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4.30 Opening

by Liam Murray Bell

I'm running late. I saw it in the look that Riccy threw me as he passed me the keys. Quick glance at my watch. Fuck sake, only two minutes. You'd think he'd give me a fucking break. Although, Thursday night- lots of prep work to be done. He gave me a list: sauce, mushies, onions, peppers, chorizo, and roasted courgette. Do them in that order, Riccy said, reminding me he's done it that way for seventeen years. Aye, I replied, no bother. No chance, more like. Do the onions towards the end, then your eyes aren't watering for the rest. Makes much more sense.

First off, though, I have to switch on the ovens- *click, click*- and lay out the trays of dough. Small, medium, large, and extra large. Put out another tray of medium and another large- they'll sell. It's a Thursday night- busy, but not weekend busy. Then flick on the computers and the immersion heater and down to the kitchen I go. 3:38. Fifty minutes to get set. Easy.

'Hi there, I'm Grace,' Soft voice chirrups from the top of the stairs. I look up, surprised. The counter assistants don't come in 'til 3:45, but this one's new. Eager. She's pretty too. Big round eyes, dark. She's chewing on her bottom lip.

'Alright,' I reply. 'Adam. The pizza chef.'

'Nice to meet you,'

'Aye, you too,' I could have had the sauce done by now, and maybe even started getting the slicer ready for the veg. 'Listen, Grace, the other counter assistant, Laura, isn't in for another five minutes, you see.'

'Right.'

'And, I need to do some prep. So, see that coke beside the fridge-'

'Aye.'

'Gonnae stack it in the fridge and then, by the time you've done that, Laura'll be in to show you what to do.'

'Right.'

'Sorted.'

Back to the sauce. Big pan- *clunk*- into the sink. Tub of onions, some herbs, salt, pepper, sugar, oil and red wine. Don't forget the fresh fucking basil, Adam. Riccy goes off his nut if you forget the basil. Then, a tin of plum tomatoes and set it on the stove to simmer for fifteen minutes. Easy-fucking-peasy.

What's next? Ah, shit. Riccy's left the corner in a state after chipping the potatoes. You'd think with all his cleanliness bullshit he'd tidy up after himself. Fucking messy cunt. I'll get the blame too. Somehow. I'll give it a wipe down. No sterilizing solution. Fuck it, use water. Good enough for cavemen, good enough for me. Then, weigh out the flour and the yeast for the dough batches. Line them up, idiot-proof, for the delivery drivers. 3:44. Laura should be in soon.

'Adam?'

Shit, Riccy.

'Aye?'

'Come up here a minute.'

Back up the stairs, two at a time. The sauce is bubbling away. I can smell the basil. Vegetables next. Riccy's at the top of the stairs with the new wee girl, Grace. She looks scared.

'What's up, Riccy?'

'Why's this wee lassie been left on her own?'

'Waiting for Laura,' I reply.

'Why can't you show her what to do?'

'Got a lot of prep to do, Riccy.'

‘Fuck that. Show her what to do, then do the prep.’

‘Right, no bother.’

Smile at Grace, let her know it’s not her fault. No-one’s angry at her. It’s just Riccy’s way. He’s a prick. I start to show her where everything is- pizza boxes, sidelines, delivery bags, coleslaw tubs. I can hear Riccy breathing at my shoulder, just waiting for a cock up. Always ready.

‘Hiya,’ Laura saunters in, trailing perfume. 3:47. She’s got on knee-high socks and a skirt that barely passes as a belt. She shoots me a glance and rolls her tongue-piercing across her top lip.

‘Alright, Laura, this is Grace,’ I say. ‘Show her the ropes, gonna.’

Back down the stairs, before she even answers. Riccy’s rumbling voice drifts down from upstairs, he’s delivering a lecture to the two girls. It’ll either be a criticism or a boast. He’s only got two modes. Judging from the length of Laura’s skirt, it’ll probably be a boast. I’ve heard them all: he was the first shop in Glasgow to stock parma ham, he once had a trial for Greenock Morton, a businessman offered him big money to run a pizzeria in New York, he used to train with the SAS on weekends, he was the first man on the fucking moon. He’s that kinda guy.

Anyway, back to the prep. I flick on the radio to drown out Riccy’s voice. Jeff Buckley. Mushies next. Easy enough, just time consuming. Need to run them through the slicer and then cook them slowly in the oven to get the moisture out. Stops the pizza getting soggy. Useful tip that, always pre-cook mushrooms. Hope the oven’s hot enough.

Buckley’s voice sings softly beneath the din of the slicer. My dad listens to him. He’s actually alright, y’know. Buckley, that is. My mind drifts back to the morning. My dad standing over me as I pour shredded wheat into my bowl.

‘You’ll have to give up that job, Adam.’

‘Why?’

‘Our Roxanne never worked during her Highers, did she?’

‘Nah, but Riccy says a part-time job’ll help me focus. On my studies.’

‘Aye. He would say that.’

‘How d’you mean?’

‘Nothing. Listen, Riccy isn’t your dad.’

‘I know that.’

‘And he doesn’t know what’s best for you.’

‘He says it’ll help me focus.’

‘Aye, you said that.’

I finish with the mushrooms. Need to give the slicer a quick wipe down. Need a fucking cloth. No fucking cloth. Up the stairs, three at a time, grab a cloth, back down. 3:52. I should be on to the bloody chorizo by now. First, though, I need to do the peppers. Nice and easy. Just run them through. Red and green.

The slicer spits the peppers out. Slow progress. At this rate I’ll be late opening, and the whole night’ll be catch up. Always a bloody step behind. Plus, once I finish tonight and lock that door, I’m not going home to bed. Oh, no. First I’ll have to eat my pizza, no time for dinner before close, nine hour shift with an empty fucking stomach. Then I’ll have to have a shower, get rid of the grease and that garlic smell. Then, I’ll be ready for bed, but there’s no chance of that. There’s two fucking pages of Maths problems sitting on my desk and that chapter on photosynthesis in my Biology textbook. Not to mention that bloody *Catcher in the Rye* thing. The spine isn’t even creased. Fuck sake.

The pepper’s mouldy. It can still be saved. Riccy would throw it out, but it’s still good. Bit of surgery is all. I grab a knife and slice around the purple and yellow bruising. 3:55. I’m gonna be fucking late opening. Shit. I’ve gone and fucking cut into my finger with the knife. Taken off a chunk of skin. Stupid bastard. Maybe I’ll be lucky and it won’t

be deep enough to bleed. No, bollocks. Move over to the plaster box. Blue detectable plaster. Gonna need a couple if they're gonna stay on all night. Wrap it round tight. It's a fucking hassle having a plaster on your finger when you're rolling out the pizza bases. A fucking hassle.

'Adam?'

'Aye, Laura?'

'We're outta *Fanta*!'

'Which one?'

'Eh?'

'Orange or lemon?'

'Both.'

'Fuck sake. Right, go through to Riccy next door and get some more, and take Grace there with ya.'

'No bother.'

Back to the peppers. 3:57. Still got the fucking onions, chorizo and courgettes to do. Onions are a nightmare with a cut on your finger. Bloody stings, so it does. Fuck this.

'Oh, and Laura?' I shout.

'Aye?'

'Tell Riccy I'd like a quick word.'

'No probs.'

Peppers done. Up the stairs. Mushies in the oven, peppers in the fridge. On her way out, Grace smiles at me. Nice smile that girl. Cute, like. Anyway, what's next? Peeling chorizo. Worst bloody job in the shop that. I'd rather read fucking *Catcher in the Rye* than fiddle about with some Spanish sausage. 4:00. No time to waste.

'What is it, Adam?' Riccy asks. 'I'm busy.'

'Aye, I know you are, Riccy.'

'So?'

I've got hands stained bright red from the chorizo. I lay down my knife. Don't want to cut myself again. Take a deep breath. Just as well I put down the knife, 'cause I'm shaking.

'It's my dad, Riccy.'

'What about him?'

'I'm gonna have to hand in my notice, like.'

Riccy seems too close. He could punch me. Easy. I'm in range. In fact, he could even reach the fucking knife. I put my hand down beside it. He puts his hand to his forehead. His eyes blaze. Fucking hell, I'm gonna get it now.

'You gotta be kidding me!' He says. 'You gotta be fucking joking?'

'Sorry, Riccy.'

'Seriously, you gotta be kidding, Adam!'

'It's my dad, with my exams coming up.'

'After all I've done for you, Adam. Giving you a job, fucking training you up, giving you that two weeks off in the summer.'

'Aye, I know, Riccy. Obviously, I'll work as much notice as you want-'

'Too bloody right you will! I can't fucking believe this! It's people like you that really make me sick, Adam. Taking all you can get from me, and then just fucking off when it suits you.'

'Sorry, Riccy.'

'You're a fucking mercenary, that's what you are!'

He's off up the stairs. Laura gets it in the neck, something to do with not telling him we'd run out of *Fanta*. Fuck sake. That's not even her job, that's Riccy's job. I swallow. Best get back to the prep. 4:08. Chorizo nearly done. Then I just need to do the onions. I can do courgettes once I've opened up.

Chorizo in the freezer. In storage for next week. Who knows if I'll be around to use it. Who knows. Riccy seemed mad, but it's hard to tell. He's got a lot on his plate, after all, since he took on next door. He was relying on me. Relying on Adam. But what about Roxanne? She never had a job during her Highers. No-one relied on her.

'Hello, Adam.' It's Rosa, Riccy's mother. She comes slowly down the stairs, creaking. She used to work here, but had a hip operation two months ago. Still comes in from time to time though, keeps an eye on the place.

'Hi, Rosa. How are you?'

'Listen, what's this Ricardo tells me about you leaving?'

'Yeah, I'm sorry, Rosa, it's just my exams are coming up.'

'Sure they are. Why does that matter?'

'My dad's saying I'll mess them up, like, if I keep working.'

'No Adam, that's not true. It'll help you focus.'

I nod, look down at the onions. They must not be that strong, my eyes are dry.

Rosa stands beside me, I can feel her watching me.

'Listen, Adam. Now's a really bad time,' She says.

'How d'you mean?'

'What with Ricardo taking on next door and my hip-'

'Aye, I know, but-'

'Let me finish,' She pauses. 'We could really do with your help, son. Really we could. I know that Ricardo would appreciate it.'

'My dad, though.'

'Listen, the job will only help you focus. I guarantee it. At least give it a try for a couple of weeks, see how it goes. How long have you been with us?'

'Nearly two years.'

'Exactly, don't throw that away.'

'Aye, maybe,' Onions nearly done. 'Just two weeks?'

'A few weeks, Adam. That's all I ask.'

'Three, then?'

'We'll take it from there, ok?'

I nod. Look at my watch. 4:18. I'll be early opening up. Although, I still have the courgettes to do and maybe I could prepare the spicy chicken so that I won't have the hassle tomorrow. Easy-fucking-peasy.

'Aye, no bother, Rosa.'

'Good boy.'

She goes up the stairs and I follow her with the sliced onions. The dirty slicer and the dishes can be done by the delivery drivers. They're lazy arseholes anyway. Rosa goes straight out the shop, waddling next door to tell Riccy she's had a chat with me. He still won't be happy, but he'll come around.

Laura and Grace stand placing greaseproof onto brown paper for the chips. They've changed into their uniforms. Beneath her black baseball cap, silent tears are sliding from Grace's dark eyes.

'You alright, Grace?' I ask.

She nods, smiles.

'It's the onions,' Laura says.

'Oh, right,' I say. 'You'll get used to them in no time.'

I begin to slice the courgettes. It's 4:22. I'll be able to open up dead-on half-past. Perfect. Just get tonight out of the way. Should be easy enough. If only I didn't have that fucking homework.

'Either of you ever read *Catcher in the Rye*? I ask.

Laura shakes her head. Grace nods.

'What's it all about?' I ask.

She starts off quietly, but as she goes on she seems confident enough. Pretty wee girl too. She explains it to me, this book, but I'm not really listening. I'm thinking, she'll make a good counter-assistant, so she will, seems smart, like, and a good wee looker. Riccy would do well to hold onto her.

She finishes and I nod. Maybe I can remember enough of what she said so that I won't have to read the book. After all, once I've done the Maths and Biology I'll be well ready for my bed. Work in this pizzeria really takes it out of you. Still, only another three weeks to go. More or less.

Three poems

by Kate Tough

knowing only I had to push on

a blizzard in January
I left

could still feel the chill in February

raised my March umbrella
against drizzle –

in April the sun came out
enough
to show me what I had done

and my
heart broke open
on the ground

nestfallen egg
one foot then the other into

May, a trip away
insight; as the mirrored trees
on early morning water.

Pedalling by the river

Keeping pace with the flow
my slowly turning legs beside its
full and heavy push

we blend
in moving meditation

gap between path and bank
grows wide

the river carries right
and I carry the river
home.

The Realisation

bus pulled off, taking the pink gloves
you'd given me

I cried

sat down to eat and you weren't opposite me
eating something different

sat with a pizza slice, surrounded
by a three-year-old's birthday balloons

and I cried

took myself to the art galleries and couldn't look
without knowing what you'd have thought

walked home after a party filled with people
who weren't you

I cried and I cried

watched a couple on film
make being in love look easy

remembered how you never came on holiday
how I stopped even asking you to

how we tried and we tried

realised I am the marrying kind
I just wouldn't have married you

and I cried

For Kirsty in New York

by Sue Reid Sexton

Kirsty has lost her jacket, again. It's on the underground or a bench in Central Park, or stolen from her café chair while she ate bagels and watched buskers rap on the pavement, the sidewalk. Perhaps her passport is in it, her mobile, her cell phone?

Her mother takes her own jacket and steps into the car. Night is falling as she leaves the house and lifting when she reaches the shore. The car door hangs open. She binds the jacket around her waist and removes her shoes. The water is cold at first and she is afraid, but the tide turns to welcome her and she eases forward into the churning waters.

The waves tug her this way and that. She begins to gasp, her face upturned to catch the last snatch of salty air. The water clutches at her and pulls her hair back as she walks. It is easier to breath than she imagined. She opens her eyes and sees a world of fish, silvery quickness flickering ahead into the dark, lighting her way, the snakes of eels whispering on before her. She strides with slow deliberate steps trying to keep up, peering past shoals of coloured stripes, surprising and sudden, a warning: a crevice opens here and there is no way round. Her hair curls up towards the surface, the jacket fans at her back, her dress squeezes her legs then blows, like lungs, like the air she breathes. She jumps forwards running a current to the other side. A dark shadow appears, twice her length with fins and tail shifting with grace beside her. Tentacles of sea plants stroke her thighs and she mounts rocks of jagged pink and green. Pebbles bounce across her feet and red anemones suck at her toes.

She gushes into the icy wind, pulls winkles from her ears and tramps the last few steps to America's gateway, dizzy with hope on the concrete. It is an island and a city, and the honks of steamers, the roar of aircraft and the shouts of early evening all pummel the air.

The streets are long and straight, full of cars that are yellow and buildings of glass, and as she turns a corner she finds a woman laughing with a friend, in a baseball cap and jacket she's never seen. They hurry off towards a theatre, to pepperoni and cherry pie. She follows them unseen, lip-reading their laughter; protecting them from danger she trips the muggers, stops the traffic, swaps cheap seats for good, and murmurs love as Kirsty sleeps, but then, exhausted, sleeps herself.

She wakes to find them unharmed.

Unmindful of the traffic and bad men, still laughing on the corner, they eat hot dogs drowned in mustard and wrap up warm to watch the ice hockey.

Blinded now by tears and fading fast for breath, she hails a passing freighter, heavy with Americans re-emigrating to their homelands, and sits astern in clouds of seagulls to watch all that she has known dwindle over the horizon.

The tube

by Pippa Goldschmidt

Some demented Orpheus was playing the guitar, badly, in this travelling underworld of sweaty people and dirty paper. There was paper everywhere, screwed up balls of it on the floor, sandwich wrappers containing abandoned crusts, flotsam of newspapers. Books clutched in people's hands as they swayed to the rhythm of the journey, hanging from poles, pressed up against each other. There was a feeling in the carriage that the bloke with the guitar should not be playing. People looked at each other and sighed when the guitar, dying down after each inept rendition of yet another Oasis song, sprang into life again.

The train drew into yet another station, where lights flashed past and the waiting crowds stared into the carriages, hoping for a reversal of being born, of being able to squeeze into the already too crowded train, and being carried off and delivered somewhere else further down the line.

The people in the carriage fought against the people on the platform. They stood in the doorways and barred access. At some places there were shouts, even punches, but the people in the carriage stood firm. This was their territory, they were not letting anyone else on their train. But as the train closed its doors and started moving, the people lost their communal spirit. They argued with the guitarist. They argued with each other over who was allowed to sit down. Someone stood on someone else's toes. A man pinched a woman's bottom and was slapped. A baby shrieked and wouldn't stop.

The train drew into another station and slowed down, tantalising those waiting on the platform, before it gathered speed once again and moved on into the black mouth of the tunnel.

At first the people in the train were pleased. They did not have to fight off any more intruders. But the train kept going. Although it slowed down at each station it didn't stop.

There were murmurs in the carriages. People wondered when the train would stop, and then, if it would stop. This line was a circular route after all. There was no end of the line. No need to stop and consider what could happen next. The train just kept going.