

1.

I've always had an interest in cooking. That's why I've taken to hanging around restaurants. I have a routine. Mondays and Tuesdays at *Food*, Wednesdays and Thursdays at *Replete*, Fridays and Saturdays at *Taste*. Sundays I stay at home and cook things you can't find in restaurants. *Food*, *Replete* and *Taste* have some things in common apart from the bland nomenclature: they all have well-sized bars which you can eat at; small, unchanging, staffs; adventurous or at least experimental chefs; and they are all close to my house.

I'm not quite sure of the exact date when my tastes shifted from the sports channel to the cooking channel. Watching sports is detached from reality. You don't even have to pretend to think about the sportsmen's lives, families, emotions, neighbours' daughters. And, in most cases, when you watch sports you watch people who are good at what they do.

I know why I stopped watching sports: I started to develop an affection for certain teams and players; in spite of the huge variety on offer I found myself cheering for Roma, Vladimir Klitchko, Bay of Plenty, Andre Agassi and The West Indies. I started to care if they lost. I didn't like what this implied. It was just far too... sentimental.

(I wouldn't have divorced Kari if I hadn't stopped watching sports. I'd probably have ended up watching the soaps with her.)

The cooking channel was different. I'd eat anything, I figured, so I'd watch a program about how to cook anything. (Although, I must admit, I was enraged when I sat through half an hour of some peroxidized nancy explaining how to make an iceberg lettuce and cucumber salad.) With cooking there is no prospect of the chef losing; the meal he – or much less often, she – prepares is invariably perfect. Once again there is an exception, and it also constitutes – as an editor would say – a turning point in the story of my life: I watched Keith Floyd, who by virtue of his dipsomania had started to become a favourite of mine, make a complete cock-up of a Sardinian dish which involved burying a whole fish under a mountain of salt and baking it. He had never tried making it before. He didn't have the time to try it again. He ignored local advice and turned the baking tray onto a steel counter expecting the fish to emerge, flanked by cloven salt crusts. It didn't. Nuggets of carbon and mushy flesh smattered the counter. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw on a television screen.

I got rid of my TV the very same day. A lousebag rang the doorbell asking for a half-loaf. I gave him the Philips. He didn't want to take it, probably thought it was a bomb. My life hasn't been the same since – but his has probably remained unchanged.

(It was a turning point in my personal life that is. My career will never be parabolic.)

I work with figures. Graphs, charts, indices. But most of all I work with waves: Kondratiev, Dow, Elliot. These are my kind of waves. Don't forget the trin statistic. They say I'm ahead of my time. Or behind the times. Single-handedly I made technical analysis *à la mode* again. The stocks I picked soared and those I sold plummeted. I am – and this one's for the arty-farty-charty among you – head and shoulders above the rest.

I've already mentioned that I've taken to hanging around restaurants. This started three days after I got rid of my TV. That sounds stupid – obviously a man in my position,

of my station, spends a lot of time in restaurants...TV or no TV. In this instance the obvious is true, but only partially. When I had a TV I went to restaurants for nourishment when I was too lazy to cook, or to impress people, or because I was invited to them.

Post-TV this changed. Let me give you an example. (Before I do that, though, I need to hammer one thing home. What you are about to read is a story. It's a story written *by me, about me*. Maybe it's not actually *about me*, but I am involved in the story as both onlooker and narrator. It's a true story, in fact it happened to me the other night.) I hope you like it.

He goes to Replete after work. He booked when he was there the night before. It was a coincidence that she should want to eat where he was eating when they made tonight's plans. It was a coincidence and there was word play but I won't go into any of that now. It's only the second time he's ever been here and he goes straight to the bar.

He orders a beer. It might be too cold for beer, but you can't just start with wine, or at least he can't, and besides he doesn't know if she wants red or white. She'll almost certainly want red, but he can't be sure. He says all of this to the barman.

The waitress is talking to the barman and another guy who's probably a local. (The other guy is *me* and I am a local. I was there the night before which is why I know about how he came to be here.)

I can see he's listening to our conversation. The waitress crashed her car on the way to work. The barman was in the car with her, so he knows the story and he occasionally adds to or corrects her story. Apparently their heads clashed when the Land Rover hit them from the side. The barman says the accident was the waitress's fault. She doesn't disagree.

While this conversation is happening his phone rings and he goes outside to answer it so he doesn't know the full story about the accident. I do, but he doesn't and he knows enough for the end of this story to be relevant anyway. She's lost she says, or actually she's not: she's at the Friendly Grocer but the restaurant's not there anymore. I don't know exactly what they say, because I'm inside listening to the story about the accident, but I know that they eventually worked out that she was at the wrong Friendly Grocer and that he gave her directions as best he could, which wasn't well at all as far as I can make out from what they said once she arrived. Maybe that's a bit mean, because it was only eight or ten minutes before she got there. Maybe his directions were good, but I wouldn't think they were.

She joins him at the bar. She's flustered. He notices that she's dressed up. She says have you noticed that I'm not wearing jeans and a cotton jumper. He says Yes and probably thinks about fishing around for a compliment. He asks for the wine list. She wants red. They try to have a discussion about which wine to order, but it doesn't really get off the ground. They order a cabernet and move upstairs to their table. Or maybe they

only moved upstairs once they had the wine. I'm not quite sure but when I got back from the bathroom they weren't at the bar.

This is where the story becomes more story and less documentation. I don't have much choice: I couldn't sit at the table with them, so what I know I know from the waitress and from what I could see from the bar and from what I picked up from the conversation I heard them having later that evening. (I don't think they recognised me and I can swear it was a coincidence.) I don't think I made up any of the rest of the story, but I want to be honest about my sources, you see.

They sit at a table in the corner and discuss the menu. The waitress brings over the specials board. He orders the pasta special which is lamb with feta and some other things, on linguine. She orders what he had the night before. It looks good on the menu and he assures her that it is. Thing is she never gets to find out for herself - and that's the story. He notices that her hair is in a pony. It's very short to be in a pony, I remember thinking that myself when they were still at the bar. He makes a comment about Shetland ponies. Either she doesn't hear it or she doesn't think it was funny, but I know from the waitress that she didn't hear it or at least made not to hear it. Come to think of it I can't decide whether or not it's funny, which makes me wonder if her silence wasn't in fact the best possible option.

They drink their wine. It's fine, verging on good even - that's my opinion of it. The bottle is almost finished. They must have talked about whether they'd make it to their movie which was starting at 8.45. They must have talked about it because the waitress only comes back to their table at 8.30, so now maybe you can see what I mean about not making things up. The waitress says when she got to their table she heard snatches of a political discussion, something about the future of our country. But they stop talking when the waitress arrives. She lowers herself, bending her knees and leaning back a touch. He taps at his wrist, even though he's not wearing a watch. The waitress says, I'm terribly sorry. She bends her knees a bit more and says, I'm terribly sorry, I didn't put your order through.

We've got a movie.

I'm so sorry.

Have you put it through now?

No. I can get you a dessert, on the house.

Our movie's in ten minutes. He looks across the table.

We won't make it, she says.

Can we just pay for this? He taps the wine bottle.

I'm so sorry. I just crashed my car.

They get up from their chairs and button jackets and rearrange scarves. It's cold outside. They walk to the till. She's already paid for the movies online, and he wants to pay for the wine. He doesn't have cash and his first card doesn't work. His second one does. He doesn't leave a tip. I'm not sure if he was in a rush and

he forgot or if he was trying to make a point. I know that the waitress didn't mind because she told me so.

They go outside and they leave in her car even though they came in separate cars. I notice this sort of thing.

I don't know if they made it to their movie on time or if the reason didn't kick up a fuss was because they were nice or drunk or just plain tired. I know, or at least I can assume that they didn't eat anything before the movie, because when I saw them in Woolworths they were buying sandwiches and she had fruit juice and chocolates too and she asked if he wanted to eat at a table or in the car. He opened his sandwich in the shop and started eating it on the way to the car.

I guess if this story is about anything it's about coincidence.

Don't get the wrong idea about me. I often go to restaurants because I'm too lazy to cook (the meals I prepare require *energy*). If I'm invited to a restaurant and I care enough about the people who've invited me, or the money that might result from eating with them, I'll go.

I no longer go to restaurants to impress people.

I go to restaurants to take notes. No! No, hold it right there: I don't sit at the bar with a Moleskine journal. I'm not an attention-seeking underground hippy cartoonist. I make mental notes, which, later, when I'm alone, I transcribe into my files. My notes are cryptic and personal. What you've just read is fleshed out; fit for public consumption. What, for instance would 'COINCIDENCE X 3 (4?)' have meant to you, had I not explained it?

Maybe it's too early to test you out like that. I'm not even half-way through the first chapter, of my first book, and I'm throwing hard-to-decipher chunks of third person narrative, (in another font, ostensibly from another source) into my seemingly simple first person tale. And you don't even know my name. Or what I look like. There's no time, sorry, I'm late for a doctor's appointment...

"Mr Ashley." Slowly the quack makes eye contact.

"Doctor." I cough. "It's Brett."

"Labuschagne." He pronounces it lah-boo-shayn. "How do you do?" I like my doctors old. This guy can't be over thirty-five. His hair's black, his skin is pink and porous. By this I mean his skin is wet. And it is too cold for the moisture to be sweat. His coat seems starched, and it's buttoned up to just below his tie: a fat-knotted mustardy number. There's a photo of his wife and, I presume, his daughter, which – and now you may start to see why I've taken such a dislike to him – is turned so that it faces more towards me than to him. His wife might once have been worth a poke, but I can see – it's something about her mouth – that she wouldn't like me. It would be mutual, believe me. And his daughter...well, she's not legal. Not even if I waited ten years. "Doctor Wilkinson sent me the x-rays." He lifts a perfectly formed pile of papers and re-straightens it against his desk. He seems to be waiting for me to say something.

I cough.

"The good news is it's not osteological." He peers at me, probably expecting me to cough.

“We Ashleys have strong bones,” I say.

He tries to ignore my vocabulary. “It’s a muscular problem.”

I straighten the leg in question.

“One of your cruciates is detached.”

“Isn’t that a ligament?”

He nods.

“You said it was muscular.”

“We...” He spreads his arms in an attempt to include all the doctors in this hospital and beyond. “Use the term muscular when dealing with patients.”

“But you don’t refer to bones?” I’m trying to piece together what small Latin and less Greek I possess: could I call him an *osteokranion*?

“Let’s have a look at you.” He’s no longer at his desk. He’s crossed the bloody room and I didn’t notice even the slightest movement. My mind has been declining. He slaps the bed which is stuck in the corner of his office. I walk as naturally as my leg will allow. I sit on the bed. The mattress is hard and my feet don’t touch the ground.

“Off with the shirt.” What the hell any of this has to do with my knee, I don’t know, but it doesn’t surprise me that he wants me naked. These doctors are all queer. All of them. They have babies as part of a fifth year project on reproduction. (This is why you should never trust a doctor with more than one kid. Unless they’re twins, of course.) Then they spend the next fifteen years doing professional research on the subject of sodomy. That’s why I like my doctors old: more likely to have become jaded and libidless. I undo the top button of my shirt and then lift it over my head and drop it on the bed.

I can’t help but notice myself in the mirror. My skin has gone the colour of ProNutro since my first and last trip to Pattaya in August. I count the rolls in my stomach: four, but small and well-pleated. I stop myself from squealing when I feel the cold stethoscope touch my back. To take my mind off the violation which I’m undergoing I examine my face in the mirror. I’ve only the slightest hint of a second chin, which isn’t half bad for a man of my age; my gingery stubble could do with some taming; the ball of my nose is slightly crazed from the winter sniffles; and my eyelids seem determined to conceal the milky pupils which were once a much more insistent indigo.

It’s a pity you should get to see me like this so soon, when we hardly even know each other. You might get the wrong impression and afford no significance to my story. That, I can assure you, would be a grave error. I’m not as bigoted, boorish, belligerent, bastardly...as I seem. Don’t get me wrong: I’m no angel, but doctors just bring out the worst in me.

In the meantime Labuschagne has taken my blood pressure, invaded my orifices with the light of reason, and had me strip to my boxer shorts. I’m glad I wore the old-fashioned checked cotton variety today as opposed to some elasticated brand name. I’m back on the bed and he’s kneeling on the ground, straightening and bending; prodding and kneading; twisting and pinching; drooling over and being aroused by...my knee.

“We’ll probably have to operate,” he says. I put my shirt back on and he passes me my trousers with a little too much grace. “I’m going to give you an exercise regime which – if followed rigorously – may make surgical intervention avoidable.” I’m half expecting him to say ‘So you’d better not be a naughty boy,’ but his boarding school morality; or the Hippocratic Oath; or the fear of a lawsuit; or – most likely – the possibility of permanent disfigurement, stops him. He returns to his seat and, when I’m

dressed, I return to mine. He outlines the lunges and crunches and squats and thrusts that I'll need to add to my already active lifestyle. He hands me a printed version of his monologue: it's a generic routine which has been devised by a physiotherapist called Botha, but pronounced *bow-thar*...complete with voiceless interdental fricative! He is, obviously, a member of the same soggy-marie *broederbond* as Labuschagne. "And stay off the squash court."

"For how long?" I haven't played in over a month: Wilkinson's orders, for the first time in years obeyed. To be honest, it's been too agonising to contemplate a game, but there must be a point where the two charts – the cruciate pain index, and the mental well-being percentile – intersect. I know that pain and sanity are qualitative, that they can't be graphed – I'm a technical analyst for God's sake – but sometimes the most important charts are those that are illegitimate, impossible, rooted in bad practice. The fact of the matter is that I'm going quickly mad and it's got a lot to do with a lack of time on the squash court.

"Forever." I don't shift my position, or look up, or protest, so he reiterates his point: "Never set foot on a court again, it's exceptionally hard on the knees and for a man of—"

"I've heard it all before. And it's *my* knee. We'll see what happens."

"You can't put a price on quality of life."

I'm sure I could if I tried, but I can't bothered. "Send me the bill. That'll be a start."

"I must object, I'm trying to *prevent* surgery."

"Just send me the bill. I'll pay it."

I drive home faster than I should. At least my 1962 Triumph Spitfire enjoyed the outing. Inside now, I walk right past my whirring computer, even though the US markets are about to open, and let myself into the squash court. I don't turn on the lights. It's cold and dry. There is dust in the corners.

This scene will have more effect if I describe it from the perspective of an onlooker – an onlooker with access to my innermost thoughts, of course – suspended from the ceiling; or floating in a blimp: there is a man sitting cross-legged in the middle of the squash court which he commissioned just over a year ago. The crown of his head is balding. His knee started to play up a couple of months after the builders left, so he's hardly got to use the court. He's not crying, but he can feel something in his throat and behind his eyes and in his nose. He makes a sorry sight, which is why what he's thinking cannot be considered arrogant. He's thinking: *I've always been good at sports. At school I played pretty much everything you can imagine and I played it well. But squash is the only one that I carried on playing after university. It's something about the angles, the symmetry and the fact that it is so nearly permanently enclosed. If you take the position of the ball after any given service it is almost possible to remove the human element and create a formula which will represent the most efficient way to play the point. Obviously the word 'almost' is of paramount importance to the previous sentence; the word 'almost' encapsulates humanity: the ability of the individual to choose – based on his own strengths and weaknesses or those of his opponent...not to mention whim, fatigue, routine, creativity (or lack thereof), and an inordinate number of other factors – where he will hit the ball, thereby recreating a platform for another 'almost' perfect mathematical equation. It is the hope of one day being able to close in on, and ultimately take hold of,*

the cumulative bounty accrued by the pursuit of this sterile, mechanical perfection, which has kept him afloat when drowning in the rest of life has seemed inevitable.

Any reliable reader should, at this point be voicing many objections. People don't think like this. People are unable to objectify their own lives to this extent. People do not try to escape humanity, instead they try to embrace it.

People do not suspend themselves from their own ceilings and regard their own bald patches.

All of this is probably true for most people, but it cannot be said of Brett Ashley who, at the age 38 years and 4 months, is sitting on the T of his squash court contemplating the end of his life as a squash player and wiping a tear from his cheek with an oversized thumb which has gone blue from the cold air.

He deserves to be left alone now.