

Deep Fried

The neon sign in our chipper window flashes over and over. Pink and green. Fresh fish. Pink. Green. Fresh. Fish. Pink fresh green fish till I wanta rip it down in a shower of sparks. It's on a cycle of three stages, four seconds each stage. Twenty-seven hundred changes in a shift. The colours flash on and on till they wreck your head. Since I turned thirteen, I've counted twelve years with that sign.

The chips are a weird electric pink and the cod has a dangerous shade of green. Six hundred flashes left. I'm making mistakes all evening. Messing up the simple stuff. Johnny tells me I'm deep fried. Only he calls it *dip fied* because his name's not Johnny. It's some Chinese name nobody can spell or say properly so he picked it after binging on The Sopranos. Got a bit of the Noo Joisey twang going on, too. Wouldn't we all be someone else if we could? *Andy, you dip fied.*

Capisco. Bada bing.

Only Gran speaks Italian now. We all can, but since Granda went into the home we've let it slip. Even Da, and he was born in Italy. The family left the heat and dust first chance they got. Granda had a motorbike repair shop in Frosinone. He got off the boat in Dun Laoghaire, swapped engine oil for chip oil and sealed the family fortune in batter.

Johnny's okay. Doesn't say much, keeps the head down, gets on with the job. He's supposed to be here on a student visa. I think he's holding down a couple of jobs and the college thing's a scam. I'd guess he's a couple of years older than me, and that's a bit old for college. Whatever. He's clever. He plays a smart game here. Risky. When Gran's handing out one of her bollockings you never know if he doesn't understand a word, or doesn't care. The more she goes for him, the less he shows. Drives her up the walls, that does.

She was in a savage mood earlier. Signs on her the minute she walked in the door, an hour after we opened. I was already in a lousy mood. Fifth Sunday in a row working.

'Straighten that sign,' she pointed at a *Q this way* arrow. No hellos or howyas. 'Johnny, this floor's filthy. Get the mop and give it a going over. This place was never dirty when we opened.'

Johnny looked up from the plastic basin where he was dunking sausages in batter. He disappeared into the storage area and came back with window cleaner and a chamois.

'Ah, Jesus, Johnny,' Gran snapped. 'Never mind. Andrea, tell that good for nothing eejit what I want.'

She shrugged off her coat and stalked out back, muttering about useless foreigners. *Eh, daverro, nonna?* Not a good sign. Looked as though she was staying. Johnny stuck out his tongue and squeezed the bottle of window cleaner like he was strangling it.

The floor wasn't that bad. I dragged one of the rubber mats inside the door a couple of feet over and covered up some footprints. She copped me and gave me a filthy

look. I figured with it being Sunday she'd been to visit Granda. Never puts her in a good mood but there's no need take it out on the rest of us.

The evening went downhill fast for me. Johnny picked up on it when I started making the mistakes. I gave one customer change of a fifty for a tenner. I packaged smoked cod instead of ray for another. I lashed vinegar on eight bags of chips when the fireman doing a run for the station wanted none. Johnny did his best to cover for me, but Gran hung around the counter and didn't bother hiding the sighs she kept coming out with.

It got quiet near nine. Dinnertime over and a few hours before the pubs closed. I wanted to sit in the back yard and watch the evening clouds roll into darkness and think about hitching a lift on one to anywhere but here. I figured that wouldn't keep her happy. I dragged my arse into gear, dug out dusters and cleaning cloths and started rearranging dirt on the shelves behind the counter. That usually counts for brownie points. Not tonight. She glared at me like it was something I should've done already.

Some days you can't win. But at least you can't hear her staring. And if your back is turned, you can't see it either. Silence is golden. Specially hers. Granda, he had a way of making the hours fly, always singing daft songs and messing, putting on a dumb *I-no-unnerstan* routine to give punters a laugh. Gran looked after the book-keeping and the hired help. Pretty much ran the show. It was rumoured once for a day or two that she'd cracked a smile. The rumour afterward was toothache. Da says they wouldn't have made a go of a chipper on their own, but together – forty years and counting.

After a while Gran disappeared into the storeroom. Johnny took care of customers who wandered in. We'd a system. It wasn't perfect, but if we stayed doing what we were doing till one we'd survive without bloodshed.

If. I was cleaning the top shelf, over the fridge for cans. It's eight feet up and I was on a stool. There's a picture of Our Lady on it that Granda brought from Italy. A proper oil painting, about ten by twelve inches. It looks kinda old, but I'm no judge. I like the picture, though. Not because I'm religious. God, no. This is like something right out of Playboy's glory days. Perfect skin soft, brown eyes, and a look – whoof. Last time I saw anything like her was on one of those live sexy babes are waiting to chat with *you* TV channels.

'Hey, Johnny,' I said. 'Whaddya think?' I waggled the picture. 'Hot stuff or ... Unh.'

Johnny looked as I slipped. I grabbed the shelf to stop myself falling. The picture never had a chance. I watched it tumble in slow motion, waiting for the crash and Gran to break land-speed records to check out the noise.

Right enough, she came storming from out back the second she heard the bang. She'd a face on her like one of Mussolini's thugs on the History Channel.

'Andrea. Cretino.' She stooped to pick up the picture. The frame had splintered and torn a jagged hole in the middle of Our Lady's face. She held it for a few seconds, mouthing words with no sound. Then she whacked a piece of the frame against the side of my head.

'Your grandfather loved that picture. He brought it from our home village. His mother gave it to him when we married. How could you be so stupid? So careless? Don't you know how much this picture meant to him?'

'It's only a picture. We'll get it fixed.'

'You can't fix everything that breaks. You can't take vinegar off a chip. Some things don't work that way, Andrea. Sometimes, when something goes it never comes back.'

I rubbed the side of my head. I was sore and bruising, and sore that Johnny was watching a family show. I glared at him and he slipped out the back. Time to share some pain.

‘Jeez, Gran. It’s only a picture. It’s not like Granda remembers it. He doesn’t even remember you or me. Hardly remembers himself these days.’ Yeah, that was the one to put her in her place. But old women, you know.

She fussed with the bags puffed open on the countertop ready for scooping chips into.

‘Your grandfather went to the angels this afternoon, *caro*. Your father and I were with him at the end. Your mother is at home making his arrangements. We’re staying open tonight in his memory.’

Jesus, the way she said *caro*. It was like she was pulling me into an embrace so she could slide a knife between my ribs.

She picked up the bits of the picture, lifted the hinged counter. I’d never heard the door chime the way it did when she walked out.

Johnny shuffled to the counter. He must have heard everything because he asked: ‘You wanna go after her? I manage.’

I didn’t answer for a while.

‘No.’

I tried serving after that, but my head wasn’t in the game. I fetched a new box of chip bags to stay out of Johnny’s way. Just for something to do. Stop me thinking. I opened the first bag like always, pinching together the edges and pushing into the gap with my fingers. By the fourth I was pawing them open, ramming in my fist in time with the neon sign. Some bags tore, some didn’t. People came and went, likely wondering

what sort of lunatic frenzy I was in. Johnny coped without coming near me, only to rummage for untorn bags in the pile now and then.

It felt good. Therapy. Grip. Pinch. Fist. Punch. After a while, each punch had its own meaning. Pow. Rotten chipper. Pow. Stink of stale oil that never washes off. Pow. What kind of life is it working here? Pow. A future of oil burns and *d'ya wan sal'n'vingar wi-dem chips*? Da's chipper now. Maybe a new name over the door. Mine someday. Jesus, what a future. Pow. Pow. Pow. Feeling sorry for myself, the pile of bags growing till they were spilling onto the floor. Feeling sorrier and sorrier for myself. Then I thought of Granda, laid out in the nursing home. I'd never see him again. I thought of Gran and Da and Ma.

Johnny came over. 'Andy.'

'Jesus, Johnny,' I said. 'What kind of family is this? Granda's dead and we're shovelling out shit food like any other day.'

He took a bag from me. 'No more bags. Please. We got enough for a whole week.'

I looked at the pile four-deep on the floor and bawled. Just opened my lungs and sobbed up noise. Johnny kept a respectful silence. Eventually, he said: 'Andy, you dip fied. You gonna stay till closing?'

I scrunched a handful of serviettes from the counter and wiped my face. 'I dunno. I'm deep fried. What would you do?'

He pursed his lips and straightened a stack of onion rings on the display. Deep thought. Eventually, 'me, I stay. Your grandfather worked hard here. All your family. This place is your family. Tomorrow, maybe you walk away. Tonight, no. I don't think you want to.' He perched on the stool I'd stood on cleaning and faced the door, waiting for the next customer. End of broadcast.

After a while, I began counting flashes. Pink. Green. It's only eleven and there's two more hours till we turn off the juice and chance the oil for one more day. We should've changed it today, but the punters like it when the oil's burned up a little flavour. Granda always left a glug of the old oil. Helps keep the taste just right. He knew the chipper game inside out. He had it sussed. Chips taste better his way, and we've never poisoned anyone. That we know of. I always do it the way he showed me. Maybe I know more than I like to let on.

Two hours to closing, and the pubs are emptying into us. Johnny's buzzing round like he's grown an extra pair of arms. He's a good guy, Johnny. Customers like him. Gran, for all she rags him. Granda would've liked him. I'll get through tonight. The next few days. Open for business in Granda's memory. Official mourning in shades of pink fresh green fish and *ah thanks, bud, he'll be missed. Now, c'mere – d'ya wan sal'n'vingar wi-dem chips?*