

In the upstairs change-room, Jeff and I made sure we were on the same page: we both wanted a quiet and uneventful shift where we hustled to finish our tasks so we could maximise our time in the back alley enjoying the sun on our milk-crate thrones and listening to music.

We had a few tasks to get going in the morning: trays of bacon baking in the left oven and buns defrosting in the right. When the alarm went off, get them out fast and on the cooling shelves and put another round in. Check the prep-list, itemize it to what need the stove-top first off and what took longest; get those things started first. Jeff and I were buds and worked well together, but there were always unknown quantities in a shift at the pub and the more laid-back a shift looked, the more wary I was.

In the back side section next to the meat-slicer, I peeled clammy strips of bacon and laid them out on the baking tray. Jeff had set-up all the ingredients for Thousand Island dressing.

‘Perhaps some prep music?’ I suggested with a handful of bacon-strips dangling.

‘Hmmm,’ Jeff answered. ‘Quite.’

He pulled out his ipod and plugged it into the stereo that sat over the micro-wave on the green metal shelves.

He pressed the power button and went into an impression of the skit before one of our favourite albums to put on in the kitchen: ‘When I little, my father was famous--’

‘He was the greatest *samurai* in the Empire...’, I responded.

‘And he was the shogun’s decapitator... he cut off the heads of a hundred and thirty-one lords!’

Dimitri ducked in under the back-door, clopping down the wooden stairs and adjusted his glasses. He was in a tank top, gym shorts and flip-flops. There was never a good reason for flip-flops in the kitchen.

‘Hey bros, what’s up?

Jeff leaned on the green metal shelf, paused mid-music selection. He gave a minimal glance up, ‘Not much, bud. Working. You?’

‘Hey, Dimitri,’ I said and finished the box of bacon. Dimitri blocked my way to the fridge where I needed to get another box.

‘Sorry, I’m late-- stupid bus! I tell ya.’

‘That’s great, man,’ I patted his shoulder and moved past him.

‘So,’ Dimitri said, and I turned as I opened the door. Jeff studied his ipod. Dimitri did a survey of the kitchen. ‘So, you’ve got bacon in? What about buns?’

I stopped myself from pointing out that he was late on his first day running the hot-side, ‘Yeah man, that’s in and just doing another one.’

Dimitri saw the clipboard where I had left it and ran his finger down it. ‘Ah, okay. Lots here. We should probably get the Thousand Island started, eh?’

Jeff pointed to the precise line-up of ingredients he had placed on the salad counter. ‘Over there, dude.’

Dimitri nodded, reassured. ‘Okay, good. What about the chicken breasts?’

‘No room in the oven until we finish the bacon and buns, bro,’ I answered.

‘Nice,’ Dimitri nodded. ‘Good work, guys. I’ll be right down after I change,’ he said and left as if it was different from every shift we worked.

I was annoyed but I hadn’t let on. I looked at Jeff and he was already looking at me under the brim of his cap.

‘It was a bad time for the empire,’ he said.

The delivery men ducked through the back door with vegetable boxes they put down on the greasy brown tiles. I leaned on sacks of potatoes with Chef's clipboard, crossing everything off and making sure nothing was missing from the order.

One of them said something in Arabic. I looked up to see black puppy looking in the backdoor at me with its head at angle. One of the guys stepped around it and put a box of spinach down on the rest of the delivery and ducked through the back-door.

'Hey, is that your dog?' I yelled after him. It barked.

The delivery man ducked in view outside the back door. He looked at the dog and then looked at me with a blank look, scratching his black beard. 'No, I thought it was yours-- we don't bring dogs on deliveries,' and disappeared.

'We don't bring dogs to the kitchen and you can't—' I said with authority but the delivery truck's engine roared to life.

The puppy barked at me and disappeared from the small low backdoor that was a portal to freedom most days: duck out for a smoke between rushes, duck out after the shift and go home but today I had work to do and Chef wasn't happy and Dimitri wasn't cool and I certainly couldn't just shirk work and play with a puppy now, could I?

I put the clipboard down and called for Jeff and Dimitri but they weren't in the kitchen. Out the door and into the greasy back alley, I expecting there to be no puppy, it was all a mirage but there he was sniffing the grease barrels, trailing a filthy red leash behind him. He look at me and panted.

'Oh hey, puppy,' I said as I checked the perimeter for a trap: grease barrels, greasy fire-escape, greasy milk-crates.

He came over to me to give me a sniff and his nose was cold. He seemed very real. I picked up his grimy leash and gave him a scratch behind the ears. His fur was dusty but looked healthy otherwise. I held the leash and stood there in the spot between the buildings and the puppy looked to me as if to say, 'What now?'

'I don't know, bud but you sure are cute,' I told him and I looked up at the blue sky between the buildings.

Maybe, I thought, that was how it all changed for me: I had a puppy now and didn't need a day-job. We could just walk away from it all and be cool dudes together. We would be there for each other forever, roaming the Earth and helping people in need.

'Hey, wanna help me put these orders away?' Jeff poked his head out and looked at me and looked at the puppy. 'What the hell? Is that a puppy?!' He clapped his hands together and knelt beside the puppy who was all too happy.

'Yeah, he just... kind of showed up.'

'Amazing!' Jeff scruffed the puppy's head who jumped up and licked him. He turned to the kitchen door, 'Hey Dimitri! There's a puppy out here!'

Dimitri made noise in the kitchen, 'What's going on? We should probably be putting these vegetables away-- Oh shit!'

'Yeah man,' Jeff said.

'Where did that come from?' Dimitri clacked the tongs in his hand.

'I was checking the orders and he just popped his head in. I thought it was the veg guys' dog for a second.'

Jeff pulled out a cigarette and asked, 'Why would they bring a dog on their deliveries?'

'I don't know, man' I said with an exhale and the puppy scratched his ear with his hind-leg and barked the cutest little bark.

'Oh man,' Jeff laughed as the puppy poked him with his nose, 'He's cute!'

'I think I should go look around for the owner quick?'

Dimitri frowned and looked back at the kitchen. 'You guys have a whole order to put away and then there's the prep-list and Chef's cleaning list which is both fridges and that's not even to mention the orders!'

Jeff gave Dimitri a look of suspicion. 'We know what we have to do, Dimitri. We've worked here longer than you, remember.'

Dimitri threw up his hands, 'I know that, I just have Chef breathing down my neck and she's got a whole list of things to clean because the weekend shifts have been slacking.'

Jeff stood up and said, 'Dimitri, stop being such a narc! We'll clean the stupid fridges because we do it every Sunday.'

'What should I tell Chef?' He asked us.

Jeff motioned to the backdoor, 'Just tell her what you normally would: we're putting the order away and doing the prep-list.'

'Okay,' Dimitri looked at both of us and squinted into the sun. 'You guys need to deal with this puppy,' he ducked back into the kitchen.

Jeff squatted again to play with the puppy, I held the leash and looked out to the sunny parking lot. 'Don't you listen to that big idiot!' Jeff cooed to the puppy.

'You alright for a minute? I should go check the parking lot for an owner or something.'

Jeff scoffed and pulled out a cigarette, 'Dude, all good.'

'Okay, well maybe we'll be back.'

I gave a tug on the leash and Puppy was happy to trot along with me out to the larger and sunny parking lot. It was a beautiful day.

A mini-van gleamed at the far edge of the parking lot near where alcove where we drank beer after shift.

'Ah, there's your family!' I told Puppy and he just lay down in the dust. 'C'mon, buddy!' I tugged on his leash and he leapt up and continued along with me.

The tanned man in the van saw me walking towards them and waved at me. Perfect. We could reunite them and I could get back to work.

'Hey, I found your dog!' I yelled. He beckoned me over as the back window came down and a young girl popped her head out, probably distraught and soon to be relieved at her companion's return. She smiled with dark eyes at the puppy and waved but did not seem overjoyed.

'There's another one!' She pushed herself out the window.

'What? This isn't yours?'

'No, there's another one. Over there!' She wave her little arm in a gesture that seemed to mean behind the van, so I continued past it and towards the alcove and just under the fire escape, another black puppy on a trailing leash trailing.

They noticed each other, and alcove-puppy ran over to alley-puppy and they sniffed and licked and their joy was obvious. They were most probably siblings. The mini-van pulled away and the man gave a proud wave.

I picked up the second puppies' leash and walked them back to the back door of the restaurant.

Jeff was finishing his cigarette on an overturned pickle bucket and he looked over and almost fell off it. 'What the hell!'

'Yeah,' I exhaled and looked down at the puppies wrestling, kicking up dust in the sun.