



LA VIE BRÛLÉ

BY SEAN THOMPSON

SEAN THOMPSON is a new author who has been seriously working at, and developing his writing for about three years. He graduated from UNF in 2008 with a Bachelor's in English and despite his hopes is still trying to find a job willing to make use of his particular skills. He has moved around a lot for various reasons and experienced his fair share of a multitude of different people and personalities and tends to day dream about "what if" scenarios. Once he started putting ideas onto paper he realized he'd been writing stories most of his life sans the paper. He enjoys writing and hopes to continue to do it for a long time to come, and maybe eventually make some money off of it.

chop. Chop. CHOP! Derek Carson sighed and dropped the knife onto the cutting board. The half-diced onions in front of him glistened and said 'Don't stop now. We haven't reached our potential. Sauté us!' He told them to leave him alone and that he wasn't in the mood. He turned around to the meat table and sprinkled some parsley on a leg of lamb.

'What are you doing man? Parsley is a garnish for my dish, not a seasoning. What's gotten in to you?' the lamb seared.

"Just shut up already, I know what I'm doing," Derek huffed and put a lid over the pan. More and more arguments sprouted with his food and their once bold voices, which usually sang jolly tunes to his quick knife, had become feeble and stuttered. His life, his passion was evaporating.

His frustration was the result of a doctor's visit from several weeks back. In the examination room he had looked around at the white walls and imagined they were made of marshmallow. He considered licking one, just in case, when the doctor entered with his diagnosis.

The doctor explained that Derek's cholesterol was too high and it was

thickening his arteries. This was why his extremities were feeling numb and he got dizzy easily. His circulation was too slow and if he didn't act quickly he faced a potential heart attack. The doctor prescribed Derek exercise and medicine that would help thin his blood and lower his cholesterol. However it had the potential side effect of lost appetite. This side effect, the doctor told him, could also help to change his diet to a more heart friendly course. He consoled that it was not the end of the world.

Derek fumbled with his apron tie and let it fall to the tile floor. 'What's wrong with me? What's happening to my food?' he thought, tugging at his beard. He picked up an avocado, squeezed, and threw it to his side where it squished against a wall. A tiny squeal sounded off the walls and upon inspection, he found the avocado. Ashamed, Derek picked it up and brushed it off. "I'm sorry," he said, and heard what sounded like the whimper of a disciplined puppy. Bits of pulp seeped from open wounds and it had fresh bruises.

Melting to the floor and he looked with damp eyes at the apron flayed next to him. The avocado continued to whimper and the bag of potatoes under the table said, 'Way to go asshole, what'd he ever do to you?'

"I said I'm sorry!" Derek boomed.

"Sorry for what and who are you talking to?" It was Troy, his best sous chef.

"No one. I mean myself. I mean, you know what I mean." Troy had been Derek's friend for eight and a half years and his fellow chef for nine. The rigorous hiring process of their restaurant, Le Petite Bistro, was the reason for the delay in their friendship. Once they accepted their shared passion they became fast friends. Derek the head chef and Troy working right under him. Troy was the only one who would hang out with the strange head chef who was often heard talking to his food. No one knew why either of them did this. Derek had confided his trouble to him the day after his diagnosis.

Troy looked around the corner from the cook line. "Are you okay? You look sadder than a limp noodle," he teased.

"It's nothing, I'm just a little distracted," Derek replied.

"You sure? You're not still upset about that doctor visit are you?"

Troy was a reliable source of venting steam.

"Nah, I'm okay."

"What about your stomach? Are you taking that vitamin I gave you?"

"Yeah, the Hoodie Gor-whatever has been helping, but it's not my stomach."

"Hoodia Gordonii." Troy corrected. "It's really popular for indigestion, straight from Africa."

"I just feel, off. And my medication is killing my appetite."

Derek burbled.

Troy smirked, then adjusted his mouth to a half-frown. He pulled a vegetable crate up next to Derek and sat down. “Listen, I didn’t want to say anything cause I figured, you know, you were just going through a slump. It happens to the best of us. But, I’ve noticed something wrong with your food.”

“What the hell are you suggesting,” Derek sizzled and leapt up nearly knocking Troy over, “my dishes are the best in this restaurant!”

“Calm down. That’s not what I mean. It all tastes fine, the best like you said, but there’s just something off. I can’t put my finger on it. They’re lackluster, less appealing.” Troy braced for a verbal braising. Derek sagged and leaned against the meat table.

A little cautious he continued, “I don’t know, maybe I’m crazy but even the clientele have been complaining.”

Derek’s eyes watered a little, and he choked “The guests?”

“Yeah, and that’s the funny thing; they can’t explain what’s wrong either. They just make a weird face, say something doesn’t seem right, and either go back to their meal or ask for a new plate.”

Derek frowned and laid his face in his hands. “I know, I know. Don’t you think I know! I hear the servers talking. ‘That’s the third time today Derek’s food’s been sent back’” he mumbled in a childish voice.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” He slid back down to the floor and kneaded the muscles in his neck. Next to him was his dirty, ragged apron. He reached out and spooned it into his lap, then began to untie and retie the strings, the tendons in his neck strained.

“I can’t figure out what’s changed. My food is the same as always but they’ve lost their life,” Derek said.

Troy looked around, making sure they were alone. “Hey man, it’ll be ok. Maybe you just need some time off. It might be your diet wearing at you.”

“Maybe. Stupid diet.”

“That’s gotta be it. Take a vacation and let your diet run its course. You’ll be your old self in no time.” Derek pondered this and worked at a tangled knot.

“I’ve been feeling empty but I can barely finish a meal. I thought this was supposed to make me healthier.”

“It will but you have to give it some time. Go and relax. De-stress” Derek percolated.

“That’s a good idea. I need to get away from food for a while. I swear it’s like they’re taunting me. You’re a good friend, you know that?”

Troy grinned and shifted his eyes. “Uh, yeah. I doubt the food is taunting you Derek. But I am about the only friend you’ve got in this place,” he joked then eased up to his feet. “I’ll let the owner know you’re taking a hiatus. Anything else I can take care of for you?”

“No. Thanks again.” Derek started to walk out the back door.

Troy followed and mashed Derek’s floored apron. “Don’t worry. I’ll look after the place.”

The next morning Derek fell into his health routine of the past week. He had loved life and thought how seldom someone was able to turn their passion into a career. Now it was all evaporating; never hungry, barely able to hear the voices of food, couldn’t enjoy any especially rich dishes, and what he could eat tasted like cardboard.

Derek woke, showered, and dressed. He looked in the mirror and wondered if his face would get as bright as a tomato from a heart attack. Then decided a shiny marble carrot half-buried for a headstone would be nice and considered revising his will. In the kitchen he made a bowl of Cheerios. His mind bubbled with possible improvements to breakfast.

In the fridge he reached for the reduced fat milk. The strawberries whispered, ‘you could slice us up and toss us in some sugar, wouldn’t that be lovely?’ And the bananas on top of the fridge hissed, ‘Man they’re not even ripe, way too bitter. Caramelize some sugar on us, we can take it.’ Bananas like it rough.

Food sired him to the shelves of the refrigerator. Though still very hushed, the voices seemed almost louder than they had been. He reached towards the produce drawer and halted. Derek shut his eyes, then closed the door and tugged away. He knew it would start with one ingredient then another, and another. The strawberries would encourage protein and he’d get some eggs. The eggs would say, ‘you know we’d taste better cooked in bacon grease, go ahead fry some crispy bacon.’ An image marinated in his mind of himself as a heroin addict, hunched against an empty fridge, itching for more to burn. More. When his eyes opened, taped to the door in shaky red handwriting like a death threat were the cholesterol results.

Bothered by breakfast and appetite reduced to a simmer, Derek gave up and decided exercise was the best bet to distract himself. He changed into jogging clothes and took his medication. His stomach felt fine so he ignored Troy’s herb and left the apartment at a brisk pace.

His mood glazed over the further he jogged from the kitchen. Deciding on a park nearby he was expectant that the woods could offer a culinarily barren comfort. Derek soaked in a pungent brine and time boiled by without incident. Just when his mood regained a little fire he saw a family setting up a picnic. The mother was having trouble with her blanket when the wind picked up and blew it right in Derek’s path.

He picked the blanket up and faced the family. The mother ran over, frantic. Her hair was the color of a dark red wine and there was an olive tint to her skin. A tasty Italian dish. Derek handed her the cloth. A little winded she said, “Thanks for grabbing my blanket. Not exactly the best idea to have a picnic now eh?”

“Huh?” He said, “Oh, uh, no. It’s a bit too windy for a picnic.” A

gust of wind blew and odors of fresh picnic goods from the woman seared his nostrils. Appetite nibbled at his stomach and confusion salivated his thoughts.

“Yeah I know, but we made all this great food so we couldn’t let it go to waste. We’ve got potato salad, deviled eggs, and barbeque chicken. Oh, and I made my special angel food cake for dessert with a kiwi frosting. My name’s Brenda and those are my boys.” Brenda pointed over her shoulder to three children passing around a football that looked strangely like a kiwi. “What’s your name Mr. Picnic Saver?”

Derek shucked the sudden appearance of his appetite. “I’m Derek, and I’m head chef at Le Petite Bistro. Nice to meet you.”

“Really?” she squealed “I love that place. You’ve got to try my food. I’d love an expert opinion.” She took his arm then tried to pull him to the food but was stopped when he didn’t move.

“I really shouldn’t. I’m on a diet and I need to finish my exercise,” he explained.

She pouted and coaxed, “Come on, just a taste. I would really appreciate any advice you could give me. You’re the head chef after all so you must be very good. I won’t tell on you.”

Derek’s eyes widened and knees shook, he argued with himself, ‘No, you can’t. One taste and you’ll be done. But it’s only a little bit, and it smells so good. I’m so hungry all of the sudden. Fight it, remember your health. Do you want to die? I haven’t died yet. One little taste won’t kill me. I’m soo hungry.’ “Only,” he huffed, “only a little taste.” Victorious, she beamed and pulled him towards the picnic spread. With each slice of his foot through the grass strange whispers sounded ahead. He began to sweat and felt his heartbeat quicken. Step.

‘Eat me.’ “Is that the potato salad? So tasty yet not finesse,” Derek said aloud, shaking his head. Brenda turned back and looked at him. “Did you say something?”

“No.” Derek replied. She grinned and continued. Step.

‘Ba-gawk.’ “Chicken, always joking.” Step.

‘Come Derek and have your fill, we’re delicious. You know you want us, just take us.’ “That must be the deviled eggs, always tempting.” Derek said. Brenda stopped, “Are you ok?” But Derek continued to walk. Step.

‘Oh Derek, I’m like heaven. Come to me.’

“I will angel, I will.” Brenda ran ahead to her children and folded her arms around them. “Come on kids. We have to go. Just leave everything and run.” Step.

Derek woke alone and unsure of his surroundings. ‘Trees, grass, a picnic blanket, what happened?’ he thought. His clothes were shredded, his faced smeared with potato salad, and barbeque sauce basted his shirt. When he sat up something squished between his legs. Alarmed,

he looked down and saw lime colored frosting splotted on bare legs. “What the hell happened to my pants” he said. In the distance a police siren screamed. He burst to his feet and in a blaze was running through the park, naked, and covered in food. He had no idea what happened but knew he was in trouble. He needed to talk to someone, he needed help. Dodging bushes and using the occasional tree for cover, Derek stumbled through the woods to his nearby apartment building and snuck in the back entrance, hopeful that he would not meet any of his neighbors.

In his apartment Derek dressed quickly. He had to see Troy. If anyone could help him it was his best friend. Though he did not want to go to the restaurant and risk another blackout he was desperate and he knew Troy would be working. He put on a jacket with a hood and left his apartment headed to Le Petite Bistro.

He took back roads and walked in the rear entrance to avoid notice. Troy was on the back prep line chopping scallions. ‘This guy has no idea what he’s doing’ they complained.

“Troy I need your help,” he whispered.

Troy jumped and turned around. “Oh god man, you scared the crap out of me. What are you doing here?”

“I need your help. There was an incident while I was jogging in the park today. I woke up covered in food from some family’s picnic and I don’t know how it happened. One second I was walking to the picnic and then I blacked out. There was a cop siren nearby when I woke so I just ran. I don’t know if they’re looking for me or not but I don’t know what to do. You gotta help me.”

Troy smiled and leaned back. “Oh so that really was you we heard on the radio. I thought so. Sorry Derek. He’s right here guys!” he yelled behind him.

“Sorry for what, and who are you talking to?” Derek said. Then two police officers walked around the corner of the cook line.

“Derek Carson, you’re under arrest for indecent exposure and assault.” They grabbed Derek and pressed him against the wall, then handcuffed him. “Thank you again Mr. Fink for your help in apprehending the suspect. We’ll take it from here.”

“Sure no problem, I’m glad to get this maniac off the streets. He needs some psychological help, did you know he talks to food and thinks they actually talk back?” he laughed. Just then Derek noticed the words ‘Head Chef’ right underneath Troy’s name on his chef coat.

“You backstabbing asshole!” Derek yelled. “You were after my job? That vitamin you gave me, it was poison wasn’t it? I thought we were friends.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Troy smirked. “That’s just an herb used to settle a sore stomach. I think it might also be for reducing appetite in some weight loss programs. I’m not really sure, but

it's definitely not poison to a normal person. Have fun in the loony bin. Derek, it was nice knowing you."

After he was processed, he tried to explain to the police that food really did talk to him, that he blacked out in the park because of a health condition and didn't know what happened, and that Troy had poisoned him to try and get his job. The police delivered him to the local mental health hospital where he was packaged with a padded room, a straight jacket, and three square, nutritionally coordinated meals. He had his first session with Dr. Mender a few days later.

"Mr. Carson. We're gonna start you on some anti-psychotic meds in a few days to see how you react but first we have to let the cholesterol medication get out of your system."

"But I need it or I'll have a heart attack."

"Actually we called your doctor about that. He had trouble finding a Mr. Carson's lab results. Turns out their secretary mixed up the paperwork with a Mr. Larson that came in the same day. He says you were actually in perfect health, only a mild case of food poisoning. Luckily all the meds might have done was thin your blood out a little. Now, why don't you tell me what the food says when it talks to you, hmm?"