ASPIRING

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For James Archie Hughes

1.

Pete's was where I had an after-school job. There was no one at the restaurant called Pete. The owner's name was Garth but he hadn't got around to changing the name. He didn't want to climb on a ladder and paint it up. 'Besides,' Garth said, 'who'd want to come to a place called Garth's? Sounds like someone clearing his throat.'

I wouldn't have needed a ladder.

I'd almost finished my three-hour shift, 5–8 p.m. I'd chipped the candle wax off the vacant tables, mopped the storeroom floor, changed a blown bulb in the toilets, and was just about done cleaning the meat freezer of its little frozen puddles of blood, inside which were old labels: sirloin x 2, rump x 3, roo stew. It was like a murder scene at Scott Base.

As I worked, bent over the freezer, I had sentences spooling inside my head. *Slowly it dawned on him that these icy pouches contained not next month's dinner but the neatly sliced remains of the missing scientist.* Recently I'd become aware that I had a sort of internal running commentary, looping language I couldn't turn off. Last week by the lake, I biked past a group of tourists emerging from their China Star Adventure bus and I was stuck for ages with this: *The selfie stick carried in its tip the most powerful poison on earth, but how could he prove it?* Maybe everyone had the

same thing going on. Just thoughts, Ricky, was what my mum said when I mentioned it to her. But these were more than thoughts, weren't they?

I was a vegetarian but I kept that quiet at Pete's. *He was a vegetarian but no one liked vegetarians.*

In the three months I'd been working at there, Garth had chewed through four kitchen hands. He was not a vegetarian. I'd found one of them—a guy called Will—crying at the rear entrance when I was putting out the rubbish. 'I'm gonna get that fat pig,' said Will.

Will was nineteen, an ex-snowboarder with a busted knee. He'd been in line to go to the Winters or the X Games or something. Until he crashed out. I lived in a town of dudes in moon boots. Kids on crutches.

Will was about 5'8". I couldn't stop estimating people's height. It was another tic in my head. I'd mentally chalk up everyone I met.

I was 6'7". And more, a little each month, each week, each day. Technically I was probably growing in the very moment I was thinking about growing. Or not thinking about growing. I slept curled up, like an extremely long foetus. *The coiled and sleeping snake is not feared for its ability to strike instantly but for its capacity to unfurl endlessly, revealing its length inch by terrifying inch.*

I had to lean over Will to tip out the rubbish. 'Hey, man!' said Will. 'Watch the jacket, Big Bird.' The next day Will would be gone.

'Where there's a will,' said Garth, 'there's a way.'

My job was also to help out in the kitchen with the prep. Logan (5'10"), the most junior kitcheneer, had shown me how to cut onions, slice carrots, and do it fast, without fear of losing a finger. The height of the bench was wrong and I got a sore back but I didn't tell anyone. Most of me was sore: my neck, my

hamstrings, my long feet pressing against the ends of my socks, my strained shoes. I was like the Hulk, always bursting the confines. But a skinny Hulk. Also I had to run errands. I had to reach up to the top shelf for Garth, who was short, not even 5'6", though he had heels on his shoes and a self-expanding manner. Maybe *he* was the true Hulk. With his belly, he tried to appear taller, or longer. It moved in front of him like a ship's prow, clearing a space, making waves.

Thinking about him summoned him. Garth came over and stared at the piles of meat I'd stacked, pushing his forefinger into a few of them. He put his nose down to one pack, then picked it up and lobbed it across the kitchen, where Dave, his second-in-command, turned and caught it. They hadn't spoken.

Garth peered inside the freezer, inspecting my work. 'Get all these back in there smartly,' he said.

'Yes, Garth,' I said.

He hiffed another meat pack at Dave's back. Somehow Dave (6'1") spun and grabbed it, reverse-cup style. Dave played cricket for North Otago. Garth went 'Hmpff' and walked out of the kitchen.

Garth had a line of sweat almost permanently on his upper lip. His shirt was marked with wet moons under the arms and jagged stains across his back—yeah, okay, like the mountain range looming over our little town. When Garth sat on his stool in the kitchen, you couldn't see the stool. It was part of him, like another leg. If anyone else thought of resting his weary bones ('weary boner' as Dave liked to say) on that stool, he got an egg flying at him or a bagel frisbeed at his head.

Garth was explosive, your typical chef, I suppose—a hurler of wet cloths, balled and leaden, and insults. But he was all right to me. I was the youngest on the payroll. One time he said to me at the end of the day, 'You're a good kid, Ricky. Don't go wrong.

Don't blow it.'

'I won't,' I said. I'd found a ten-dollar note on the floor by his office and I'd handed it in. This struck him as odd.

'Don't hang around a kitchen too long.'

'I like it.' It was true.

'I don't want to hear you say that.' Garth trod his cigarette into the ground, mashing it with his shoe. He never lit his cigarettes—he'd given up smoking years before apparently, but he couldn't live without the feel of it on his lips. I swept these mangled unsmoked ciggies. I was sweeping up a fortune.

In fact, I liked the sweeping and I liked the buzz, the meshing of working parts, the steam, the behind-the-scenes. I liked cutlery, crockery, the fit of a lid on a pot and the way the lid lifted slightly as things came to the boil. I liked things boiling. Would someone please turn the temperature up on this life of mine?

Garth wasn't having a bar of it. 'Anyone comes to me and says I want to be part of the industry, I say, if you have any other options, explore them. Deeply. It'll eat your soul, Ricky. In a kitchen you think you're doing the cooking. Reality is the kitchen is cooking you. Understand?'

I didn't understand but I nodded. I didn't understand anything, beginning with those saliva cigarettes.

The meat packs were back in the freezer. I tied a full plastic bag of rubbish shut and took it out the rear entrance. Mr Le Clair's Cadillac was parked across the street. The driver's door was open and the chauffeur, in his sunglasses, had one foot down on the street while the rest of him stayed inside. This manoeuvre meant he was at least 6'2". From the car came a faint spooky kind of

music. Mr Le Clair must have entered by the front door, like a punter. But he wasn't a punter.

I went back inside Pete's and heard Garth calling my name.

Mr Le Clair wasn't from round here. Was he American? Googling didn't turn up much. Someone said he might be Garth's financial backer, a silent partner in Pete's. But why invest in Pete's? Surely there were better options. Lots of Yanks were buying up land around Aspiring. Helicopters flew over the town, depositing these rich-listers on remote hilltops where their low-roofed mansions were inserted into the landscape, harmonious, grey and slatey, with infinity pools like fallen mirrors. Most of the cargo on these flights was golf clubs and fly-fishing gear. The wine cellars were already stocked, the imported chefs were already at work. Sergio. Philippe. Mr Hua. My friend Sim's father flew for Aspiring Air. One time he couriered a grand piano up Mount Aspiring, swinging it into place six thousand feet up for some dude's birthday singalong.

Mr Le Clair didn't appear to be one of these chopper folk. Way too seedy and way too connected to Garth. His voice was weird as well, as though *he* couldn't decide where he came from. Maybe he's a vampire, Rachel said. She was the longest-serving waitress. We only see him, she said, when the sun's gone down. Mr Le Clair was certainly pale, with hooded eyes, and though his cheeks were without stubble, they always carried shadows of growth as though ink was washing just under the skin along his jaw. He spoke quickly and you never saw his teeth. Out of earshot of Garth, Logan said Le Clair was some kind of drug guy. You don't know that, Dave said. Look at his nose, Logan said. That's your classic coke nose. The nostrils cave in and the surgeons make a new one but it never looks right. He's a bad man. Stay clear, Ricky. Rachel laughed. What's he going to do to

Ricky? Drink his blood? Fresh meat, laughed Logan. He went to pinch my arm but I dodged him. Get off, I said.

The car was definitely from 'the place once called America', as Dad referred to it. But this was no ordinary long black Cadillac. This was a short black Cadillac. There was no other way of describing it. The car was a Caddy in every respect—and bore the maker's name—but it was missing several feet in length. The bonnet, or what once-were-Americans called the hood, was severely shortened. Could the engine even fit in there? And likewise the boot (trunk) was a sort of sawn-off number. Dave, who knew something about cars, said it was a kind of outrage this Caddy, like a kid's Caddy, something that got made at fantastic expense for the spoiled son of the world's richest, stupidest man. You imagined it getting wrapped in crêpe paper and finished off with a big black bow. Happy birthday, Doofus! Happy birthday, Donald!

It was the second year of Trump's presidency. Everything was stupid. *As the president spoke today, healthy birds dropped out of the sky.*

'Come through to the back,' Garth told me.

In the office, Mr Le Clair, thin and about the same age as my dad, looked me up and down. He was smoking a cigar. He was actually smoking it, though smoking of course was banned on the premises. The smell was of dog shit but from a very expensive dog. 'What are you feeding the boy, Garth? Donuts?'

'There you go,' said Garth.

'Then how is it you're that shape, Garth?' said Mr Le Clair.

The frier had made Garth's skin shiny and yellow. His fingernails, though, were astonishingly clean—like a girl's—with pink cuticles. One time a health inspector came and told Garth he had to wear a paper hat when he was cooking. He had to wear plastic gloves. 'What am I,' said Garth, 'a surgeon?'

Garth *was* a little medical, I thought. There was nothing he protected more jealously than his knives. They weren't stuck in a block—like Mum had at home—they were wrapped in a leather apron. If any idiot tried washing Garth's knives, he may as well not show up the next day. 'A knife washed is a knife ruined,' Garth said. You *wiped* a knife clean on a special cloth. When Garth unwrapped his apron of knives and looked at them in their individual pockets, then folded them up again, he may have been dealing with a baby on a change mat he was so tender and careful.

Garth had a daughter who was about my age. He would always bring her up as a way of suggesting how far we all had to go to meet a reasonable standard as workers. His daughter was always quicker, neater, more powerful, more intelligent than us. The trouble was the daughter lived with Garth's ex-wife in Auckland, a place no one could mention without Garth emitting a low growl. Grrrraucklarrrggghhhnd. Occasionally the ex-wife called him at Pete's and that was terrible for everyone. From the office we could all hear him. On those days Garth was rude even to the customers if they so much as questioned whether the ham roll came with mustard.

I put my hands in my pockets. My hands were huge; they were unknown to me.

'Hey, kid,' said Mr Le Clair, 'you're blocking the light. You're blocking the sun.'

'Go stand against the wall,' Garth told me.

Here's the thing: Garth had a height chart going, marking off my progress. It had started in week two of my employment, when Logan pointed out I was still growing and pretty soon I wouldn't fit in the kitchen. I'd bumped my head on the edge of a high cupboard. Garth had put the chart up for his daughter, who would apparently come down to Aspiring during school holidays.

For fun Garth asked me to stand beside the chart, which only went up to six feet. His daughter's measurements were from years ago. Keri, aged five years and seven months. Keri, aged eight years and two months. Etcetera. He asked Logan to stand on a chair and they marked off another foot above the chart with a tape measure. Somehow Mr Le Clair had got interested—he'd seen the fresh marks on the wall in Garth's office. Now the only time they measured me was when Mr Le Clair was present. It was a thing. I didn't get it at first. Two adults curious about my height to this extent. Sure, I could have walked away at any point.

The second time Mr Le Clair came and they marked off my progress, I got it. They were betting on my growth. For how much money, I didn't know. But whoever won had to give me a cut—their idea. This wasn't something I reported to anyone. They'd slip me twenty dollars as I left the office. They may as well have been betting on a flea race. On how long they could go without blinking. People are weird.

I stood there and Garth reached up with a pen. He couldn't quite do it this day so Mr Le Clair kicked the stool over and Garth stood on that. No one kicked the stool.

'Soon that's a ladder job,' said Mr Le Clair, who was average height. He wore a dark suit and a white shirt and a string tie. On the lapel of his suit he had a tiny silver pin in a kind of arrow shape, but I'd never got close enough to see exactly what it was. He carried a black cane with a silver tip. His boots were black and ended in a sharp point. His hair bore comb-marks, wavy ridges that glistened with some kind of oily substance. The hair didn't move a hair. And there was that ruined nose, just a thin slash, really. Had he been something in the music business? The manager of someone promising, dead at twenty-seven? Or had he himself been that promising person? A few inches from a breakthrough

before bad luck struck? I knew about bad luck. I knew how it could reach out and in a moment rearrange everything.

'Another quarter inch,' announced Garth. He was unhappy about this. He'd lost the bet again.

'You got tall parents, kid?' said Mr Le Clair.

'His father's same as me,' said Garth. 'Just a little bigger.'

Mr Le Clair was always trying to figure out the secret. 'Brothers and sisters?'

'There's just me,' I said.

I hadn't told anyone at Pete's about Mike. I liked to keep Mikey private; he was mine. Never again would I show anyone that softball glove with my brother's name on it.

'Look at the shoes on the kid!' said Mr Le Clair. 'Your poor mother. Though there'd be advantages. You can reach for the high stuff for her, right?'

I nodded.

'Soon you'll be buying booze for your buddies.'

'Which would be illegal,' said Garth.

'Totally,' said Le Clair. 'But there'll be pressure. Still, you'll be able to look after yourself. People will want to have a go.'

'What people?' said Garth. 'What are you trying to scare the boy for?'

'He's not scared. I'm saying some squat piece of muscle will want to bring down the big house. There are people walking around with the stature and the IQ of bowling balls. Their entire *raison d'être* is—' he looked at me '—to take out pins.'

'We don't know what you're talking about,' said Garth. 'And anyway, he's got to stop growing one day.'

'In the meantime,' said Mr Le Clair, 'I keep taking your money.'

'Pardon me,' I said, 'may I go now?' I didn't care to be under

the gaze of Mr Le Clair. I stood in the room and got measured so I didn't end up losing my job. Hell, this was part of my job—they paid me, didn't they?

Another thing: when they measured me and when I was in Mr Le Clair's presence, my head was clear of commentary. Le Clair seemed to suck it from me. No sentences were looping. I was blank.

'Sure, go,' said Garth. 'I'm growing chilly in your shade.'

Mr Le Clair dropped ash from his cigar onto a plate and looked me up and down one last time before turning away. He extended an arm towards me and I reached for the note: a fifty.

Garth pushed me from the room. At the door he said, 'I don't need you any more today. Go home, Ricky.' I said I hadn't quite finished all my jobs but Garth waved his hand. 'Out, go on now. You cost me enough already.' I still held the fifty-dollar note in my hand. Garth looked at it. 'Put it in your pocket. It's yours. Though I wouldn't advertise your good fortune, eh.'

Biking home, this: *He squinted against the cigar smoke. Smokescreen, he thought. But smoke . . . smoke, as his Auntie Rena once sang in nightclubs around the world . . . gets in your eyes. Your eyes water. Then what? Maybe a drop of moisture sliding over your eyeball magnifies the world and you start to see things.*