

# Breakfast Cook

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The alarm goes off at 6:00 A.M. If I have been diligent, the automatic coffee pot is already brewing. I turn off the radio and make my way into the bathroom. There is time for a shower and clean clothes today. Other days I just put on my Washington Redskins cap and go. I don't want to arrive late because it throws the whole morning off. After coffee and a shower, it's time to do what I do: get on the bike and ride into work at Sova's. I have to hurry. I am a breakfast cook.

The ride in is glorious. The bike wheels crunch on the icy driveway outside the Shack. The Shack is my so-humble abode of over a decade now. It takes exactly twenty minutes to get from the front door of the Shack to the back door of Sova's. The clock on the bank reads 6:43 as I go by; I'm arriving right on time. I slow down and glide to the back door, calm before the storm of Sunday morning breakfast.

It's either comical or pathetic that I don't know which of my keys opens the door. I have been working at Sova's for over a decade and still can't pick out the key on sight. After trying several I score: the lock turns, and I let myself in. The kitchen light is just inside the door. I flip it on and move into the kitchen, quiet except for the hum of the refrigerators. After plodding upstairs to stash my extra clothes, I come back down to the kitchen with a billion things to do. I have an hour before my co-workers will start to straggle in.

The first business of the day is to choose a tape for the first hour and a half. We have an old french fry box full of greasy cassettes ranging from Karen Carpenter to the Sex Pistols. Music is important to the kitchen crew. As manager, I try to respect the different tastes of everyone and not play too much Grateful Dead. I'm working with my

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crack weekend crew today. We listen to a broad range, from hip-hop to reggae. I pick out some vintage Dead and pop it in. The boom box sounds like it got dropped in the fryer last night.

The next task is to find the key to the walk-in refrigerator. Our boss started locking the walk-in after sides of beef started disappearing. An employee was busted and we lock it up every night now. Putting the lock, key, and chain away, I start looking for the left over food from last night. It's supposed to be in one place on the shelves, but can end up anywhere. I find the gallon containers and head out for the sandwich line as the Dead start to get wiggy with it.

The sandwich line has to be filled with ice. I'll use a bus tray to ferry it from the ice machine out front. It takes about three tubfuls. You have to make sure there is a bucket directly under the drainage pipe. If there isn't, you'll have a nice big puddle around noon. Once the ice is in place, it's time to put the cheeses, veggies, and meats in their spots. Everything has to be just so. The sandwich maker needs to reach for something and have it be there.

I find this part of the day relaxing. My music is playing and I'm all by myself. If I keep moving, there is no need to rush. A clean kitchen is pleasant for a cook to work in since it is so fleeting. Everything gets trashed during the rush.

After the sandwich fixins are in place, it's time to start the chilis and soups. After that, I'll pull fresh bread from the walk-in. Then it's time to get the cash trays for the cashiers and put them in the registers. Boom boom boom. All of these things are done in about ten minutes. After flipping the tape, it's time to start preparing breakfast.

I know it's goofy, but I really like scrambling eggs. When you're good at something, you just like the way it feels. I'm good at eggs. We'll need about a gallon pre-scrambled. You crack each egg on the rim of the container and watch it plop in. When the container is full, I hold it up to the light to illumine the eggs. It is sublime. I've been doing this for years and still get a kick out of it. There is something primal about

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all those yolks floating in a yellow glow, slowly turning. I want to photograph it and call it "Morning at the Abortion Factory." I set them down and take a large whisk to 'em. We'll use these for omelets early on. Later, we'll scramble more as we go.

The grills are getting hot. That means it's time to put the *au jus* and marinara on. We keep them hot so we don't have to worry about microwaving each order. One problem though. The grills have a layer of grit on them. We use griddle bricks at night to clean the grills and if you don't wipe them carefully, there is grit on them in the morning. Night cooks! There is a continuous war between day cooks and night cooks. Threatening notes fly back and forth between the crews and occasionally heads get hot, but usually it's copacetic. There is a basic camaraderie among people that do this kind of work.

I have to get some fresh towels to clean the grill. Our boss, Carl, keeps them locked upstairs and we use them sparingly. They are cleaned by a laundromat and it's expensive. I finish cleaning the grill, which is tricky because it's so hot. Now I'm running a little behind. Time to put a little hustle into it.

Here comes Carol. She's young, cool, and hates to get up in the morning. Sometimes she'll come over and rap with me about wild times last night and sometimes she'll avoid me for a couple hours. She's a good-hearted party girl and brings a lot of life to the place. Which is nice in the morning.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Looks like it's going to start slow with the crew today. Which is cool, I have some catching up to do. We need a breakfast special. Any factor can influence my choice. Has it been cold? Sunny? Is it the end of a semester? Are the Broncos on today? Something tells me...nothing. Hell, we'll go with Eggs and Salsa. Everyone loves eggs, salsa, cheese, and sour cream on a tortilla. I'll come up with a more special special next week.

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We have index cards that list the items and price for a special. I find "Eggs and Salsa" and take it to Carol.

"Hey. Here's the special. Eggs and Salsa."

She takes the card and holds it at arm's length, studying it for a moment.

"Didn't we run this last week?"

"Yeah. It's easy. I'm tired. You know, you know. How're you doing?"

"Crappy. I mean, great. I don't want to talk right now."

She grabs the special board. Carol is a fine artist and will make that board a thing of beauty. I grab a little coffee and lean against the counter and watch her. I always want a little contact first thing in the morning.

"Looks like it's gonna be a nice day."

I look out the window. It is a nice day. The ice and windows reflect the sun coming over the fence outside. The patio on the north side of the restaurant is one of my favorite places on earth. It's not big, and when the sun comes over the fence, the patio floods with orange light. The sky in Colorado is a light blue, the lightest sky I've ever seen. So light that it seems to be evaporating as you look up into it. Other places have grass, trees, and sky as equal components of the landscape. Here, you look up into Heaven. I've got to get back to work.

Carol is finishing her sign.

"Looks great."

I grab a little more coffee and head back to the kitchen. Let's see. It's crunch time and I've got to think. The Dead are deep in one of their spacey jams that go so well with L.S.D. I take another hit of coffee and look in the music box for something a little more grounded. Bob Marley.

"Lively Up Yourself" works. The kitchen crew will be arriving soon. Potatoes! I've completely forgotten potatoes. The basis of all breakfast, potatoes go with most of our dishes. We boil them until soft and then cut them into cubes by hand. After boiling and

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cooling, they take about an hour to cut. If the night crew hasn't done it, I'm hung. A glance in the walk-in confirms it. I'm a dead man. The night crew seems to think that cutting potatoes is optional. Aaaaarrrgh!

I drag the fifty pound pot out and toss it on one of the tables. I pull the potatoes out and start making piles. One pile is for me and one is for the prep cook. Together, we can get through them in a half hour.

Beth, our prep cook, walks in. One look at the two piles and she shakes her head and just walks by. She takes her jacket upstairs and stomps back down. Before I see her, I hear her talking.

"...night crew...lazy-ass bastards...Metallica blasting all the time...can't wait to get to the bar and get drunk..."

She picks up a knife. I stay on my side of the table and don't say anything. Beth can be edgy for a few hours in the morning. We turn into the two-headed potato-cutting machine and blaze through our piles in about twenty minutes. I know not to say anything or I will morph into the night crew in her mind. I go out front and get us two cups of coffee.

Back in front of the grill, it's time to pull it all together. The pancake situation needs to be addressed. We use a pre-made mix. I add water to the powder and stir to the right consistency. Then I make sure we have enough fruit. People like their pancakes and it's one of the things that certain folks come in for every week.

Our baker, Jed, has arrived. The baker works back next to the walk-in. He's generally in his own space, on his own timetable. If there's a heavy rush, you can call the baker to bring you stuff. They generally resent this. Everyone has a very specific idea of what their job is and often feel put out when you ask them to do more.

Jed is an interesting fellow. He's a soft-spoken pothead with a ready smile that doesn't seem to refer to anything in his immediate environment. You can joke with him and get that smile, but mostly he is content to do his job silently. We all like him. He also

born-again Christian. He'll talk about Jesus and smile that smile. He also gets in a fight with Sam, one of our other workers, about once every two weeks. I see that he has a black eye.

"What up, Jed?"

"Hey." Smile. "You want to burn one?"

We walk over to the exhaust hood. It's an old restaurant trick. You blow your hit of weed up into the fan and the odor disappears.

"Looks like you got a bit of a shiner there."

Jed smiles and doesn't say anything. He has already packed a bowl. It is our ritual when we work together. If you smoke pot before 8:00 a.m., most of the effect has worn off by the time the rush hits. It can be pretty weird to be high in the kitchen. Almost everyone puffs at some point in the shift. Pot makes things a bit more interesting and time pretty much evaporates. It also makes you stupid and inarticulate.

We smoke. We have to be careful not to get caught. If it's a co-worker, they will want to get high too. Too many stoned people in the kitchen can be dicey. If it's the boss, he'll put his hands on his hips and stare at us. We all get high with him, so he can't really bust us. It's just better to keep it on the down-low.

Here comes Carol.

"Carl wants to know why you are running the Eggs and Salsa again. He's driving me crazy. Can you make him go away?" She leans her forearm on my shoulder as she plays with her hair. "Hey! Are you getting high? I want to!"

I cast a glance at Jed. Sorry, pal. I gesture with my hands as if to pass her into his care and head back toward the sandwich line. I grab a piece of cheddar cheese to cover my breath before I go out and talk to Carl.

"Hey man."

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"Hey man," he mimics, not bothering to hide his irritation. I figure I'll go full offensive.

"Everyone is in and functional. Looks like we're right on track."

I'm filling my coffee cup. Sova's makes coffee about half-strength. You can drink the stuff all day and as a rule, I do.

"You want some?" Sometimes a little friendliness softens the man. We go way back. He still remembers the color shirt I was wearing at my first employee meeting. Red. We have a vexed relationship. There is a strong bond, with mutual affection, but I know I disappoint him and don't know why.

"No." Carl's hair is sticking out sideways and he's still wearing the clothes he was wearing last night in the bar. Sova's has a bar and most of the employees end up there every night. Carl is a hard drinker and a complicated man. He picks up his coffee from behind the register and walks back through the kitchen towards his house behind Sova's.

Bob Marley is singing "One Love" as I get the key to unlock the front door. It's time to open. I flip the sign from "Closed" to "Open" and turn on the lights in the dining room. The night crew did well here. Everything is in place and stocked.

Here comes Al, our first customer. Al is in a wheelchair. I think he has multiple sclerosis but I'm not sure. Sometimes I forget he can't use his arms very well. If I haven't seen him for a while, I'll thrust my hand out in greeting and shake his lifeless arm. He has been a professor, married man, business owner, and now he's an advocate for the handicapped.

"Al!" I say.

We've talked a lot over the years. Once he asked me, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I didn't rightly know. In my own weird way my life is full. I cook breakfast, teach philosophy, and play music. Granted, I am no great success in any of these endeavors. I think somewhat ruefully that I am actually right where I belong.

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Al smiles and waves and disappears around the corner toward the cash register. I know that he will order blueberry pancakes. He loves blueberry pancakes, and arrives at 8:00 a.m. on the dot each Sunday to get some. I give him a huge helping and he



at 8:00 a.m. on the dot each Sunday to get some. I give him a huge helping and he sends back for a to-go container to take the leftovers home. About a year ago I started writing a few lines of poetry or a verse of a song on the box. One time I quoted Dylan:

“Life is sad

Life is a bust

All ya can do is do what you must.

You do what you must do and ya do it well.”

The next time I saw Al he had tears in his eyes. He told me I probably saved his life that morning. You never, never know.

I walk back to the grill and start looking for the pancake batter. I glance toward the front to make sure the order is coming. Al grins and waves his arm. “Make ‘em good!” he calls.

Over by the prep table Beth has settled into her groove. She lifts her head and smiles as her hands continue in perfect rhythm. She’s not especially fast, but she’s steady. We’ve been friends for a long time. A lot of us at Sova’s have known each other for five, ten, even fifteen years. We work together, drink together, and sometimes sleep together. We’ve watched each other go from the possibilities of youth to the realities of age. You could search the world and not find friends like these.

I smile back.

“Why don’t you switch the tape, Beth?”

She likes obscure folksingers and we usually listen to one before the next wave of workers arrives. Generally, people don’t like the mellow stuff in the kitchen.

“Order out!”

Al’s cakes are ready. I put an extra handful of blueberries on top. It looks good; I must be hungry. There is a line forming out front. By 9:00 a.m., it will stretch out to the

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door. I’ll also have two more helpers by then. Until then, I’m on my own. Time to wake up and produce.

The tickets are coming in steadily. I have to separate them by type. Here is where

breakfast cooking becomes fun. I have to cook and spice the potatoes and keep them turning on a hot grill. Pour scoops of eggs into three different omelet pans after applying just enough oil to make them slide. Place the right amount of veggies and meats for the omelets on the grill, turning them often enough to keep from burning. Start and butter the toast that will go with each omelet. Begin pancakes. Soak French toast. Apportion yogurt. Scoop strawberries. Sprinkle granola. Pick and scrape anything burnt. Check out front for pretty girls. Sip coffee.

All at the same time. I love it.

When you're cooking well, it's a dance. Anyone that is good at something knows the stillness at the center of perfect action. Not that my action is perfect, but it's damn close. I live for the stillness, the silence in the whirl. I can feel the toast cooking, hear the vegetables screaming. I can imagine the pig in the barnyard about to give up his bacon. You get to where you're just listening and each detail seems to be doing itself. Cooking, like anything in life, can be a meditation. When I'm cooking well, I'm not really there.

After forty minutes and dozens of orders, the rest of the crew begins to arrive. Don comes in first. You know when Daffy Duck gets his bill blown around to the back of his head? That's Don. He appears from nowhere, leans on the counter and starts talking. What he's talking about, I can't really say. He's one of those people that can take an enormous amount of drink and drugs and still remain lucid. Then when he sobers up, he's talking crazy. Always coming and going at the same time.

Bob is another one of our cooks. He's from the South, Georgia or somewhere. He's got a big, slow smile and long, curly hair. He's worked in restaurants for years and knows all kinds of recipes. He is also a touch slow. You can never get him to crank up to rush speed. He'll only work so fast and no faster. He's really stubborn about it too. I've

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pulled him aside and asked him to pick it up. He says, "Yeah, yeah, I feel ya," but never speeds up. It's like he's working for a certain wage and won't put out one cent more energy than he feels like he's earning.

Sly is my main man. Big and tough with a lot of soul. He cannot wake up on time.

We have a fairly strict policy about being on time but we all make an exception for Sly. I'll start calling him in about twenty minutes. After about a half hour, we'll have to send someone over to get him. He just can't do it. Once he arrives, he's as solid as a rock.

"...and then we went to the Rio for margs. I ended up wading in the fountain in the back. They threw us out. I don't know how many margaritas I had. Then we came back here. I crashed on Carl's couch..."

I'm still in cooking rhythm. Don is telling me the long, involved tale of his last twenty-four hours. I could use his help. He needs to work his way up to it. He isn't exactly a tough guy, but he's done well with this shift. I'll let him ramble on for a while before reminding him that we have to work now.

Breakfast is happening. I ask Don to go to the freezer for some tortillas. I forgot to take them out to thaw. Now we have to microwave them slightly before we can put the special together. He pauses, stricken, as if his story has run away from him and he doesn't know if it will ever come home again.

"And put an apron on. We gotta get busy."

The orders are piling up. Bob saunters over and takes a casual glance at the tickets. No time for that.

"Okay man. We'll need another gallon of scrambled eggs and make sure we have back-up salsa. Hustle. I need you both over here as soon as possible.

"Beth, will you put in something more rockin'?" We've worked out what "more rockin'" is. She puts in the live Talking Heads album.

I grab small handfuls of peppers, tomatoes, and onions. They go on the grill. Grab an avocado and cut it into quarters, peel off the skin and slice it. Reach into the toaster

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for the slightly burning toast. Scrape the black parts and brush it with butter. The fried eggs are ready. Grab the pan and gently flip with a lot of give on the landing.

Everything else waits. Pause. Flip them back over and slide them on a plate. If there is any discoloration on the egg due to burnt butter, I'll take a paper towel and dab it,

leaving the egg soft and nearly white. All this happens in about 15 seconds.

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Don returns with the tortillas. I point to the corner and he puts them there. He's my brother and I can order him around, no problem. I read out, "Garden, cheese, Denver, and a special." He has to set the plates up while I provide the eggs, grill the veggies, and cheese the omelets. Bob tends to the potatoes and toast. We overlap into each other's territory when we have a spare moment.

Carol brings back a plate and slams it on the counter. She points at the ticket. It says, "no dairy." There is cheese on the omelet. Oops. A glance out front. No one is looking. I slip the knife under the cheese and deftly remove it in one motion, flipping it in the trash. Grab a small portion of veggies and spread them across the cheeseless eggs. "Two minutes," I say to Carol. This is how long she is to wait before she comes back for the order. The customer will expect us to make it again and we don't have time.

We have three orders of pancakes coming up. I raise a fist to the trio of derelicts that drag their hangovers in every Sunday. "Jack-son," they reply in unison. We'll have to clear off the grill to get the cakes on. They take a lot of space.

The crew is in full rush mode now. The Talking Heads are "Burning Down the House." Silently, we throw together six orders in thirty seconds. Precision, baby. Acting without thinking, we've got the three-headed, six-armed breakfast monster working to perfection. We will need to keep it up for at least four hours.

Here comes good old Sly. He's a big guy, low to the ground. He doesn't look at us as he rounds the corner toward the stairs. His Walkman is so loud you can hear his Damned over the Talking Heads. A few minutes later he is beside me.

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"Where we at?" Sly. Hates the shit out of this job, attacks it like a pitbull. One glance and he has the whole run of orders in his head. He will overlap each of our functions and inspect the orders before they go out.

Carol comes back for some orders. "Hi, Sly," she coos. She's finally awake. Sly grunts as he turns to slide some potatoes on a plate.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Bob doesn’t get it. He has the vibe of someone who’s in the closet. Gay is cool; we’re all unique here. It’s just that he tries too hard and it makes everyone a little uncomfortable.

“Yes.” Carol grabs the plate and is gone. Bob turns his palms up as if to say, “What did I do?”

“Let’s go, hombre. Giddy up.” If someone stops for a minute the whole effort gets thrown off. Bob turns and starts to chop some onions very, very fine.

Carl is back. He stands at the end of the line with a cup of coffee. His hair is slicked back and he’s got a fresh shirt on. He doesn’t say anything, just stands and watches us. You know the experiment that proves sub-atomic particles are influenced by being watched? We feel watched, and therefore, watch ourselves. The whole thing flubs. You can’t think and do this thing at the same time. You have to know what to do and do it as quick as possible. Thinking makes you go half-speed.

“Carl, can you get some potatoes for us?” He will usually respond to a need. He goes to the back, sees something he doesn’t like, and begins to re-arrange the walk-in. Back to breakfast.

We have orders all the way across the line. Pancake batter, egg shells, and empty containers pile up on the cutting boards. You hollow out a small space to work in and clutter piles up around your perimeter. We’re in a good groove and only get stumped when there is a special order.

Like now. It’s an order we get every Sunday. Two omelets, each special-ordered down to the last detail. I look out to the front and wave. It’s a young, friendly

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professional couple. Like a lot of people, they hit on something they like at our restaurant and come in for it on a regular basis. A certain friendship occurs with the regulars. You are playing a role in a part of their life—the fun part. We enjoy it.

We’re starting to run out of stuff. Bob has furnished us with more scrambled eggs but we’re low on salsa. Beth usually makes the salsa, but doesn’t realize we’re going through it so fast. I send Bob to whip up a batch right quick. He’s happy for any break

from the rough and tumble of the line. During the morning, we'll each take little breaks from the full concentration of cooking. Bob is first.

"What up, Sly?"

"Jackson."

"Rough night?"

"Kind of. Ended up back here, drank a lot of wine. Carrie's sister is in town."

"Right on. I'd like to see her."

"Yeah you would."

Carrie is Sly's girl. Her sister is Heidi. Heidi worked at Sova's before Carrie. She got away, as we say. Not everyone does. She's teaching down around Denver.

"Carl came through, looked a little rough."

"He was buying us drinks at two o'clock. It's a miracle I got out of here."

All the partiers are starting to come in. Sova's is laid-back enough to where you can take an hour with your meal if you want to. You see a lot of the same faces behind a Bloody Mary that you saw behind Fat Tires last the night before. Rock on.

We hit a rough spot with a lot of different items. It goes quicker when there is a lot of continuity between orders. But when you have to do one of each thing, you build each order from the ground up.

Customers are starting to hang out in the front where they pick up their orders. People are funny about their food. They think they can will their food out from the

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kitchen with their eyes. Like someone at the laundromat watching their clothes dry. It doesn't help.

We crank through a Huevo, yogurt combo, banana cake, special and two Gardens. The people out front are replaced by a wave of hungry customers behind them. We hit a row of omelets and start to make some progress. We need more potatoes on the grill. They're not getting crispy any more. Just getting them out hot and spicy is enough.

Carol appears. "Jack-son. You're needed out front."

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It's the moment we've all been waiting for. Sweet Carla has arrived.

"Hi-ya Jackson."

"Carla, you look lovely. What will it be our pleasure to get you today?"

"I'll have the yogurt and a piece of dry toast. Would you be so kind?"

She looks at the coffee. I slide on over and flip a cup in the air and catch it with my other hand.

"Black, right?"

"Totally."

This is another ritual. Carla is a stripper on Saturday night and a Sova's regular on Sunday morning. She is precious to us because she brings dollar bills on a Sunday. Lots of them.

Carla reaches into her cleavage and pulls out a roll. For real. Isn't she a trip?

"Whatcha need, Jackson?"

"I think fifty will do it today."

She's got them counted out already. She folds them down the middle and stands them on the counter like a church. I grab a ten and two twenties from the register.

"Thanks, Carla. You're a life-saver."

"I'm saving a seat in the front row, Jackson. All you've got to do is show up."

"Thanks, baby. One of these nights I will."

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Things have backed up since I've been gone. The orders are doubled up at the end of the line.

Sly says, "Jackson, we need two over-mediums and a *huevos* no sour cream. Keep the toast coming."

Pretty soon I've got all the pans cooking. We are putting out a lot of food. Looks like every family, hippie, and student in Ft. Collins has come in today.

"Jed, we need to start more potatoes."

Jed fills another 50 lb. pot with potatoes. They'll be soft by the last hour of breakfast.

Damn, a yolk broke on me. Scrape the egg into the trashcan and wipe the pan clean and start again. Reach in the fridge and pull the pancakes out. Need to make more. Do that. People are sending back for their second round of all-you-can-eat pancakes.

We've begun to run out of vegetables. This a slow-fix. One guy has to chop tomatoes, onions, and green peppers by hand. Don is leaning against the line working with one hand. Bob has slowed down to a crawl. It's tough on Don, but I almost always set Bob aside in a situation like this. He just slows us down too much.

"Bob, can you start cutting up some veggies?"

He sets up on the prep table facing us. Immediately, his mood improves.

"Sly, have you been over to the Stone Table yet?"

"Naw. They don't have my half-price discount over there."

"Good stuff, very cool."

Don, Sly and I are in continuous motion between the orders, the walk-in, and sources of caffeine. Black coffee is my poison. Everyone else drinks pop.

Here comes John in a "This train runs on bong hits" tee-shirt. Smooth cat, he leads with a smile. When John greets you, his eyes crinkle up to where you can't see his pupils. He's our night manager.

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"Workin' your magic, Jackson?"

"Yo. Getting crushed."

"Come around to the bar when you get a chance." He's cracking up. When you've been through so many rushes, it makes you feel good to see someone else getting it.

Don says, "Man, I'm folding." He looks over at Bob who has settled into a methodical groove with the veggies.

"Wassup Bob!" The dude startles, but doesn't lose his cool. He keeps chopping. "We need you over here." I explain that the two of them will switch.



Out front, the line is to the door. Customers are two deep waiting for their food. We're on the edge of taking too long with the orders. Luck, though. It's almost 11:00 and the afternoon shift will be here shortly.

I decide to slip out for a second and catch John. The coffee is backing up and I've got to use the restroom.

"Sly, I'll be back in a minute."

"Solid."

We bump fists and I'm off to the restroom.

John is standing at the exact corner of the bar. He's with a couple of his buds, hanging out, laughing. John is gesticulating with his whole body at something or other. He waves me over.

"Whiskey?"

"Make it two, on me."

John and I are tight. It's not that we've spent a lot of time together. Mostly, we've just partied and talked. But sometimes you meet someone and you feel like you've known them your whole life. That's me and John.

"Busy today, huh?"

We click whiskeys and throw them back. I'm in a hurry. This is officially a bathroom break. We let veterans have a little to drink while they work. It keeps things

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in the kitchen more relaxed. Of course sometimes someone will get too buzzed and we have to cut them off. You have to be a pro in a lot of different ways.

"Yeah. It's been hard and steady for months now. How's it been at night?"

"Not bad. Got some new kids. Tuesday is murder from start to finish."

On Tuesdays we offer 2-for-1 Tempeh Burgers. It's line-out-the-door time for the night crew.

"Gotta go my brother. You gonna stay for the game?"

"Yeah, I think so. Depends on when I can get a ride."

"I got you covered when I get off."

"I got you covered when I get off."

"Righteous." John smiles and his eyes disappear in the merriment. It's time to go back to the kitchen.

Back on the line I start grabbing utensils and plates that are piling up and carry them over to the dishwasher. It's easy to focus on the food and forget about the other stuff. Part of my job is to create the best working conditions.

I jump in and we're slinging orders fast as lightening. Don is back from his vegetables and we ramp up to warp speed. This crew is good. Before long food is flying out front with maximum efficiency.

Carol comes back and gets our attention.

"Have you seen order 591?"

We look through the row of orders. No dice. Look quick in the trash can. It's disappeared.

"What is it?"

"Two gardens. A special, extra guac. A *huevo* light on the chili. Here, I've got it written down."

She looks worried. It won't be much fun telling customers that we lost their order. It happens. But like I say, people get funny when they're hungry.

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We take the order from Carol and start it right away. Bob is taking a break, so it's just the three of us. We have to squeeze the re-make into the flow of orders we're making already. I grab the extra pans and fire them up.

We're sending out three or four orders a minute. Sly times the steam rising from beneath a lid while simultaneously pulling toast from the toaster. I'm sending over three omelets at a time. Don puts potatoes on the plates and keeps the tins in the sandwich line full. Nothing is hard to do except that you have to do everything at once.

"Greetings." Our eleven o'clock man is here.

"Jump on in."

Max has arrived. He's calm and focused, like someone who had their first cup of coffee at home. Max is another one of our five-year veterans. Knows how to do everything. Slow fuse. A good man for the Sunday rush.

"What's up, brah?" Fist bumps all around.

"We've been getting crushed. What do you want: line or prep?"

"Line's cool," he says. Beth has done the heavy prepping. Max will make sure everything is just exactly perfect along the line for lunch.

I wave Jed over. We pull the potatoes off and carefully pour the boiling water into the sink. We throw some ice in there and wait for them to cool off.

"You and Sam go at it again last night?" I can't help it; their battles are epic. They're like brothers, fighting one minute and tight as a knot the next.

"Sam ended up in jail last night. Started going crazy and yelling at people at this party. I tried to calm him down but...that's when they called the cops."

Jed grins as he grabs a potato. Still too hot.

"Want to smoke a bowl?"

"No time, bro. Maybe when we get off."

Back on the line, Max is giving us the shot of energy we need. I send Sly and Don on breaks.

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"Maximum, how you been, man?"

When I first met Max, he was still living with his conservative Christian parents. We used to tease him a lot. He asked me how much a bag of weed cost and I told him, "thousands," as I waved my little dime-bag in front of his bugged-out eyes.

"Great. Me and Jenny went dancing at Lincoln's last night. Pretty much a sausage party. She loved it, though."

"Duh."

Max swings his spatula at my neck. I duck.

"When are we going to play hoops again, Jackson?"

"Soon as I recover."

He dragged me out to this rickety old outdoor court one day in the middle of summer. He proceeded to kick my butt three games in a row and told me I was pretty good for an old guy.

“How’s the Descartes paper coming?”

We’re both into philosophy. Worst thing that can happen to a person.

“Okay. I’m good with clear and distinct ideas and all, but I wonder why he was so hung up on doubt?”

“It was the beginning of the modern scientific era. They wanted truth that could not be doubted.”

“Doesn’t that leave a lot out?”

“It does. A lot of philosophers are too mental. The scientific version of truth tends to get hung up on repeatability. A lot of truth is specific to a time and place. That doesn’t count for science.”

Carl appears at the end of the line. Take a little break and—boom—there he is.

“You guys.” He smiles. “How’s it been?”

“Doing good. Getting the breaks in before lunch.”

“Good job, guys. I’ll be around.”

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We have conquered most of the breakfast rush. There is a short period of time between breakfast proper and lunch. Between 11:00 and 3:00 we’ll be serving both breakfast and lunch.

Carrie, our afternoon cashier and Sly’s girlfriend, arrives. She and Carol are on the other side of the sandwich line weighing meat portions for the sandwiches. For some reason, cashiers weigh the meats. It’s funny because most of the cashiers are vegetarians.

“Hey Carrie, how are you?”

“Good. How are you?”

“Fine. Burned out. Can I leave now?”

She smiles and looks over her shoulder to see if any customers are out front. Not at

She smiles and looks over her shoulder to see if any customers are out front. Not at

the moment.

Carol is standing a full arm's length away from the scale. She looks slightly to the side as she puts the turkey on the scale. She seems a little bent over, like her stomach hurts.

"Lookin' a little green, Carol. Why don't you give yourself a break?"

She glances up and forces a smile as she backpedals from the line. Damn! Girl works like a fireman but gets taken out by a pile of meat.

Sly and Don are back from their breaks. Sly goes over to say hi to his girl and Don comes over to talk to me.

"How you don', Jackson?"

"Rollin', bro. Gettin' ready for the lunch rush."

Don is pulling out tins from the line to see if we have to re-stock.

"How're the ladies treating you, D?"

"Well, I've got my eye on Theresa, the little hottie that works at night. Bob says she talks about me a lot. I don't know, she's just nineteen."

"What's wrong with that?"

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"Yeah, I don't know. She's super hot. I've been hanging out with Carol and her friends. I made out with Julie the other night, but haven't seen her around since then."

"Keep looking, D. Like I need to encourage you."

"Yeah."

Sly is back. He seems mellower.

"How's it going, Jackson?" He grabs my shoulders in a brotherly clamp. "I'm all here now. Crazy night, bro. You hanging out for the game today?"

"I think so. I want to get out but you know how it goes."

We're all getting stuff ready. Orders are starting to pick up again. It's hard to get going once you've let up a bit.

"Here we go."

Everything seems to be set for lunch. I've got all the guys back on the line. Carol and Carrie are taking orders out front. We have a dishwasher, prep cook, and baker to back us up if we need it.

"Hey Beth. Wanna throw in that Social Distortion?"

It's time for the heavy stuff. Social D has carried us through many a lunch rush. And here it comes.

The tickets are coming in non-stop. Sub rolls are getting toasted, fries are getting fried. I have to do most of the remaining breakfast orders myself so the other guys can make sandwiches. We've decided to run French Dip with *au jus* for a lunch special.

"Jimmy, can you bring us some plates?" Jimmy is our weekend dishwasher. He's an older guy, a little rough around the edges. Carl will give a guy like this a chance from time to time.

"They're coming!" Jimmy barks out. We use two plates for each of the omelet orders because the top one gets blazing hot when we melt the cheese. We tend to run through them all before lunch, and the dishwasher needs to make them a priority.

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Jimmy is slowly and meticulously scraping something from between the prongs of a fork.

"Come on, dude. We're out of plates. I've got orders."

Jimmy throws the fork down and starts slamming plates into the washing machine tray. Something like this happens almost every weekend.

"Bob, will you give him a hand?" Bob goes slowly to the dish area and stacks plates as they come out of the dishwasher. He says they are too hot to handle and he has to let them cool off before he can carry them.

Now the orders are held up completely by the lack of plates. I walk over to the dish area and reach across Bob and grab the stack of plates. In the process, I bump into Jimmy.

"Whattya want, some of the rough stuff?"

Jimmy has spun around and squared off. His eyes are blazing and his forehead is purple. I stand there facing him. I'm sick of this shit. I keep looking at him and his eyes narrow as he waits for me to say something. I look down at his feet and back up at his face again.

"Yo man, it's cool. My bad. Just need some plates to get the orders out." I look at him again and try to rewind back to chill. What can you do? He shakes his head and turns back to the dishes.

Back on the line we settle into a steady groove. Jimmy is muttering to himself and washing dishes. Time passes and slowly the tension begins to ease. I slap Jimmy on the back as I pass by. He looks up and shakes his head, grinning a little. I think a little about where I want to be in five years.

Sly has the big bag of mayo out. He's cut a hole in the corner and squeezes the mayo into a tin. If potatoes are the life-blood of breakfast, mayo is the backbone of lunch. Just about every sandwich needs it.

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Carol and Carrie rush back and forth picking up orders. They are quick and efficient. If there is a problem with a customer, they will take care of it.

"You guys rock," says Carrie. "Anyone want something to drink?"

"Four cokes and a black coffee. Thanks."

We've been working steady for about an hour. Everyone is tired. Jimmy has us back up to speed on plates. Beth is almost done with prep. The end of the shift is in sight.

We get held up on an order that has a little bit of everything. Three omelets with special preps, salads, burgers and fries. Everyone focuses on it for a couple of minutes. It's finally done and Sly checks the ticket. Don takes the two trays out front.

Our drinks have arrived. Everyone has a spot for his cup. You have to be ready to grab your drink quick and empty it if the Health Department shows up. They won't show up on a Sunday though. Sipping your drink is part of the rhythm of cooking

show up on a Sunday though. Sipping your drink is part of the rhythm of cooking.

Speaking of drinks, John has arrived with a tray of shots. We all pause and raise a glass and cheer. Victory! The Sunday crew is almost there. John takes a shot out front to Carol. Carrie doesn't drink alcohol when she's working.

It's a little after one and the worst of the rush is over. We make food steadily as one or the other of us takes dirty pans and utensils over to Jimmy. Breakfast will be over in an hour and the other guys will finish out the afternoon.

Sly is telling a story about last night.

"We went to a crazy rave at the old church on Remington. I guess you can rent it out. There were DJs at either end and punch bowls and everyone was smoking weed. The place was packed and a lot of people were on ecstasy. They may still be dancing."

He pauses for a minute and looks thoughtful. I want to ask: what else, man?, but the moment passes. Sly is deep in thought and goes quiet for a while. We're wrapping up the rush and Social Distortion is blasting.

"Beth, did you get something to eat?"

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"I'm going to take something home when I'm done."

She and Jed are chatting as they roll cheese sticks in the bread crumbs. Jimmy has gone on a bus run and I send Bob out to help him. Hauling all the dishes in and cleaning them is the last big challenge of the shift.

"Don, are you still doing open mic?"

"Yeah, it's rad. I jammed with this guy who was really good on Dead tunes. We played Deep Elem Blues and Candyman."

"Were you singing?"

"Yeah. There were a bunch of people there. Everyone talks too much but it was a blast."

"I'm jealous. You coming over tonight?"

"Yeah. Me and Fish and Tyrone. What time should we come?"

"How about seven or eight? I may watch the Broncos this afternoon before I go



home.”

The fellas will be coming over to the Shack tonight. I've been hosting a poetry and music jam on Sunday nights for a couple of years now. We improvise on the spot like the second set of a Dead show. Sometimes it sounds like crap, but sometimes it's truly inspired.

“Cool,” Don says. “We'll be there.”

It's hard to keep cranking out the food. Everyone is burned out on the rush mode. We slow down a bit and each of us picks a ticket and works on just that. It's easier when you don't have to coordinate with others, but slower.

Carl shows up at the end of the line. He stands, hands on hips, watching with his preternatural skepticism. I catch his eye as he walks away. What now? Just Carl being Carl. We may never know.

Sly and Bob are making orders while Don and I clean up. We make sure all the tins on the sandwich line are full for the afternoon. Carol comes back to pick up an order

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and smiles. She's feeling better. Carol is like a great running back. She gets stronger as the game goes on.

The lunch rush winds down and people are chatting about everything but Sova's. Beth has to babysit her grandchildren this afternoon. Bob has a chemistry mid-term tomorrow. Max is the clown prince, shucking and jiving. You feel the strong friendship between these people as we wrap up a job well done.

“Sly, I think I'm gonna ramble. You guys got it covered?”

“We're good, Jackson. Get your ass out of here.”

“Hey!” Jed sticks his head around the corner and smiles. Yeah. I'm about ready to smoke a bowl and head over to the bar and watch me some Broncos.

Jed and I go outside to the small walkway between the restaurant and the bar. He packs a bowl, lights it, and passes it to me. I watch the herb-glow rise and fall as I hit it. Ahhhh! We pass it back and forth without saying anything. A deep weariness takes hold of my body. Thoughts go by like flies and I have nothing left to swat them with. I thank

good old Jed and head over to the bar.

The Broncos are playing the Jets and it's the middle of the second quarter. As usual, Elway has them up by a couple touchdowns early. A local crowd packs the bar and a sub-set of cliquy regulars are nailed to the stools around the bar proper. They are like a flock of birds with one mind, able to twist and turn together in their mutual disdain for any talk besides their own tired proclamations and putdowns. They are the cool kids in the lunch-room, the bullies on the playground. I wade through their brittle silence and lean an elbow on the bar.

"Nurse!" I yell at Baldy. "You got any cold beer left?"

Baldy and I worked in the kitchen together for a few years. We were both managers and it was a disaster. He's a good guy, but there is a part of both of us that just won't give in. A friend of mine says that we're too much alike.

"Old style?"

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"Yeah."

He brings one over and says "two bucks." I leave him three and beat it to the outskirts of the crowd where I belong.

John comes over and we click our beers and drink. He looks like he's got a small ocean of alcohol sloshing around in him, but his grin says he hasn't lost his balance yet. Bill and Ben come over and we get a pitcher. We kick back and shoot the shit for a while and slowly draw silent watching the game.

A stillness spreads from my center to about six inches beyond my body on all sides. I sit in the bubble of calm as my spirit slowly, bit by bit, makes its way back into my body.

Later, as the Broncos pull away, Sly comes into the bar on his break. He sits down with us but doesn't say much. Bill and Bob head out and John drifts away. Sly looks like there is something he wants to say.

"How's the shift going? They laying off you yet?"

"Yeah. It died off after you left. I let Beth and Bob go home. Don and Max are

"Yeah. It died off after you left. I let Beth and Bob go home. Don and Max are

going to flip a coin next."

Sly leans forward and rubs his head. Then he sits up slowly and looks at me.

"Man, last night was crazy. Can you keep something quiet?"

"Yeah, sure Sly."

"Susan was there last night. She was completely drunk out of her mind. When we got there, one of her roommates came over and grabbed me by the arm and said I had to go talk to Susan. We go back to some stairs. Susan and a couple girls are sitting there. Actually, Susan is laying with her head in Lori's lap and Brenda is cleaning up the puke. Susan was really fucked up."

"Damn, that's rough."

"Yeah, but it wasn't just that she was drunk. She was really fucked up inside. She was going on and on about how she wanted to kill herself, how she's a piece of shit and

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all that. It was real, man. She meant it. It wasn't just drunk talk. It was like she was drunk and couldn't hide her misery any more. After they cleaned up after her, Lori and Brenda cleared out and it was just me and Carrie. We sat with her for hours. I've never seen anything like it."

"Damn. Did you get her home?"

"Yeah, finally. She's got people with her. She finally stopped crying and got really quiet. We couldn't get her to talk after a while, and that's when we finally took her home.

"What do you think is bothering her?"

"It's not like that. She was going around and around about her father and her kids. It wasn't what she was saying. I was scared. It was like death was right over her shoulder and all she had to do was turn around and walk away with it. She really wanted to die last night. What do I do?"

"I don't know, man. I guess you just talk to her, see if she needs anything. Ask her if her kids are okay. Is Carrie all right?"

"Yeah, I think so. She's a tough one."

"So are you, man. Susan was lucky you were there last night."

We sit in silence for a few minutes. The game and the crowd seem really far away.

"I'd better go back. Thanks for the rap Jackson."

He stands and stretches and then reaches down for his plate. We bump fists.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do Sly. I'll be around. Seriously man."

"Aw-ight."

Sly smiles a little and shakes his head. "Gotta go"

He heads back to the kitchen and I look around for John. I tell him I forgot that I rode my bike in this morning and can't give him a ride. He says no worries; he's going to stay and drink for a while. We bump fists and I go out and get on my bike and head on home.

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## Part Two

### League of Merry Gentlemen

It's a beautiful afternoon. Shame I spent the day inside a kitchen. I ride my bike over the melting ice sheets just to hear the loud crack. Kids are running around with

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their coats off and folks are doing errands on a sunny Sunday afternoon. I'm thinking about what Sly said. I don't know Susan particularly well, but I like her. She's intelligent and soulful and listens closely when you speak to her. What can you do for somebody? You never, never know.

As I pull in front of the Shack, the neighbors are out already with cigarettes and beer. One of the children throws a half-assed snowball at me. I run over to her—"Hey you! Whatcha doin?"—and pick her up in my arms and spin her around as she squeals with delight. We have a cold brew and kick it before I go back to my place to wash up.

Back home, I'm tired as tired can be. The eternal dilemma: do I shower right away or crash out for a while? The temptation is to just crash. But working in a hot kitchen leaves a layer of grease on you that just feels gross. We call it washing the Sova's off you. I've had dogs come over and lick my shoes for fifteen minutes after work before I had to make them stop

I had to make them stop.

After my shower, I fall into my big gold easy chair. I found it by the side of the road one day. I don't know why I grabbed it, but grab it I did. I've had it for years. It's as if it were made just for me. It fits my legs and my back perfectly, and my head sits against a soft, perfectly placed cushion. I lay back and drift off for a while. You can train yourself to journey right out to the lake of the land of dreams, dip your toe in, and then turn around and come back. I do this and wake up back in my chair, deeply relaxed.

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There's just a little light over the foothills to the west when I wake up. The Shack will be full of people in a couple of hours and I need to put things away. First, the bed gets folded back into a couch. Then all the dirty clothes beneath the bed have to be thrown in the closet. You get the idea. Before too long, the Shack is presentable.

I make myself eat a burrito. We'll get to drinking later and I won't want to eat. Ah, delicious food-like substance! My kitchen is ship-size—everything is tiny. A friend of mine got weepy the first time she came over and saw how tiny it is. I don't know. I like it this way. My little dorm fridge will hold a couple burritos and a twelve-pack of beer. I eat most of my meals at Sova's anyway.

It's time to head out and pick up some brewskis. I walk across a dark cemetery to the liquor store at the far side of the park. I swear I can see shadows moving out of the corner of my eye. When I turn to see, nothing is there. No one else in the park and no one on the streets. My shoes crunch in the hardening snow.

I get to the store and head in. The cashier is familiar and we say hey. I pick up a twelve-pack of Rolling Rock and hope I have enough money to pay for it. Just enough, and I head back for home through the silence of the tombs. When I get back to the Shack, my boys are there waiting for me.

"Wassup, Jackson!"

"Gimme one of those."

---

I walk up to about five or six dudes sitting on the benches outside the Shack. Don and Fish and Tyrone are the core. Dave has been coming for about a year. Billy is Tyrone's brother. Mike is a friend of Tyrone's from the English department at the University.

"Wassup, y'all?" I hand the beer over to Don, who immediately begins distributing them. Fumble for my key and turn that cranky old lock and let everybody in.

"Come in, come in to the Shack of sin."

Everyone is spreading out, such as is possible at the Shack. Billy drops into the gold recliner. Don heads for the bong in the kitchen. Tyrone is putting a CD in the boom box. He is the word man, as we say. Writes poems and likes to improvise lyrics to music. There is a distinct Dionysian vibe to this gang and Tyrone is our Jim Morrison.

"Sorry to be all greedy. Got any weed?"

"In the drawer, Don. Bring it on out. Let's get high-ee."

"In the drawer, Don. Bring it on out. Let's get high-ee."

Fish gravitates to the portable synthesizer. He plays no musical instrument.

Rather, he is possessed by an uncanny ability to provide exactly what is necessary in any situation. In the Shack, this means long drone chords on the keyboard and shouting out genius commentary to the general ruckus.

After a bong, I go over and grab the bass. We aren't too worried about being exactly in tune. We get a spooky groove going as Tyrone shuffles through his poems.

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I'm thinking about the graveyard, of poor Susan, the sliver moon, the darkness. Tyrone pulls out his Blue People poem and the incantation begins. Dave starts blowing low honks on the sax and Don ker-plonks on the guitar. Fish keeps a one-two oompah going in the center like a heartbeat. Funny how quick it all happens and how sure our intuitions are. It's like a great kitchen crew. The song/poem comes to an end and we all toast to the League of Merry Gentlemen, which we are, and we are.

Tyrone's techno disc is still playing in the background and we pack a bowl and pass it around. Tyrone has begun to read again but the rest of us are kind of kicking back, sipping a brew. Ty starts telling the story of Baudelaire and we quickly get drawn in and start playing again. Soon everyone is making percussive noises that sound like *Apocalypse Now*. A couple other dudes show up and grin when they come in the door. You can feel it. The ceremony has begun.

Don yells out, "Yeah!" Dave answers with a horn blast. I run from the high to the low on my bass. Billy's eyes are shut and he's rocking out with a smile on his face. Mike



holds a flaming bowl to my lips and I draw in as I play. It's really blazing and I cough it out and come up smiling. Hit a low E and start a twelve-bar crawl.

Tyrone drops right in. This is our semi-regular rendition of his Southern-fried Tom Sawyer poem. We call it going to Mississippi. Tyrone says, "I'm fixin' to tell you about the Mississippi River, boy," and Don yells, "that's right!" It's getting warm in here and sweat runs down my neck

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John and Bill arrive. This is a different John, a friend of Tyrone's from the program. Bill is another Sova's cat. From Nebraska, he is an outcast by choice playing the role of cultural critic.

"Yo, Bill. What's shakin'?" I ask across the room.

"Not much." Bill doesn't waste words.

Don grabs the sitar. He took lessons from a Master in India. He has a good ear for melody and complements my bass rumbling well with his sitar-trance plonks.

I'm thinking it's time for a song. We decide what to do on the fly, organically. The more you can let go of control, the more interesting it becomes. I grab my guitar and give it a tuning.

"I Know You Rider" flows unannounced from my folkie D chord. Everyone pitches in and Don sings along. Our voices complement each other, though we don't know a whole lot of songs together. Tyrone has turned off the techno and someone opens a window. We warn our Rider that she is going to miss us a few more times and wrap it up

wrap it up.

"What's up at school, Ty?"

"I'm writing a series of disco poems. The Dionysian. It's like the Dead. Everyone drops their ego and the crowd becomes an organism. Grab me a beer, Don."

"One for the house!"

---

More beer has arrived. We're passing around bowls and talking to the person next to us. There are about ten guys in the place now.

Tyrone pulls out some non-fiction. He wants to write a novel about his days in the Naval Academy. He has epic stories about chasing women and sneaking back into the dorm before dawn. They finally had to throw him out.

Just as he gets to the point where you really want to know how the story ends, three ladies from the school arrive. A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. Full house. They started coming with Tyrone and have been coming for a few months now. Best party in town on Sunday night.

The story falters and we make room for the ladies. Beers are served, fresh bowls are packed. The atmosphere changes from a backyard barbeque on acid to a Friday night double date on Main Street.

"How are you doing, ladies?", I inquire in my quasi-courtly way. I don't know them well, but when we get to rockin', they hang right in. The redhead grabs a pad from my desk and sits down to draw.

“Want to start it over, Ty, or are we moving on?” No need for talk. There is a new pitter-patter beat starting and I hand the guitar over to Don so I can get back on the bass. Fish has the blonde laughing at something. I let out a wolf whistle on my bass and look quickly out of the corner of my eye at Elizabeth, the redhead. Her head is down, and she draws. I’ve got a feeling she knows I’m watching.

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We start playing something funky. I lay a repeating five-note groove down. Don starts a chicken-scratch on the guitar. Fish is screeching on the organ and saying things like, “body parts!” “grilled cheese!” Tyrone says:

Beat, beat it’s on the street

We got nowhere to go

The wave is breaking overhead

Beware the undertow

Blonde and Brunette are chatting excitedly about clothes. Elizabeth is still drawing. When we’re all in the Shack, it gets a little crowded. The heat from the bodies and the smoke and the lights gets thick. It’s a boy’s club, for sure, and we’re glad the ladies put up with us.

The musical and poetic forms have broken down. It is one group mind and everyone has a voice. I’m repeating my bass line and sweat rolls down my face. Tyrone says:

Over the hills and through the woods

To Grandmother’s house we go

To Grandmother's house we go

The wood's on fire and higher and higher

The flame burns through the snow.

He puts down his poems and heads for the kitchen. The front door is open and people are passing in and out. I spot my neighbors. Hey there! An irritating theatre-type

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grabs the mic from Fish and starts telling the room how great he is. Lose yourself, man! My bass line has smoothed back into a walking blues and Dave is hitting the high notes on the sax.

Without further ado, and wearing nothing but a red St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap, Tyrone re-emerges from the kitchen with five open beers.

"Maestro!" he says, and hands one to me.

"Ladies!" and hands one to each of the smiling women.

Don of course drops his drawers and joins right in. Over the next hour or so, the music and poems pick up and leave off, beers and bongos are consumed, and merriment holds sway. Brunette takes her top off and runs a lap around the outside of the Shack and we watch her through the windows.

She comes back in and says to me, "We want to create a space where it's all right to be ugly." No thanks. Ain't nobody gonna see me naked. I wouldn't do that to you. I may run for President someday.

Tyrone is hittin' a bottle of whiskey and rapping to the jungle beats. Blonde and Elizabeth don't take off their clothes but appear extremely comfortable. General

nakedness does that to people. Elizabeth comes over as I chat with an English professor who joins us from time to time. She butts in and hands me a drawing of myself.

It's good. I don't know what to say. I look like a bard with fiery eyes. I admire the stillness in the picture as the chaos rages around us. I have a hard time looking away.

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"Thanks," I say in my quasi-courtly way.

The League burns some more until we begin to burn out. It's been quite a day. Everyone has their clothes back on. I ask Elizabeth for her number and she writes it on my picture. Don is arranging the after-party: open mic night at Sova's. He and I go outside and look up at the stars.

"It's cold out, D."

"Yeah, man. Good to have the clothes back on."

He's grinning from ear to ear. Damn if we don't set something free each week.

We feel lighter, less neurotic, happy like children. It's what church should be.

"Glad you guys could come over. Craziest tonight."

"Love the Shack, Jackson. Wouldn't miss it."

People are heading out and waving goodbye.

"Drive safe, animals"

The techno is pouring out of the Shack as Tyrone and his prof are bent in conversation. Don calls Tyrone and says it's time to go.

"You gonna come with us, Jackson?"

"Naw, man. I'm burnt. I gotta head back in the morning. You working

"Naw, man. I'm burnt. I gotta head back in the morning. You working

tomorrow?"

"No. Three days off."

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We bump fists and hug. I hug Tyrone and Fish as they come dancing out the door.

"Good times, good times."

I close the door and head for the fridge but think better of it. I gotta get some sleep, gotta be there on time.

I am a breakfast cook.

