



Edesia

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Tavi's shift at the restaurant ended around five p.m. and he rode his bike down King Street. He took this street every work day because it was an empty straight shot to and from the restaurant and you had to cross a pair of railroad tracks. Tavi had thought, for a while, of the tracks as a line drawn using steel. Everyone he knew dreamed of moving to the good side to be closer to the beach. Tavi lived across the tracks but he had some friends on the good side. Some he knew moved from his neighborhood, some were born on the good side. He had friends move farther away too, who would never live any closer to the beach.

When Tavi walked into his house he saw a note from Joe on the dining table.

“Tavi, forgot you are working today. I won't be home again until late tonight.

Locked in a real tight battle for offensive coordinator. –Dad”

He got a cold water bottle, thinking how many times would he read the words *offensive coordinator* this summer, and lied down in their living room watching a cooking show.

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Tavi had been working as a busboy for over a year. The idea of becoming a chef had grown on him. He was a business major at Canis Major College. Tavi had been raised to be a professional athlete and he'd chosen, at a young age, to pursue baseball. He had recently stopped pursuing that lifelong effort. Without sports, he was tuned in to his thoughts more than he had ever been. His course schedule was loaded down with survey calculus, anthropology, micro economics, and Spanish. Tavi, frustrated with his studies, began to realize that his life had revolved around physical results—what grades he couldn't make in school, strides he couldn't make on the page, he could get excused because of his commitment to being an athlete.

When he had quit baseball he lost the baseball staff tutors too and without their help Tavi wasn't passing. He needed to figure out what he was going to do with his life. He had believed he was going to be drafted before graduation so he chose business as his major solely because it sounded like the kind of major that was recession proof.

Passion equals production was a motto of his Dad's.

Tavi believed any results he had produced were because he was passionate then.

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He fell asleep watching that cooking show and when he woke from his nap, the second episode of the same cooking show was on. Yesenia was showcasing frittatas. She cut into them and steam rolled from the cut. Tavi could see the red and green bell peppers, cheese, and sausage which made him hungry.

Tavi wanted to cook. He got up and checked the fridge. The top shelf was full of Gatorade and the rest of the fridge was empty except for some cold waters and chicken Tavi had bought that was too out of date for comfort. The chef had let some of the staff go recently and had needed Tavi to work late until he was relieved and so he had been eating dinner at the restaurant. Tavi grabbed his back pocket and looked for his wallet thinking he'd go to the grocery store. He didn't find his wallet but he had an image in his head of where his wallet was. He got on his bike and slowly peddled looking along his path, he didn't find it on his way to the alley behind Edesia, but that just made him more sure about where it was.

The teal bricks of the building had vines growing up them to the white gutters and gray shingle roof. He entered the restaurant through the alley entrance. The alley doors looked like they were made from the same material as a dumpster. He didn't see anyone in the kitchen but

walked stealthily to the bathroom; the last place he had been before he had left the building. Shakari wasn't in there but Tavi thought he must have been cleaning tables in the front of the house. Tavi found his wallet in a stall. He used some brown paper and picked up the pissy leather wallet and attempted to escape unnoticed. The last thing he wanted was to be seen with the wallet or worse yet to be asked by the chef to fill in for someone—because of the empty kitchen he guessed that some people had called in sick. Just before Tavi could get out of the building he heard the chef's voice.

“Tavi, you forget something?”

He accepted that he was caught and held out his wallet wrapped in the brown paper. “I guess it fell out of my pocket earlier,” Tavi said.

“Ho,” the chef said, and pushed out his hands to frame the space between the two.

“Careful with that thing.” The Chef was a lanky man, with hairy, lean forearms that had been shaped by kneading dough for decades. The chef wore all-whites with a relaxed toque that hid most of his gray hair.

“I'm just trying to get some food,” Tavi said.

“You need to bag and tag that thing,” the chef said and grabbed a zip lock bag and held it open. He looked Tavi right in his eyes with a “if that wallet grazes my finger you are fired” look.

“Have you betrayed me too?” the chef said and handed the bag to Tavi.

Tavi's heart dropped.

“Sneaking off to Napoli's, huh?” The chef didn't smile.

“Never,” Tavi said.

“I'm your favorite turd, right?” the chef said. “You wouldn't shit me?”

“I *was* going to order some food but from my neck of the woods.” Tavi was actually going to the grocery store but he didn’t want the chef giving him a depressing cooking lecture when if he hurried he could grab some groceries and be back in time to learn from the always-happy Yesenia.

The chef smacked Tavi on the shoulder. “It’s way cheaper to cook at home than it is to eat out,” the chef said. “You know what. Keep your money—come have some real Italian cooking. I got extra antipasto plated over here.” The chef pointed with his thumb at the entrance to the walk-in cooler. “First, you gotta put that thing in one of the lockers and wash your hands,” the chef said and walked away while talking over his shoulder, “to your elbows.”

“I couldn’t afford Napoli’s anyway,” Tavi said. He was confused but in no place to turn down free anything.

“Fuck Napoli’s,” the chef said and breathed out stopping just short of the swinging doors. He took a quick moment and went back out front.

When the chef came back into the kitchen Tavi was still drying his arms and the chef handed him a wooden stool and told him to sit at a stainless steel prep counter. The chef passed him a wood platter and walked out back to smoke. All the contents of the platter were laid out on a bed of thick, dark, ornamental lettuce: in the center was rolled and stacked capo, surrounded by a moat of mushrooms—at one end of the platter was a mound of white cheese cubes, and hard cheese with herbs was next to that, the cheese was separated by julienned green peppers and black olives, and at the other end a darker asiago cheese—there were a few clusters of artichoke hearts, accompanied by rolled smoked prosciutto, cherry tomatoes, and pickled chilies. The platter had been made two days ago but everything tasted well enough to Tavi.

Tavi believed the chef was genuine but after Tavi's immediate hunger was curbed he wanted to know what all this was about.

The chef's daily address to the small staff meetings was variations of assurance that the staff was a family. For all the chef's niceness, and Edesia being a staple restaurant in the community, Napoli's, Edesia's newly opened rival, was winning the week-day and week-end business. The chef had been forced to cut hours and let some staff go. All the chef could offer now was gestures but people needed their forty hours.

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Napoli's resembled Edesia but had fewer flaws. Edesia's building was smaller. It maybe could fit thirty people inside. It had block walls painted teal, inside and out, with a gray shingle roof, and white trim to match the gutters. The front walkway was decorated with waist-high shrubs and cement lion figures alternating with figures of the goddess of food, Edesia, and the goddess of drink Bibesia. Leather-backed booths in the corners, six fine wood tables, nice space in-between, all covered in white cloths, white candles set in dark green glass, beige napkins in bronze rings, and fine wood chairs; the minimum for a restaurant close to the beach.

Perhaps if the chef had more seats at Edesia, those who found it hard to get a seat at the restaurant wouldn't have gone to Napoli's. For whatever reason once a customer went to Napoli's they didn't come back. Napoli's offered everything Edesia could, was updated, and would always be closer to the beach. Tavi liked that he could hear the train when he was inside Edesia. He'd have to pay more attention in his economics courses to really understand why the restaurant was declining.

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“You want to pick up some more hours tonight?” The chef said when he came back inside and was washing his hands.

“I really don’t want to work another shift,” Tavi said and felt bad thinking maybe Shakari needed to leave. Shakari had come into the kitchen while the chef was gone. He was at another stainless steel prep table, near the cooler, slicing purple onions and putting them in a tote. He still hadn’t seen anyone else. Tavi just wanted to eat and go home but his gut, full off a two-day old, high-end platter, had told him nothing, not even over-prepped food, was free.

“What if it’s to cook back here with me?” the chef said and dried his hands on a towel.

“Definitely, Chef,” Tavi said quickly with food in his mouth. He sprang up from his seat to shake the chef’s hand.

“Sit down. Finish your antipasto. Nice attitude though.”

“I don’t have any other clothes with me and I’m wearing sneakers,” Tavi said, finding he had a little more room for the smoked prosciutto. He was appreciating its buttery garlic taste, the paprika and black pepper, and juniper berries once more before the work began. The chef got up from his seat and looked into the front of the restaurant.

“It’s slow tonight. Just stay in the kitchen and you’ll be ok. Thanks, Tavi.”

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Tavi had been dying to ask the chef if he could cook. He’d watched the chef and sous chef work while he washed dishes or checked inventory. Sometimes he or Shakari helped. He’d wheeled a big fish over to them and watched the chefs carve the fish up. They could start with a pot of warm water and make a soup that’d you’d clock out and eat and feel like you could ride your bike home in the winter with no jacket. Everything they made from scratch.

The work was hard but he could see the fun in it. He was looking for something he could do for the rest of his life. He remembered doing early morning prep with them. The chef and his sous chef would have music playing. They'd be drinking coffee and going over their ingredient lists and recipes for the day. The chefs talked about things like slow cooking overnight and having to bake at 3 a.m.. Tavi remembered all these things and he suddenly felt the giddy spark of passion for cooking.

Passion equals production he'd been taught.

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Tavi loved baseball. He played outfield. In highschool, two years ago, towards the end of his senior year, Tavi had tracked a high ball and called it but another fielder got lost tracking the ball and collided chest-to-chest with Tavi. One of Tavi's lungs had collapsed. At the same time of his injury, his mother was going through rounds of chemo. He was out of the hospital in a few days and prescribed rest. Tavi spent nearly all of his rest time with his mother. The injury immediately changed the pace of his life. He had been training for something his entire life. His father made passion his duty in life. There was always a guilt he'd feel about "mismanaged" time. Even seeing his mother in the hospital, she worried he was losing focus. Tavi didn't think he'd ever forgive himself for the time his mother spent alone.

Tavi's father hadn't taken time off from coaching. His father believed she would beat the illness. Tavi's grandmother had done all the caretaking because his father believed she'd be more comfortable that way.

No one on the team said so because his mother was sick, but his leaving the team was when they needed him. His father made that known. Tavi worked it out to have tests proctored

and he'd finish his school work at home. After a few weeks off, and at his father's insistence, he joined his highschool team for their final three games of the playoffs. Almost all of the offers Tavi expected didn't come in. Canis Major College didn't rescind their full athletic-scholarship for baseball so Tavi accepted admissions there.

His mother passed away in the off season.

"Canis Major is getting you for a steal," she'd said. "I can't believe one injury and those bigger schools lose interest—their loss—I'm happy my guys can look out for each other."

He didn't start his freshman season and had limited playing time his sophomore season. He'd decided not to return to the team. It was ironic because his father was the designated motivator and wordsmith for the football team. He had a mini-speech he'd been saying all Tavi's life.

"Passion is when you wake up and want to do something. Love is when you care so much you have to do a thing," His father said. "Find your passion, *want* to be here, don't *have* to be here."

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Tavi heard voices coming from the dining front and moments later the chef came back into the kitchen.

"How's the antipasto?" the chef asked with little interest.

"The best!"

The chef half-smiled and went to dry storage. When the chef returned from dry storage Tavi was fixing the cellophane back over the platter.

“Tavi, I need you to grab the television from my office and bring it out here.” The chef pointed to the bar through the double doors. “I was going to say throw the rest of that away but just put the platter by the sink.”

Tavi had a tinge of nausea but he quickly attributed it to the smells that were registering now that he was done eating.

When Tavi entered the dining room carrying the television, he saw the chef standing next to three men sitting at a booth. Tavi set the television on the bar. One of the men wore a nice black button-up and gray slacks, another a red button-up also with gray slacks, and the last man was dressed in tan Dockers pants and a silky black polo. They were all sitting down talking over the menu. Tavi felt he did not exist to the men. He went around the counter and searched for an outlet. The chef came and leaned over the bar to check on Tavi just as he plugged in the cord.

“There’s a cable down there also, screw that on too, pal,” the chef said. He turned to the man in the nice black button-up and asked, “Which channel is it, Two Way?”

Tavi thought the word Two Way had something to do with the television until the man in the black button-up—busy with his reflection in a hanging picture, patting his thinning auburn hair into place—said, “It’s on NBC.”

Two Way was a large, healthy looking man with a natural tan. His immensely fat friend in the red shirt had so much sweat around his arm pits the red shirt there was maroon. The skin on his cheeks was dark. The fat man had two small gold necklaces: praying hands and a Pope. He had gold pinky rings with big, square glossy-black stones and a crack running down the middle of one. Two Way barely looked at the chef when he spoke.

“Gio, cousin, you don’t mind if we skip the main course and just have some antipasto? Bring us two pitchers too,” he said before the chef could say anything. “Surprise us.”

Two Way and the men folded their menus and stacked them. The chef filled the pitchers. Tavi came from around the bar and watched the football game. He grabbed the pitchers from the chef and set them down on the table.

“Hey, kid,” Two Way said, “turn that this way. I’d like to at least see these guys losing my money.”

Tavi turned the TV more toward the center of the table.

“All right. That’s perfect,” Two Way said.

The chef handed Tavi three stacked glasses and slipped back into the kitchen

“Do you want me to pour the beers?”

“We got it,” the fat man said.

“Who do you like?” the man in the black polo and gray slacks said.

Tavi pointed at himself.

“Yeah, you.”

“Arizona State.”

“Fuck you,” the fat man said.

“Barry, are you talking to the kid? Look at his baby face.” The man in the black polo and gray slacks pinched the air towards Tavi a few times. “He’ll never be so young again.”

The chef kicked the double doors open. They opened fast but were slow to close. He walked through with a large antipasto platter in hand and a smaller one. Tavi grabbed the two

pitchers and moved them so the chef could set the antipasto platters down in the middle of the table.

“I’m throwing in a half-platter for free,” the chef said but the men barely cared. Tavi recognized the half-platter was the one he had been eating moments ago and the chef had moved the half-eat antipasto and reorganized it on a smaller serving dish.

“I got three grand on this game,” Barry said, frog-eyed, and combed his hand through his hair a few times before grabbing the half-platter and setting it down in front of himself.

Tavi tried to hold in his laugh but he couldn’t and the fat man’s eyes cut sharply to him.

“We all set?” said the chef.

“Yeah, Gio, we are good,” said the man in the nice black button-up and gray slacks.

The fat man picked up a small plate and fixed it with antipasto from the whole-platter and passed the plate he’d made to Two Way who was writing in a small pad he’d pulled from his shirt pocket.

“Set the plate down,” Two Way said to the fat man. “I’ve told you a million times, quit trying to hand me stuff when my hands are full.”

The fat man set the plate in front of Two Way and made another before handing that plate to the other man.

The chef walked back toward the kitchen and this time Tavi stuck close.

“You don’t mind if we bet on the game do you, Gio?” Two Way said.

“No,” the chef said and he kicked the kitchen door open.

“All right fellas. I assume you got a pocket full of stinky twenties. Twenty-dollar minimums. We can bet on anything.”

“\$20 says the next play is a pass,” Fabian said.

“I’ll see that action, because they’re in I-formation, dumbdick,” Barry said.

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In the kitchen the chef poured himself a half glass of red wine that he drank in two nods, his lips never leaving the glass. When the chef spoke his voice seemed flattened. “I got to get some sausages ready for tomorrow. I slow cook ‘em overnight.” The chef rubbed his forehead. He seemed tired. “Get me a few large deep square pans will you?”

Before Tavi got too far the chef said to him, “The pinot noir is the base.” He raised the bottle by the neck and held it in the light. “Hey kid, you’re in college ain’t ya?”

“Yeah. Business major.”

“That’s what I heard.” Shakari looked up from slicing bell peppers. “Look, Shakari asked to work full-time or he has to find other work.” Shakari walked to the compost totes and took them outside through the back steel door. “Bethany isn’t working out.” Tavi breathed out, relieved, thinking he was about to get fired. “She has a culinary degree,” the chef said. “Best thing for this place is a couple cooks I can trust to show up, follow instructions, and track inventory. Shakari tells me you are in school for accounting.”

“Business administration.”

“Same thing. I know you check off the inventory now but I need someone to do what Bethany did with the paperwork and put in orders on the computer. I also need you to cook your ass off but Shakari is going to run point on the sous chef gig. What do you think?”

“Can I cook with you tonight and let you know in the morning?” Tavi said and surprised himself. He wanted to try something on. He didn’t know if he wanted to buy it.

“Gio!” Two way yelled.

“Ok. We will talk more later,” the chef said and his energy turned down again. The chef walked fast toward the men beyond the swinging doors and Tavi followed wondering when they were going to cook.

The three men were each wagging a cigar in the air. “Gio, do you mind?” Two Way said.

The chef stopped in the door jamb holding the doors open. He looked around and his head dropped and he sighed like he had hoped they were asking for the check.

“My tip alone, Gio. Come on. Look around this place, man,” Two Way said. “Looking like a Jehovah’s Witness birthday party here.” His friends liked that. Two Way, dug in his shirt pocket, pointing his pinky like he was sipping tea, ring blinging, and flashed a thick money clip. As if there weren’t a few hundred in twenties on the table.

The chef walked over to the evening hostess; she had been mostly standing around on this slow night. “What does she make in a night?” Two Way said across the restaurant, preparing to count it out of his clip. The chef whispered in her ear. She protested some, but he whispered again, close to her, and calmed her. The hostess grabbed her purse and left, locking the front door behind her. “You dog. What are you two whispering about?” The chef ignored Two Way and started checking the dining area, like he would for any typical closing only it was Eight O’clock at night.

“Why do you think Arizona State is going to win?” Two Way looked towards Tavi as he set his money clip out on the table. “You didn’t hesitate much, like you knew something.” Two Way collected his twenties.

“Rutgers is my father’s alma mater. He was a running back—played for them when they lost to ASU the first time.” Tavi looked around at the men. He was nervous so he kept talking.

“My dad’s been going on about this game all week. He’s a ball coach at Canis Major.”

“Tavi, help me sweep the front,” the chef said.

“You want me to get a broom?” Tavi looked over his shoulder.

“No, sweep it with your eyes for belongings and whatever’s laying around.”

“Okay.” Tavi turned to leave.

“Give us a second, Gio,” Two Way said.

The chef shook his head no and chewed on nothing.

“Tell Shakari to come out here and wipe the tables down.”

Tavi leaned into the kitchen and told Shakari.

“What’s he been saying?” Two Way asked. Two Way drank his beer, interested in this new information. The last gulp of beer seemed too big for Two Way’s throat, his eyes watered, and the beer gave him some trouble going down.

Tavi looked at the chef, but the chef was kneeling at a booth reaching for something. Tavi couldn’t maintain eye contact with any one of the men so he bounced around a lot when he talked to them.

“He says, as a leader, Schiano is arrogant and arrogance trickles down lack of focus to the players.”

Shakari came out of the kitchen with a steaming pail and a couple rags over his shoulder. He was surprised to see Tavi talking to the men and walked past him to the chef.

“Fuck that,” the fat man, Barry, said.

Two Way got up looking serious and went into the bathroom. Barry and the other man offered Tavi to pull up a stool. Tavi looked for the chef. He was kneeling in another booth and reaching. The chef seemed scattered. The chef talked to Shakari and Shakari started to wipe down tables.

“We got your boss by the balls. You can do what you want,” Barry said. Two Way was on his way back from the bathroom so Tavi moved out of his way.

“Tell us a story about your father,” Two Way said with a genuine grin. “Have a seat.” Two Way pointed to a bar stool. Tavi didn’t hesitate this time and pulled it over. Two Way lit a cigar with a match from a box.

“I like this kid, Gio. We’ll have him back to you by halftime.”

Tavi was caught in the weird tension that had been brewing between the chef and the men. They wouldn’t let him leave. He wasn’t sure he wanted to leave. He kind of knew what the chef wanted him to do, but he was also like the entertainment now which he felt kind of put him under the mens’ thumbs.

Three stories in, he was talking about how his father’s legacy had always consisted of two things: his father’s prized average, five yards per carry, and *Joe De Nobili never fumbled in college football*. The chef walked by and gave Tavi a look before he went into the kitchen.

It was nearly halftime. Rutgers was receiving a punt. There was a referee no-call on a Rutgers player who clearly dove at an ASU player’s shins—the Rutgers’ punt receiver saw a hole and turned on the gas for a seventy-one yard punt return.

“Get this kid outta here—he’s like a lightning rod,” Barry said. All the men started laughing. The other man leaned over the table and patted Barry on his shoulder, his plump cheeks wrinkling near his eyes. “Your team just scored. You ever thought about enjoying your life?”

“You don’t know shit about sports betting. There’s a spread,” Barry said firmly.

The chef came back to the table from the kitchen area. He set an ashtray down for the men’s cigars.

“You guys aren’t giving me much of a choice—ashing on my plates—I need some kind of respect here.”

“Why you gotta’ be difficult, Gio?” Two Way said. “I bring guys who got serious dough. If it makes you feel better, think of it as we are renting the place out. You don’t like what we are doing then fine us. Fabian, Barry, come on, let’s make a deposit.” Fabian and Barry held their twenties to the light. “Put out your hand Gio. We got some stinkin’ money for you.”

The chef said nothing.

“How else are you going to get paid?” Two Way said.

The chef held out his hand and each man put at least five twenties in his hand. Two Way faked like he was going to pull the cash from the chef’s hand. The chef quickly clenched the money.

The chef walked away and stopped at the kitchen doors. He turned to Tavi and said “Sausages.” Tavi got up. He was in disbelief at how the chef was allowing these men to behave.

Two Way nodded to Barry and the man placed his fat hand on Tavi’s forearm as he passed – which stopped him. “You don’t mind if the kid hangs with us for a bit do you, Gio?”

Two Way said. “He’s the closest thing you got to entertainment in this spot. You need a fuckin’ piano man or somethin’.”

The chef looked away from Two Way and turned to Tavi. “He’s on the clock. We gotta’ make the sausages for tomorrow.”

A smile broke across Two Way’s face. “Sausages?” he said. “Cuz’o, I’m sorry, I forgot that can be a two-man job.” Two Way elbowed Fabian and finger fucked an an A-OK hand sign.

“You wanna watch the game with these assholes or do you wanna work?” the chef said. The chef was looking at the men fiercely but spoke to Tavi. Shakari had long finished putting chairs on tables. Tavi wasn’t sure if he was still clocked in.

The men simmered down and wiped their eyes as they watched the young man decide.

“I have been on all day. Maybe we can start this tomorrow?” Tavi said.

“You wanna’ be a clown, fine,” the chef said. “But we ain’t hiring any entertainers.”

“We are,” Two Way said.

“The pay is definitely better,” Barry said.

“Fuck all of you,” the chef said. “Fuck you too, kid.”

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The game, as Tavi’s father had predicted, ended on the Rutgers thirty-yard line. The score was forty-five to forty, Arizona State.

“Momentum is a hell of a thing,” Two Way said. Barry and Fabian got up cussing and left for the bathroom.

“Papa Joe called that well,” Two Way said. “Tell him I said thanks for helping me cover the spread.” Two Way got out his money clip, pulled some bills from the inside, not the outside. He folded them and covered them with an empty beer glass.

“I should be getting home now, it’s nearly midnight,” Tavi said.

Two Way shrugged.

“This money is yours. See you around.”

Tavi, calm as possible, tilted the glass and took the folded bills. When Tavi reached the stainless-steel double doors the two men were returning to the table.

“Yo, Tavi. Get my number from Gio. Napoli’s, that’s mine. I could use you there, kid,” Two Way said. “We aren’t looking for any entertainers, though.”

“Why come here when you have your own place?” Tavi said, not able to walk away after hearing this.

“We figured no one would be here,” Two Way said. “Can’t even think at my place.”

When Tavi entered the kitchen he smelled meat cooking in wine. The chef was sitting at the stainless-steel counter with a new bottle reading a book.

“Where’s Shakari?”

“Sent him home a while ago.” The chef raised his glass, but did not look away from his book. Tavi thought before tonight the chef was living right.

“You’re going good,” Tavi said, “until someone comes in and copies your business model.”

“They tell you that in school?” the chef said.

“Yeah.”

“They’re about right.”

“I’m sorry, chef. I didn’t really know what to do.”

“You’re a kid.”

“I do want to cook,” Tavi said, “like you and Bethany used to.”

“Need some people to fuckin’—” the chef took a breath in and exhaled. “We need some people to cook for.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” Tavi said and put his hand in his pocket and imagined how much money might exactly be there.

“Then we’ll start tomorrow.”

Tavi was nearly through the doors when he remembered his wallet in the locker. He turned back towards the lockers and saw the chef walk into the dining room. He got his wallet and carried it in a bag like a county-fair goldfish. He got back on his bike, wishing he had a jacket, and rode home. He felt guilty for a moment, but the long day had him sleepy and he thought might nod off without the cold air on his face.

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At their house his father was sleeping face-up on the couch. His hands were interlaced across his chest and he had tucked his laptop under the backs of his knees. He was groggy when he opened his eyes since Tavi walked in the house.

Tavi concealed the bagged wallet as he crossed the living room towards the hallway.

“Where you been?” his father said before Tavi could slip into his own room.

“I was watching the Rutgers/ASU game.”

Joe's eyes opened quickly and he appeared offended before he settled back down, closing his eyes again. "You already know why they lost. Fuckin' Schiano."

"How's the offensive coordinator race going?"

"A.D. wants me to sign a four star recruit or 'two,' then the position is mine." When Joe said this he used his fingers to air quote.

"Night, Pop," Tavi said lightly, shaking his head. He stopped in the hallway and looked back to his dad. He instantly regretted having said anything about his father to Two Way and his friends. Joe's ears were red and Tavi thought, *what if he knows I've been talking about him?* His father's ears were sunburned. The thought still pushed ice into his chest. "I cooked with the chef today," he lied standing in the hallway.

Joe's laptop creaked underneath him as he rolled further into the couch. Joe set the laptop on the floor with a clunk. Tavi tossed the bagged wallet into his room and came back to check on his father. Joe was asleep. He thought about waking Joe and helping him to his bed. He wanted to talk to Joe. He counted to three a few times hoping to startle himself into speaking. He wasn't really allowed to need Joe. But he felt this intense need for Joe to hear his thoughts.

He'd learned that he and his dad don't talk, they fight. He remembered their last confrontation.

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"I'd have liked to have sat up there and spent time with her," Joe had said. "Someone had to keep the lights on at the house, feed you, and pay the insurance, the doctor bills, and everything else. Maybe you should have got a job?"

“I said I would get a job,” Tavi had said. “So you could work less. You specifically said any job I was qualified for was peanuts.”

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Tavi stood there unable to speak to his father. He pictured himself kneeling and saying, “Pop, I’m going to quit Canis Major and enroll in a culinary school.” He wanted to say culinary school out loud to try it on like a new look. He didn’t have to follow through.

Tavi almost believed his own imagination when he imagined Joe saying, “Seems a better racket than coaching.” That wasn’t what his father would say. He had no idea what Joe would really say.

“Why’d you let me quit?” Tavi managed. The words were shaky, dry, and oily from his long, confusing night.

Joe rolled over, still groggy and now confused.

“You were happy for me when you walked in?” Joe said.

“It’s hard to tell what’s real and fake with us anymore,” Tavi said. “I played baseball at the same university where you coached and you never saw me play. I thought we’d be closer when mom passed, but that’s just not you.”

“That’s why you’re so upset? You don’t talk about how you didn’t even start,” Joe said.

“You want me to lose out on this new position to watch you sign from the dugout?”

“You’re one of those guys that never figured out that ball is just a game,” Tavi said.

“What was I supposed to do, keep playing a game?”

“Life’s a game,” Joe said. “You and your feelings, man—if I was my father I would have knocked your teeth out, gave you a dollar, and told you to cry to the tooth fairy about it.”

“It’s impossible to talk to you. You deserve to be alone, now” Tavi said. “Mom, needed us.”

“Yep. I’m so alone.” Joe mimicked Tavi talking with his hand and rolled over. “Fuck you, man. I’d bring one back to the house, but you know. I got my whiny ass son living with me.”

“There’s a reason for needing the promotion,” Tavi said. “That alimony had you scared.”

“You’re not going to get a rise out of me, boy,” Joe said.

“Blaming me,” Tavi said. “You probably use your dead wife to slow them from wanting more from you.”

“They understand. It’s your feelings I have to worry about hurting,” Joe said.

“We’re her guys,” Tavi said, “we were supposed to take care of each other.”

“You’re living ain’t you?” Joe said.

“You run your mouth your whole life,” Tavi said, “believing all that bull shit you say—passion equals production. What reason do you get up in the morning other than your image?”

Joe raised himself up from the couch.

“What?” said Tavi and he stepped up to Joe, face to face.

Joe pushed Tavi’s face away from his own. The push made Tavi’s nose burn and he’d got a finger to the eye.

“Get out of my face, man,” Joe said. “Trying to get your head whooped.”

Tavi crossed the room to the mantle and took a picture of his mother.

“You better leave that,” Joe said.

“The things I’m saying are not me trying to fight you,” Tavi yelled. “I’m lost. I can’t think. I got no one anymore. The one person I do have has no interest in who the fuck I am.”

Tavi took the picture to his room. He rolled up two pairs of pants and wrapped his mother’s picture in a t-shirt and put some socks and underwear on top of the picture in the bag. When he came out of his room Joe was standing in the hallway waiting for him.

“Look man, I didn’t mean to push you in the face. Where are you going?”

“Move,” Tavi said. He tried to push past his father but his father grappled with him and threw him a few feet back.

“I’m getting out of here,” Tavi said. “Move.”

“I can’t believe you are crying,” Joe said. Joe was so big he didn’t leave much room on either side of him standing in the hallway. “This is nothing, son.”

“I’m trying to leave,” Tavi said. They started pushing each other but Tavi ducked and Joe fell past him and grabbed Tavi’s backpack and wouldn’t let go of it. Tavi turned trying to twist away. Joe had Tavi’s backpack with his left hand and held on to Tavi’s shirt with his right hand. Joe pulled himself up by Tavi. They were in the living room by the couch. Joe slung Tavi and Tavi fell on his back and the picture popped like a muffled gun when it broke.

“God damn,” Tavi said. He got the pack off his back and looked at the top. The shirt had come off a little and Tavi could see the glass was broken and the frame had lost its shape.

Joe didn’t say anything until Tavi was walking out.

“I’m sleeping. You walk in and start all this stuff.” Joe was having a tough time catching his breath. “I’ll be here when you get over this mood.”

Tavi slammed the front door. He dug into his pocket and got the money Two Way had given him. It was two hundred and fifty dollars worth of worn-out fifties that smelled when he counted it. He got on his bike and thirst and hunger hit him. Tavi didn't have to go far. He parked his bike at a 24-hour convenience store. He walked straight to the cold alcohol and grabbed a 32 oz. Smirnoff Screwdriver and a room temperature blue raspberry MD 20-20. He set them on the counter and had no feelings.

“Can I have a black and mild woodtip?” Tavi said.

He wasn't quite old enough for the alcohol, but the sleazy old man didn't care, behind the counter watching some pulp news about whose ass was photoshopped.

“Wood tip black and mild,” the old man reiterated, barely paying attention to Tavi. The man rang it all up. “Do you need this, young man?” said the old man when Tavi was staring at the glass store front, he could see his own face: he had a pinkish-red nose and his dad had left a noticeable scrape under his eye and it was bleeding.

Tavi turned back a little worried that the old man was going to card him and nodded. The old man handed him a book of matches. Tavi brought his shoulder and his eye together and let his shirt dry his one watering eye and the scrape under his eye.

“Thank you,” Tavi said and took the matches. He paid and got his change. He walked towards the front door ready to have his drink on an empty stomach.

He got his bike and crossed the street heading to the pier. It was a fishing pier, but if you climbed the enclosure at the entrance, you could walk to the end of the pier and hang your legs off. The black and mild was only good for a little while, just like the Smirnoff. He doubted he'd make it to the Mad Dog before his stomach started to hurt. For a split second he pictured himself

jumping off the pier with a cinderblock and shoelace tied around his neck. Then his mind was onto baseball and choices he'd made. For a moment he wished he still played; only because he was never alone when he was on a team. There was always a guy after practice, or when they got back from a game, who had a joint and just assumed you took an unlucky ground ball to the face. He felt a joint was all he needed sometimes, that's how he felt about the alcohol until he had it, that's how he felt about the pier and the beach. The repetition of waves rolling into the jetty and siphoning off was about as good as smoking. He gave it a little time, but again its soothing effects diminished.

