get disappointed when the air bubble pops are toddlers on a tit. Wake up and go and buy a different set of tits; buy a cunt or an arse or the mouth of a dog.

I'm so glad Lee is not around me now. I'd make a mess of things. I'd ruin it all before it has a chance to become something nice. She's the best kind of inspiration. I know she's not going to make everything all right, change the story of my past, but she'll bring in some different shades of grey. I'm not generally keen on pastels, but for her, I'd wear pink and green...maybe even powder blue.

I open a box of peppermint tea that I bought when I knew my habit

was getting out of hand. Peppermint is good for detox. I'm damn sure it's not going to make hanging out any better in ways I will appreciate, but I'm determined not to make things worse. I could take some pills; I could finish off the cognac. There's plenty of pot that would take the edge off things. But I'm in a forest, there's a ribbon around a tree... somewhere. If I don't panic, if I stay calm, even if it's three o'clock in the fucking morning, I'll find the ribbon and my way home. It's what I'm trained to do. I'm a survivor. I can absorb chaos until I'm so full of it I've got no choice but to puke it up into something that looks like order; like pleasure on a plate.

5

I WAKE UP with the smell of sweat everywhere.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' I say to no one in particular. Everything's gone bad, everything's off. My legs are in spasms. The coin-sized wounds in the crux of my arms are running with pus and blood. My sweat is ripe with chemicals. I don't just smell of smack and cognac but also of disinfectant and toilet water. I have absorbed King's Cross into my being; mainlined the neon strip.

'Fuck,' I yell at myself, disgusted.

I rip the sheets off my bed, defy my joints and limbs and muscles and nerves, and run to the bathroom. My stomach is churning. I dry retch in the bath I turn on the shower. I grab a cake of soap and start lathering up before the water is warm enough to get under. I rub soap all over my body. I rub it into my face and arse, my feet and ears. I stick my head under the cold water and wet my hair. I pour a bottle of shampoo into it and rub my scalp until it's sore.

The water warms up and I get under. I become aware that I'm groaning in pain. Everything hurts, everything's fucked and broken and wrong. There is no light or sweet, no nice or neat. Everything is black and green and blue.

I lash out and punch the tiles. I punch them harder. I start crying. I lean my forehead against the wall and sob beneath the running water and steam. Why do I do this to myself?

Suddenly the idea of time becomes critical. I jump out of the shower and race to the kitchen to check the clock.

'Fuck.'

I race back to the shower and turn it off, grab a towel, and run to the bedroom. I pull my clothes on over my sores and scabs and aching everything. I grab my wallet, keys and cigarettes.

I slam the door behind me.

I run all the way to work. I defy everything I feel. I race like a panicked goat; like a goat that should be in a mountain somewhere but finds itself in morning traffic.

I crash through the front door of Café Dolce and greet Rosie who's setting up the tables.

'Hi,' I call out and rush straight past her.

'Hi,' she calls back.

In the kitchen, Colin is waiting.

'Right,' he says. 'You ready to go?'

'Ready, Chef,' I say, sweat running off me.

Colin is so annoyed that I'm five minutes late that he doesn't bother to check me out too well. It's obvious I've been running; obvious I'm somewhat desperate. For Colin, all those signs read as someone who slept in rather than a junkie hanging out.

I'm glad Joe isn't here. I'd smash Joe in the face if he were standing at his sink with his stupid, bitter smile. I'd grab the cunt's head and slam it into the glass rack. And I'd keep slamming it into the broken glass, up and down, up and down...

'First thing you do is turn the oven on to gas mark four,' Colin says, as I grab my jacket and apron, a notebook and a pen. I write shit down while I dress. 'Then walk out to the cake fridge and see what you need,' says Colin. 'I'm just going to keep things real simple today and see how much you retain. Are you okay to do everything by yourself tomorrow?' he asks. 'I'll be here but I'll leave you to do it.'

'Yes, Chef,' I say, trying to slow my breathing down. 'Sorry I'm late.'

'Don't worry about it. You'll either make it through tomorrow or you won't,' he says, pissed off, but still committed to giving me a trial.

'I'll make it, Chef,' I say. 'Couldn't fucking sleep last night after service. Been a while since the adrenaline's pumped like that.'

‘Yeah,’ Colin smiles and settles down a bit. ‘It was a busy service. You did okay.’

‘Thanks, Chef,’ I say, doing up the string around my apron. My chef’s jacket is on, sort of. I slick back my hair. ‘I won’t be late again.’

‘Okay,’ he says. ‘Now come over here and check out the fridge. Basically, whenever any of the desserts are half gone or more, we bake another one. So just start by making a list of whatever it is we need today.’

‘*Oui*, Chef,’ I say. ‘What’s this one called?’ I ask, pointing out a cake that’s been reduced to two serves.

‘That’s the coffee *choux*,’ he says. ‘We pretty much need to do that one every day. You can’t make it ahead of when we need it because the toffee melts and choux pastry goes soft in the cool room.’

I’m busy writing everything down. My heart rate is still high but my breathing is getting back to normal. I become aware that I haven’t had a cigarette or a coffee, let alone a shot of smack. I am so fucking raw. Everything is bleeding. I could melt into a pile of pus on the restaurant tiles, collapse, like a soufflé hit with water. I’ve got nothing of substance left anywhere inside me. What remains is meaningless; surplus shit. Things are precarious. Things could go either fucking way.

‘So basically, we need four desserts,’ Colin drones on. ‘A coffee *choux*, a strawberry match, a trifle and a pecan. Now,’ he says, like, here comes a surprise, ‘what we do is, we take our list out to the cool room and see what we’ve got in stock.’

‘Cool,’ I say, like, yes, this is exciting.

Really, shit could go either fucking way.

‘Would you boys like a coffee?’ Rosie asks.

‘That would be awesome,’ I reply before Colin has a chance to say something completely fucked like ‘Maybe in half an hour, sweetheart’.

I could be dead in half an hour. This could be the last coffee I ever have the pleasure of drinking.

‘How do you have it, Jimmy?’ Rosie asks.

‘White with three thanks, Rosie,’ I reply with a smile. I would have preferred six sugars but I’m already off to a bad start and I don’t want to appear more needy for sustenance than I am.

‘Thanks, sweetheart,’ Colin says, in such a way that convinces me I was right to answer Rosie as quickly as I did.

‘Now, let’s check out the cool room,’ Colin says again.

‘Time’s getting away from us already, Chef,’ I say, as I follow Colin out through the kitchen.

As Colin talks, I slow my breathing down and take stock of things. I am in a fairly high degree of pain and discomfort. ‘About eleven out of ten,’ I answer the imaginary triage nurse. I should be cooped up inside a hospital or detox unit in a pair of second-hand pyjamas with the collar turned up. I should be smoking a cigarette on a grimy balcony while nurses and cleaners work around my decaying body. But that’s not the quality of problem I have today. I’m a fucking survivor. I was born to get on with things when other junkies drop dead around me. Stay calm, don’t panic, just float to the top of the wave and keep swimming. You’ll work yourself out of the rip.

‘So we have the pecan and the strawberry match ready to go. What we do now, is take these two out of the cool room and put them in the kitchen.’

Colin follows out his own instructions while I tag along behind him. I write everything down in such a way that indicates reverence. I’m on the scent of a master, every instruction an insight into the pus.

I need this job.

I could cut my legs off and be quite happy about it. Really, things would calm the fuck down if my legs no longer existed. I picture smashing them into a side of a bus while riding a motorbike. The daydream is pure pleasure. It’s the only way I have of taking the fight up to my legs, which are winning the battle with all three judges. My legs are out-punching, out-jabbing and out-moving me every step of the way. I’m a lightweight in a heavyweight ring...against a pair of legs. The legs are all fucking over me.

‘So cross those two off your list, Jimmy,’ says Colin.

‘*Oui, Chef,*’ I say and diligently draw a line through the two already prepared pastry items. Check one – fucking – two.

‘Then we grab two clean cake plates and take these pastries straight out to the service fridge,’ Colin says.

‘Do we portion up what’s left of the one that’s out there, Chef?’ I ask, like I’m switched on; I’m way the fuck ahead of you, old mate. But really, I’ve

seen it all before. I'm grateful for the attention to detail he's going into about what I'm going to be required to do tomorrow, but I could make a fist of it now if he dropped dead and left me with his notebook. And fuck the recipes anyway, take them to the grave; I could knock up half a dozen more enticing things than these cakes anyway.

'Here you go, boys,' says Rosie, as she sets two coffees down on the kitchen bench.

'Thanks so much, Rosie,' I say and reach straight for my cup and take a slug. It burns the shit out of my mouth but it's a pleasant distraction from what's happening with my legs.

'Ah,' I say out loud. 'That's the best coffee I've had in months,' I lie. The coffee is crap but I'm just a pile of pus glued together so I figure it's not necessary to reach out to the *Good Food Guide* just yet.

Colin checks me out a little better than he bothered to this morning. I take another shot of coffee.

'Ah,' I say again, like, what are you looking at, cunt? I'm just a young fella enjoying a brewski.

'What time did you get to sleep, Jimmy?' Colin asks with a dumb smile.

'About five I reckon, Chef,' I say. 'Didn't want to have a drink or a smoke or anything...to come down after service, you know. I find if I start off a job that way it doesn't end well, so I just cleaned up the house and stuff until the sun started coming up,' I reply.

'Yeah,' says Colin slowly. 'No good getting off on the wrong foot.'

'I actually haven't had a cigarette yet either, Chef,' I say. 'I reckon if you let me have a quick one now, I'd be right until after lunch service.'

And Colin looks at me like it's starting to dawn on him who he's let inside his kitchen.

'I figure if I don't have one before I start I'll probably just make a mess of things, Chef,' I say. 'No good trying to give up on day one.'

'Yeah,' says Colin even slower. 'No good trying to give up now.'

'I'll be back in one minute then, Chef,' I say, and grab my coffee and head out the back gate. I know Rosie and Colin will be shaking their heads and wondering what the fuck's gone wrong with their escape plan, but I also know how keen they are to leave. They don't really care

about the personal life of the chef they find to replace Colin; they're just desperate to employ someone who can do the job so they can hit the road.

I spark up a cigarette in the laneway. I draw so long and deep the smoke makes my head spin. I feel instantly better. I swish the rest of the coffee around my mouth and drag again. I'm super keen for any mood altering effects I can muster from a coffee and a cigarette. I pull three more drags and flick it. Walking back into the kitchen, I feel about 400 per cent better than I did a minute ago. It has been, without any doubt, the best sixty seconds of my life.

'Thanks, Chef,' I say. 'Good to go.'

'Great,' Colin replies, unconvinced.

But I know what he doesn't know. By the end of the day, he'll see Whale Beach in a whole new light. Whale Beach will be his and Rosie's new reality and I'll be the piece-of-shit chef who delivers them into paradise.

After pastry section we prep protein. After protein we prep sauce; then pasta, then larder, then garnishes. Same as it ever was. Protein, starch and vegetable: pus, blood and cum.

Lee and Joe walk in, bang on twelve.

'Hi', Lee calls into the kitchen, to no one in particular.

I let Colin and the Joe do their thing, and when there's a moment's silence, I fill it full of meaning.

'Hey, Lee,' I say.

The way I say it kills Joe dead.

Lee is like me, she's an outsider. She doesn't belong at Café Dolce. She's not going to be here in six months or two years; it's a means to an end. She isn't looking for a career in hospitality. It takes everything she's got to walk through the doors each day.

'Twelve o'clock, Chef,' I say, stating the obvious.

'Time to suit up, Jimmy,' says Colin.

'Time for the punish,' I say. 'Might have a quick cigarette if that's okay, Chef?'

'Yeah, sure,' Colin says. 'Do what you've got to do.'

Colin and I sliced and diced our way through four hours of prep.

Everything is good to go, everything is set. He's shown me everything the best he can. It's up to me now. I'll either make it through lunch service or I won't.

I walk out to the laneway and Lee finds a reason to bring some rubbish out and dump it in the bin.

'You been here long, Lee?' I ask, even though I know.

'Six weeks,' she answers, like, her life is nearly over.

'Is it always this busy?' I ask.

'Every day,' she replies, like, it's madness, like, why would anyone do it to themselves.

'Cool,' I say. 'Do you get decent tips?'

'Not really,' she says. 'The people who come here are looking for a cheap night out. Some of them are all right.'

'Yeah, the freaks,' I say, like, I know, babe.

'Yeah,' she says. 'The freaks tip all right.'

And then she steps right inside things, opens up some doors and windows.

'Give us a drag,' she asks and reaches for my cigarette.

'Sure,' I say and hand the butt over. 'You want one?'

'Nah,' she says, drawing back. 'I'll just take a quick puff.'

And after two long drags on the cigarette, and a glazed look out at the world, she hands the cigarette back and walks inside.

'Thanks,' she says.

'Yeah, no problem,' I reply, as I watch her arse slide through the gate. 'Watch out for the freaks,' I call after her.

'Yeah,' she says, like, whatever.

I flick the butt and step back inside. My legs are lead. They plant themselves into the ground with every step. My various scabs and my pinpricked carcass are crying out for smack. My neck and back are twitching nerves and overdoses gone wrong. Various bruises are turning shades of yellow, green and blue. My muscles reach out for what they need. They are aching for the one true thing that's missing. I could easily go under today if I wasn't chained up inside a kitchen. There is simply no need for things to feel so bad. I would pop pills or kick doors in or do a deal somewhere to give my body what it needs.

I make a point of washing my hands before I take my position at the stove. I run my fingers over the prep, checking everything is in its place. The phone starts ringing and Lee takes an order. Cunts are filing through the door, keen to be greeted and seated.

My six burners are switched on and turned to low. I'll fire up each flame as I need it. They won't get turned back down until three o'clock this afternoon. There's no need for knives at this stage of the game. I push my bag and implements under a shelf. If everything's not sliced, diced, chopped and sweated off by now, you're in a world of pain. There's nothing to do during service but churn and burn my way through all the food we've just prepared. The cake fridge is full, the saucepots are simmering, there's water on the boil for vegetables, another pot for pasta.

'You all set, Joe?' I ask, just to piss him off.

'Yeah, good to go,' Joe replies, like, let's see how you go, fuckhead.

'Keep those pans coming,' I say.

And Joe just snorts into his sink like he can't believe what he just heard. As if what I've got to worry about has anything to do with him. And it doesn't. Joe isn't going to be the reason I fuck things up and that's something we both understand. Pissing Joe off is just about saying I've got someone to scream at if things start getting on top of me. It's a threat that indicates the hierarchy of the kitchen. I'm just playing with him, pushing him around because I can, and because it's an easy way of relieving stress in the moments prior to service.

'Check on,' Lee says, in her most bored tone.

'Thanks, Lee,' I say, and smile like, here we go, babe.

'Two gardens, two Greeks, two bread,' I call to Joe.

'Yes, Chef,' he says, because he has to.

I fire up two flames and drop a pan on each. I fire up the pasta water. I run my eyes over the menu that's stuck inside the hood. I pour enough oil into the pans to get them smoking.

I drop diced onions and garlic oil into a pan, hit the other one with chilli oil. The chilli gets pork, the garlic gets chicken; I flick the pans to moderate the heat. It's a balancing act between heat and fat and produce. Flavour is heat. Too many punters don't know it. Which is not to say

you want things running hot when you're cooking off a pot of sauce or braising a side of beef. Those things need to sweat and simmer in order to build up flavour slowly. But when it's service time, time to stand and deliver, it's all about blowing the flavours out of everything in the shortest time you can.

'Check on,' says Lee, as she spikes another docket.

'*Oui*,' I say. I pull the check off the spike and slot it on the rack. 'Three gardens, three bread,' I call to Joe.

'Yes, Chef,' he says.

Everyone is getting into the zone now. Everyone has a job to do. Colin stands back at the doorway, checking how things go. I can't be worrying about what he thinks or what he'd do. It's me that's got to suck this one up. I'm the chef, the guy that's tossing the pans and moderating heat. There's no running away, no escape until the 'last check' call.

I kind of wish I sucked back another cigarette.

'Check on,' says Lee, who's starting to move a little quicker. The joint is filling up and cunts want what they want. Same as it ever was.

'*Oui*,' I say and slide the check onto my rack.

'Five bread, two gardens, two Greek, one leaves,' I call to Joe.

'Yes, Chef,' says Joe, as he pulls the next five bowls down and splits them into two plus two plus one. As well as keeping the dishes clean, Joe has to put five things together in the larder section. It's not as hard as it sounds. Any monkey can do it. It just takes a capacity to handle repetition and a semi-straight back.

'Check on,' says Lee, as she spikes, picks up the salads and bread for the first table, and heads back out to the hungry pack.

'Two bread, one Greek, one leaves,' I call to Joe.

'Yes, Chef,' calls Joe, as he pulls down another two bowls, and splits them one plus one.

'You right?' asks Colin.

'*Oui*, Chef,' I say, like, stay the fuck out of my head, cunt.

'Check on,' says Caroline all bright and bubbly, like, I'm a person too.

'*Oui*,' I say and take the check off the spike and slide it onto my rack. 'Six bread, three garden, two Greek, one leaves,' I call.

‘Yes, Chef,’ answers Joe, as he pulls six bowls down and divides them into three plus two plus one.

I only have to call the bread and salads because there’s only Joe and me. All the entrées and mains are mine. I glance at the checks as they hit the spike and try to memorise the order.

6

‘LAST CHECK,’ SAYS Lee, as she spikes the docket on top of the four checks that I haven’t had time to call. Every pan is smoking. My pasta pot is full of starch and broken bits of linguine. My vegetable water is a deep, dark green. The *mise en place* which was so full and brimming with promise at midday is running low of everything. My chef’s jacket and apron are splattered with every kind of sauce.

I pull the last five checks off the spike and call out the salads and bread to Joe.

‘Yes, Chef,’ says Joe, who hasn’t had time to get the dishes through for ten minutes. Dirty plates, bowls and cups form a tower on the sink.

I keep moving, keep tossing pans and plating up. I push an order onto the pass.

‘Order up,’ I call and ding the bell.

I haven’t yelled at anyone. I’ve sucked up the chaos of service and churned it into order, into pretty plates of food.

Everything got seasoned, everything was hot.

The last five checks are all that’s left. Sweat is running freely down my face. I’ve drunk the river dry. I sucked up all the pus and blood and cum, I heated it, plated it, and garnished it.

There’s nothing but the river, the river is all there is.

Detoxing off anything is just a matter of time. There is no easy way to pass that time. Pleasure is hard to find, but the adrenaline of a busy service, when it surges and flows through hungry veins, is enough to make me forget.

In front of the stove, where there’s only the check rack and me, it’s necessary to go with the flow. It is necessary to let the power of the river flood through me. My body is a conduit. My function is to turn all the raw

ingredients that were prepared this morning into hot food on a plate. Any cowboy can slice an onion and get a sauce bubbling on the stove. Not everyone can survive a hectic service; it's a different kind of skill.

Colin hasn't moved from his position in the doorway. He hasn't run out to the cool room to get something we need or pushed any dishes through the machine. He just watched the river flow. There's a pride in what he's watching. He created this little channel. He dragged a stick through the dirt and made a path for the river to pour into.

He hasn't said a word for three hours. There wouldn't have been too many days where he's been able to stand back and observe what he set in train. And now he knows he's leaving it all behind.

I push the last few orders out the door, slide the plates onto the pass, ding the bell and pile up my pans. I turn all the gas burners off, wipe my bench down, and take a slug of water. I release my neck from the apron.

'Might grab a quick cigarette, Chef,' I say to Colin.

And Colin kind of wakes up, like, it's over.

'Yeah...' he says. 'Get one into you.'

And as Colin walks back to his position in front of the stove, he does so with an air of nostalgia. There's not going to be many more services in front of the six burners for Colin.

I walk out to the laneway and light a cigarette. The afternoon burns bright. The adrenaline in my system is pinging, my hands still move over imaginary pans and *mise en place*. My neck and back, arse and legs, are all hot and loose. In about thirty minutes I'll be suicidal with pain. The adrenaline will seep away. It's only day two and it's not until tomorrow that things will even out.

There's a mountain of ingredients that needs to be prepped for dinner, and then there's dinner service to cook. It's the same thing all over again except every guest is different. For the guests tonight, it's an evening away from the kids, a family meal, an anniversary or a date. None of them give a fuck that someone just cooked lunch. None of them want to think about the idiot at the stove.

If I let my body slow down too much the snakes inside me will squirm and burn with bitter discontent.

I spark up another cigarette and squat down against the fence.

Lee pushes her way out of the gate. I pass the cigarette up to her and she sucks the life out of it. I light another one for myself. She drags again and flicks the butt and walks back inside. Her tables are still full. She just came out to check I didn't rip off my chef's jacket and walk up the lane.

There have been plenty of jobs where I've walked after my first service. Sometimes, things don't gel. Either the joint is a disorganised joke, the governor's a cunt, or the vibe's all wrong. I generally know after an hour or two.

I flick the cigarette and walk back inside.

The kitchen is a fucking disgrace. Colin has stepped into the restaurant to greet his guests, check how things are going. He's moving like a man who's leaving town. Things have changed since lunch service. There's a new kid in town. He's going to be a prick as he works himself free from what he's created. He'll start picking on things I'm doing, insisting it has to be this way, not that. That's just what saying goodbye means. Colin wants the money and the house at Whale Beach, the gentle waves and the sun on his back, but up there, there's no adrenaline or steady stream of guests. There's no one kicking his front door in to sit at his table and laugh and drink and celebrate what he does.

I pile my pans into Joe's sink. I start breaking my section down. I pull out whatever full containers of *mise en place* I've got left inside my fridge. I write a list of all the things I need for service tonight. The list grows long. I'll be chopping and slicing and dicing for hours. Everything has to be fresh and full. The guests for dinner don't want to know.

Lee dumps more plates into Joe's sink. Joe has his head down and the dishwasher screaming. He knows that he cannot let the machine stop until the last dessert plate goes through. It's all about doing what needs to be done in the shortest time possible. It's the only way to buy some time before the first dinner check gets spiked.

'Don't stack them there,' Joe snarls at Lee.

'Whatever,' Lee says, as she walks back outside.

'Fucking...,' Joe calls after her.

'They're all the same, Joe,' I say.

'Cunt,' says Joe, as he turns back to his nightmare.

'Who, me?' I ask.

'Whatever,' says Joe.

Joe's hurting. All the little conversations he's had with Lee in the privacy of his home, all the imaginary debates about what all the pus means, are revealing themselves as what they are. Lee is going to be sucking my cock. Joe doesn't have a speaking part. Which is not breaking news for Joe. That's just who Joe is and he knows it and I know it and we've all been thrown together in this little part of the river. Being here, in Café Dolce, doesn't mean anything more than chance.

'Maybe she's hot for you, Joe,' I say, desperate to distract myself from my own pathetic pains.

'Yeah, maybe,' Joe says, like he knows the same things about the river that I do.

'Maybe,' I say, walking up behind him, 'she secretly wants to suck your cock.'

'Yeah, maybe,' Joe says. And he's not going to be able to hold the river back much longer. He's going to lash out in all the wrong ways.

'Or maybe she's just any other junkie slut looking for a fix?' he says, all quizzical and light.

'Mm,' I reply, as if grappling with the concept. 'I certainly hope so, Joe. I really fucking do.'

And Joe scrapes all the plates into the sink, which crashes and burns about ten of them.

'Whoops-a-daisy,' I say, as the sound of breaking crockery brings Colin back inside.

'Fuck, Joe,' says Colin. 'Go easy, mate,' he adds.

'Yeah, sorry, Chef,' says Joe. But he's feeling better already.

It's only natural to explode, create new channels for the pus.

Around here, Colin is the man and everyone else is a slave. There are plenty of worse slave-owners than Colin, but that doesn't change how things are.

'Need some cutlery, Joe,' Lee commands.

'Yeah, no worries,' answers Joe.

But Joe's too busy dealing with a broken heart to give a fuck about the forks.

I don't know when the moment's going to come for Lee and me to party, what the circumstances will be. I just know it's going to happen and she does too. There's a tension between us that has already resigned itself into a weird kind of intimacy.

The adrenaline is still charging around inside me. Endorphins are keeping me pumped. I need to eat, but if I do, the food will change the chemical mix. Right now, I'm naturally high. If I eat something I'll get tired and heavy and won't be able to move. That is something that I have to avoid until everything is boxed.

'You having something to eat, Jimmy?' asks Colin.

'Later, Chef,' I answer. 'I want to get my section up for service.'

'Okay,' says Colin. 'You want something, Joe?'

'Yeah, that'd be great,' says Joe, just to piss me off.

'And what would the kitchen porter's pleasure be?' I call out to Joe.

'Linguine,' answers Joe.

'Thought you might,' I say.

Joe's starting to see what the future looks like and it's all about him and me. The kitchen is so small that some things are bound to break. And I'm not going anywhere, at least for a few weeks, which makes Joe about as happy with his future as I am with hanging out.

I fire up a pan and smash out a linguine. I plate it up and pass it to Joe.

'Careful with the plate, mate,' I say.

But Joe doesn't even look. He just ordered it to piss me off.

I soap down my bench and run a wire brush over the stove. I start filling fresh containers with *mise en place* that is dry: salt and pepper, lemon zest, cinnamon and thyme; oregano, chilli flakes, mushroom chips and limes.

7

FROM THREE O'CLOCK until six, I'm just a slave cook boxing my section. I have a sense now, a feeling, about what I need to do. Service tonight is just more of the same.

Colin chimes in with useful tips and pours a glass of wine. He's animated

in a way that he wasn't before. Watching me act like him during service makes Whale Beach come alive. His dream of what the future holds informs his every move.

Over lunch, I mainlined the mysteries of Colin's menu. All the flavour combinations now make sense; all his secrets were revealed. I get the dream. I understand what he had in mind when he sought to host his neighbourhood. And what that means for Colin is a certain kind of freedom. It's like now he thinks he's found a way to rise above the pus. He's walking and talking like it was him that brought the river into existence.

Most of the time spent alive, feels like working for a dream, each day and every night a different set of obstacles. For Colin, today's the day that he becomes a winner. Now he'll shake hands and sign the paper, and keep the red wine flowing. There's nothing inside me that wants to drag him down, tell him how nothing endures. It's not news anyway; everybody knows.

Piles of clean plates keep growing above the pass. My pans are polished and racked and stacked. Clean tongs and spoons and ladles hang from butcher's hooks.

Joe drains the dishwasher at ten past five. Just another day in the office.

'See ya, Chef,' he says, to no one in particular.

'Night off, Joe?' I ask.

But he doesn't bother answering as he walks out the door.

The phone starts ringing and the checks get spiked for six o'clock pick-ups.

Someone else arrives and takes a position in front of the sink. Bob or Phil or Bill?

I'm going to make day two. I'll stay clean; drain some more pus from my blood.

At five forty-five I fire up all the burners and turn my pots of crystal water up to boil. I position all the early pick-up checks neatly on my rack. I'm back in the groove; I'm ready to roll, just a line cook looking for work.

Colin opens another bottle.

Lee winks as she spikes her fifth check of the night. And her flashing eyelid touches something deep inside me. How can such a small act lift a

heart out of jail? It's all I need and I figure she knows...knows that I needed something. It was a simple gift to fire the spirits of a prisoner, while cunts and cocks and bellies settle into seats.

To feel anything at all lets me know that I've broken my habit's hold. There's nothing more my legs can say that will take away that wink. From here on in it's a head-trip. Am I ready to use again? Should I wait another day, a week, never use again? I have some choices again, and that equals power.

The rent is getting paid, the gas man's back on side.

'Pans,' I say to Bob or Phil or Bill.

8

'LAST CHECK,' SAYS Lee, as she spikes another one to the pile.

I'm no longer communicating with words. It takes too much out of me to speak. There are six checks on the spike and eight left on the rack. I'm working through them. I'm in the zone. I'm in a space that is familiar. I wonder how I came to have these particular skills? How the fuck did I end up in hospitality, standing on the line?

I slide four plates onto the pass and double-ding the bell. I slide the check for the order underneath a plate. I don't have any strength left to call out 'order up'. There's no need. Everybody knows.

Everyone's a train wreck, everyone's a slave.

Soon the boat will hit the dock, oars will drop, bodies will slump and bend.

I drop the dirty fry pans into a slosh bucket and clang clean ones over flames. I run my eyes over the next check on my rack. I season the pans, add the *mise en place*, and ladle in the sauce. I reach for portions of protein and add them to the mix. I plunge the first serve of pasta into water, and then toss it into a pan. I go again with the pasta, then again, and again.

I let the heat build up and pull the last checks from the spike. I slide them into a line. I don't care what's written on them. It's all too much information.

The sauce is bubbling in each of the pans. One by one I toss them, flicking all the ingredients over. I pull down four bowl-plates from the shelf above the pass. I season the sauce then pull the first one off the heat. I use my tongs to guide the pasta into a bowl. I plate the other three dishes and throw the

pans into the bucket.

‘Pans,’ I say.

Clean ones arrive and the slosh bucket slides away.

I wipe the four plates clean, sprinkle garnishes on top. I ding the bell and push the check beneath a plate.

I wonder why I feel the need to make things so hard? It’s not enough for me to go to work and earn an honest dollar. I have to use smack and run a rabbit, push everything to its limits.

And transgression is all about limits. By surviving the extremes of hospitality, and what transgression means, I seek pathways to approval.

There’s only the past. The past is all there is.

‘We live another day,’ I say, pushing the last plates onto the pass.

‘Better than that, Jimmy,’ says Colin, as he drains his latest glass of red. ‘You did great, young fella. For your second day in the joint; that was fucking awesome.’

And they are the words I needed to hear: You did great, young fella; that was fucking awesome.

‘Thanks, Chef,’ I say.

‘Fucking unbelievable actually,’ says Colin going on with it. ‘What do you reckon, Bill?’

‘Yeah, went alright,’ Bill says, to no one in particular.

‘Oh fuck off, mate,’ Colin laughs, like he’s pissed, like he can smell the salt air on the night sky. ‘That was...’ Colin says.

‘Might grab a cigarette then, Chef,’ I say.

‘Get one into you, mate,’ Colin laughs, and punches my arm as I walk by.

9

THE STARS ARE shining in the pus. That was fucking awesome. I spark up a cigarette and draw back long and deep. I lean against the fence. I pull my twisted neck out of my twisted apron.

Everything is raw, everything is pink.

I ease my jacket free from the scabs on my arms. The cotton sticks hard to the pus. I bite into a warm baguette and chew. The bread is sweet and

sour, soft with a crusty shell. I take a slug of wine, wash the bread down my throat.

'Here,' says Colin as he stumbles out through the gate. 'Here's a few hundred for the last couple of days, Jimmy,' he says, pushing a wad of bills into my hand. 'Take a couple of days off, all right? You look like you fucking need 'em. You start on Wednesday with me. Okay!' he beams. 'You happy with the pay?' he says, like, I really fucking ought to be.

'As long as the ad wasn't lying, Chef,' I answer, looking up at him.

'Everyone wants the fucking twelve hundred, Jimmy,' he says, punching me again. 'Fuck-all people can do what it takes to get it though,' he slurs. 'Come and have a glass of wine when you're done. Okay?' He says, and slaps me one more time.

'Yeah, okay, Chef,' I smile, and slide side-on so he can't hit me in the same spot again.

Colin laughs and stumbles back inside the gate. He chants a drunken freedom-cry of, 'Jimmy! Jimmy!'

I bite off another piece of bread and hold its goodness in my mouth. My bloodstream sucks it in.

'Keep it clean, you two,' Colin yells, as Lee pushes her way outside.

I pass her up a cigarette and take another slug of wine.

'You okay?' she asks, sparking up and pulling smoke into her lungs.

'Yeah,' I smile, like, we're cashed up, babe. We're back in the fucking game.

Jim Hearn is a researcher, writer and chef. He has written five original feature length screenplays, as well as worked on the script for *Chopper* and an adaption of Andrew McGahan's novel *Last Drinks*. His memoir 'Hospitality' was published in *Griffith REVIEW 27: Food Chain*. Jim has a BA (Hons) from Southern Cross University and is currently enrolled in a PhD at the University of Technology, Sydney. His first book, *High Season*, was published by Allen & Unwin in 2012.

Subscribe to Griffith REVIEW

Discover the best Australian and international writers and thinkers as they tease out the complexities of the issues that matter the most.

Each themed edition presents timely and elegant new essays, reportage, memoir, fiction and poetry from a range of established and emerging authors who make **Griffith REVIEW** the premier Australian quarterly of ideas.

Chose from a range of subscription packages, including **Digital, Print** or **Premium (digital+print) Subscriptions**.

Or treat yourself to the value-packed **Super Subscription** and receive four editions of Griffith REVIEW plus four advance copies of the most interesting titles from Text Publishing throughout the year.

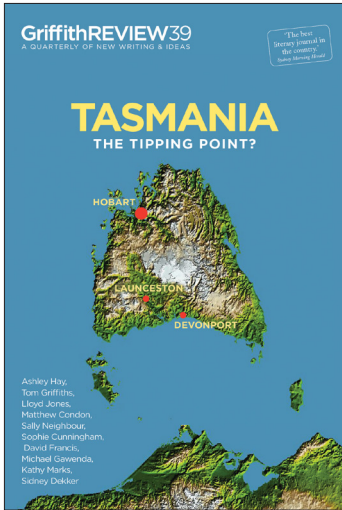
Subscribe at www.griffithreview.com with the promo code **EPUB2012** to **save at least 20% off the retail price**.

*'It cannot be said often enough: **Griffith REVIEW** is the best literary journal in the country ... Each essay and memoir is like a great meal. It fills the reader with thoughts and leaves them deeply satisfied.'*

– Sydney Morning Herald

'It's a cracker, a reminder of how satisfying on ever level good quality non-fiction can be.' – **New Zealand Herald**

Future Editions of Griffith REVIEW



For too long, as the smallest and least wealthy of Australia's states, Tasmania has been on the edge of national conversations about prosperity, identity and equity, widely regarded as the 'poor cousin'.

In *Tasmania: The Tipping Point?* Griffith REVIEW will move the state centre stage, serving up strategic slices of Tasmania's past, present and future.

Once the Apple Isle, Tasmania has recently become the focus of concerted efforts to improve its lagging educational outcomes, enliven an economy highly dependent on the public purse, and better connect Tasmanians with twenty-first century agendas. The success of these ambitions and interventions will be considered.

Tasmania: The Tipping Point? challenges how Tasmania is seen by outsiders – and illuminates how Tasmanians see themselves, down home and in the wider world.

Available late July 2012