

TWELVE

(Maxine)

A workplace of names

One of the main reasons I like working at Carrington Meats is that, unlike the pretentious world of my childhood, I kinda fit in there. You see, at Carrington Meats my nickname Pepsi isn't an insult; it's a badge of honour and I can wear it with pride.

Shakespeare once said that 'all the world's a stage', and if that's true, then maybe we actually need 'stage names' or 'nicknames' to capture the essence of who we really are.

Out at Carrington Meats, of course, nicknames are everywhere. Aside from Snuff and Salman 'the Terrorist', there's also Cadbury.

Cadbury is a pimply-faced teenager who got his nickname because of the fact that he can't hold his grog. He gets pissed on just *a glass and a half*.

Then there are people like Parole, the fast-talking female meat-packer who, in conversation, changes topic so often that she never really finishes her '*sentence*'. Get it? Or Buzz, the old Gypsy Joker turned meat grader,

making money on the side, peddling ecstasy, speed and dope from his brick commission house down on Raymar Street.

And let's not forget 'BeSsiE', the abattoir's rather slow-witted line supervisor. Her nickname has been taken from the medical condition, 'Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy' (or 'Mad Cow Disease') – a lethal virus which turns your brain to mush. Thankfully, Bessie's never got the joke!

In the end, I guess I like nicknames because nicknames keep things real. And after all, you don't choose your nickname. Do you?

Your nickname chooses you.

Spotting the difference

The word 'Doctor' which goes before some people's names is a title, not a nickname. Okay?

A *title* can never, ever be trusted to sum up a person like a good old-fashioned nickname can.

Never! Ever! Ever!

The accident

It's Friday afternoon. I'm halfway through my shift and there's a bad vibe in the air today that makes the sour memory of what happened earlier this morning down at Granny's Grave quickly fade away.

The bad vibe has to do with the fact that three days ago, a young worker at Carrington Meats died in an accident on the kill floor.

Since then, the place has felt like a mortuary rather than an abattoir.

Nobody's talking.

People are just getting by.

The young bloke died on Tuesday at eleven o'clock in the morning when the boning knife he was wielding got swung too hard, ricocheted off a piece of cartilage and buried itself deep inside his brain; the sharp, thin blade punched right through his eye socket.

It's the worst accident Carrington Meats has had in twenty-odd years and Maisy O'Neill says she saw the whole damn thing. She says his body fell onto the cold concrete floor with a thud and that his body then flopped around on the ground like a fish pulled straight out of the sea.

The poor guy had only been at the abattoir for two short weeks.

He was seventeen years old. And he hadn't even been given a nickname yet.

We simply knew him as Bobby. But to his family he was Robert.

Robert Donald Moncrieff.

Therapy

On the day that Bobby died, the bastard boss made us finish off the final four hours of our shift because, according to him, 'The twenty-five head of cattle that had already been slaughtered couldn't go to waste'.

Despite the howling ambulances, despite the cops

and WorkCover inspectors, despite the cameras and the smiling counsellors asking us at lunchtime ‘if we needed to talk’, the whole lot of us somehow made it through to knock-off.

That night, for our real therapy, we gathered at the Cally Hotel and drank.

We drank and drank and drank, trying to forget Bobby’s face, all freckles and winks, his teenage swagger and his shiny-new mountain bike, still parked beside the male change rooms back at work.

That night, rather than be my normal antisocial self, I sat myself down beside Parole and let her incessant chatter spread over me like sunscreen on a 40-degree day.

In the beer garden, beneath the intermittent glow of a dozen cigarette-tip suns, I leaned back in my chair, gulped down beer after beer and soaked up the warm rays of alcohol-induced conversation.

Flashes back through time

Sometimes, when I’m working up a rhythm on the line, the numbness fails me and I’m transported back to another time, another place.

It doesn’t happen very often, but when it does I get flashes inside my head: my dad’s naked flesh, wet with sweat ... his hands groping breasts ... bed sheets scrunched to fists ... or candle light and the way it casts its stories on the wall.

Sometimes, instead of flashes, I remember sounds: the chink of Johnnie Walker on ice, the midnight creak of bedposts, or the wet squelch of skin upon skin.

Carcass Art!

That's how I cope on the days like these.

I cut, I shape and I sculpt, carving out Frankenstein – the likeness of his face – onto meat.

Yes, I cut, I shape and I sculpt until staring back at me in sinewy relief is a portrait:

my father,

my monstrosity.

Philosophy 101

Unlike the honesty of nicknames, some words have the ability to bury the truth so deep you can never hope to find it.

Take some of the 'official' words bandied about at Carrington Meats to conceal the truth.

Down at the abattoir, the official name for the 'kill floor' is the 'processing floor'. Clearly, a far less gruesome name. In the same way, the official word for 'slaughter' has become 'exsanguination'; 'gutting' has changed to 'evisceration'; and 'execution' is now referred to as 'knocking'.

Suspended two metres in the air, I stare at the carcass of meat dangling before me and plunge my knife into its side.

As I work, tired but strong, I think about the language all around me and wonder where the hell I fit in.

Buzz

I meet him in the staff car park after work, next to his Harley Davidson, and hand him two twenty-dollar bills.

‘Shit, Pepsi, you look like crap,’ Buzz laughs. ‘You sure you want to do this? Reading all those books at lunchtime, I picked you as some sort of stuck-up bitch. I didn’t think you were the type.’

‘Well, there’s a first time for everything, Buzz. And anyway, maybe you should mind your own business!’

‘Okay, no need to go feral on me. Here you go.’

Buzz hands me a small white tablet in a clear plastic snap-lock bag, puts the money in his top pocket, then kickstarts his bike to life. The engine beneath his legs gurgles thunder.

Buzz jams down his helmet, gives me a wink and pulls back on the throttle. The back wheel of his Harley spins, pebbles spit and Buzz yells out, ‘Have a blast, Pepsi!’ over the pandemonium of his departure.

Topping off the week from hell

Mum and Dad’s twentieth wedding anniversary is scheduled for the weekend, and back at my unit there’s an unopened invitation lying on the kitchen bench. The invitation has been sitting there, untouched for over a month.

I look down at the small white ecstasy tablet in the palm of my hand and try to imagine how disappointed Mum would be if I didn’t turn up to her anniversary celebration.

I sigh.

Drastic events call for drastic measures, I think to myself, shoving the little pill deep inside my pocket.



The language of meat

Dad always wanted me to learn another language, so I have.

The language of meat.

The language of meat:

is gambrels and pulleys and rollers and hangers, bleed conveyors, cradles and chains;

is brisket saws and floor boys, compressed air and bung holes, trolleys and boxes and cranes;

is red offal, green offal, hocks and dehiders,

blast freezers and pallets and pens;

is tallow vats and restrainers, deboners and bolt guns,

spreaders and splitters,

and friends?



THIRTEEN

(Charlie)

Charlie's best friend Kane didn't need an audience to perform. He didn't need a crowd. Room empty. Room full. Kane was always ready to rock.

Pushing back the mascara-black fringe of hair from his face, Kane leaned in closer to the microphone stand and tenderly placed his lips on the microphone's wiry mesh. Closing his eyes, dark with invisible distress, he wrapped his fingers around the cool metal stand in front of him and let the rhythms seep into his soul. His narrow, leather-clad shoulders and tight denim jeans swayed beneath the ebb and flow of music.

Charlie looked up from the edge of his bed – his nose still sore, but at least not broken – and slowly ran his plectrum across the strings of his Fender. The Marshall amp by his side hissed and crackled, the distorted cry of a murdered E minor filling the room with longing.

'This song is for the broken,' Kane spoke slowly into the microphone, imagining a crowd spread out before him. Focused. Intense. Waiting. His voice was the perfect blend of charcoal and lace. 'This broken daylight, these broken names, our broken future bound in chains.'

Lying on Charlie's bed, with an unlit cigarette in his mouth, was Casey. Holding his bass guitar vertically, Casey fingered the strings of the bass, coaxing out a series of low, satisfying tones.

Squeezed into the opposite corner of the bungalow, behind his drum kit, sat Kane's cousin, Luke Miles. Luke turned his face to Charlie, gave him a little nod and raised his drumsticks to the ceiling, signalling the end of the introduction. 'One. Two. A one, two, three, four!' Luke called out, beating his drumsticks together.

The little bungalow erupted with sound as Charlie's fingers sprang to life, no longer walking, but dancing their way up the fret board. Standing in front of Charlie, Kane lifted his hand, palm open to the ceiling and started to slap the air, slap it into submission. Then, parting his lips to sing, the words poured out.

These broken hands can find no path.

These strangled eyes fade in the dark.

These bleeding lips refuse to pray.

These tumoured thoughts grow day by day.

The little bungalow grew wet with sound, wet with words. The rhythms and sounds lapped up against the fibro walls, swirled around the window frames and surged up against the bungalow's old blue door – a rising tide of melody and angst.

Then, with the first verse sung, Kane readied himself for the chorus. Closing his eyes, he grabbed the microphone stand in both hands, put his left foot forward and turned his head to face the screaming women in his imaginary

audience. The French lyrics of the chorus sprang from his mouth like a long, slow kiss:

J'ai trois mamelons et j'aime chacun.

J'ai trois mamelons et j'aime chacun.

To an outside viewer, it must have been a stellar performance, full of pathos and intent. But for Charlie and Casey, the over-the-top performance of their friend was almost unbearable.

The mood in the bungalow suddenly started to change. Out of nowhere, Charlie began to hit the wrong notes on his guitar and a big juicy smile started to snake its way across his face.

Pushed along by the long-necks of beer he'd drunk with Casey beside the chook shed a little earlier, Charlie started to feel something welling up inside him.

A wicked tidal wave of memory.

A tsunami.

Charlie's fingers went dead on the fret board, his body convulsed and laughter suddenly burst free. Wave after wave of rolling, cascading laughter. The kind of laughter that cramped your stomach with pain. The kind of laughter that made you check your pants for wetness.

On the bed, Casey started laughing too, laughing uncontrollably.

'What the hell! Shit guys, get it together, will you. Stop acting like a pair of arseholes,' Kane spat. 'What's so damn funny?'

Charlie looked over to Casey and started wiping the tears away from his eyes. 'Nothing, Kane,' Casey replied, gasping for air and trying to regain his composure. No

use. A fresh explosion of laughter tore through the tight seam of his lips.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake! This is our last practice. I’m moving to Melbourne next week. Can’t you two concentrate for just one night? I warned you about drinking those beers before practice.’

‘Okay, okay, Kane. Just give us a sec,’ Charlie managed to say in between bouts of laughter.

Charlie tried to steady himself, then attempted to speak. ‘Sorry, Kane, but I reckon we need to drop that song. It’s no good anymore.’

‘Why? We used to play it all the time.’

‘It’s just had its day. It’s the corniest song I’ve ever written.’

Unknown to Kane, the laughter threatening to overtake the little bungalow had to do with the French lyrics of the chorus. In truth, the song’s lyrics had been written as payback for all the times Kane had failed to acknowledge Charlie as the band’s sole song writer. Whenever their band played in front of a live audience, especially one with plenty of women, Kane always took the kudos for the music.

Charlie had written the song ‘Broken’ as an act of rebellion. And when Kane asked Charlie what the French lyrics, *‘J’ai trois mamelons et j’aime chacun’*, actually meant, Charlie had simply replied, keeping a straight face, ‘My heart lies broken, in three pieces, upon the floor.’

But a more accurate translation was, in fact, ‘I have three nipples and oh, I love each one of them.’

Kane in his arrogance had never bothered to



double-check the words for himself. He had no interest in French whatsoever. He just liked the lyrics because he thought they made him sound mysterious and alluring.

But then, the weirdest thing had actually happened. Over time, Kane had actually started to make the lyrics work.

Ever so slowly, gig by gig, the song started to morph and change. The humour slowly disappeared, replaced by something else. Kane was so good at performing on stage, so charismatic, that when the French lyrics got blended in with his Mills and Boon voice, the whole package sounded sexy, intoxicating and strong. Inextricably, Kane managed to transform his extra nipple from ‘freak’ to ‘sheik’.

Well, at least for a little while.



Thankfully, however, Charlie’s original plan of ‘getting Kane back’ had finally come to fruition last summer. It had happened out of the blue on New Year’s Eve, at a gig the band was playing at the Warrnambool Surf Club.

Charlie remembered the gig as if it was yesterday. It had been a hot night, thick with the coastal smells of seaweed, salt and sweat. Charlie remembered how Kane had stepped up to the microphone for the band’s final song of the night: ‘Broken’. How the crowd had slowed to a hush, soaking in the long, drawn-out intro. How the spotlight had pressed down on Kane’s angelic features. And how Kane, eyes closed, had just stood there like a rock god before exploding into song.

In a flash, the drums erupted, the crowd pulsed and Kane strutted his stuff, his voice alive and electric.

Crackling in English before snuggling down into French.

Yes, Charlie remembered it. And he particularly remembered the two cute girls dancing up the front of the stage all night, flirting with Kane. He remembered how they had looked at each other, looked back at Kane, and then suddenly burst into laughter when he first sang the chorus. Half tanked, the two girls had reached out for Kane as he sang, clawing at his sweat-soaked t-shirt.

‘Permettez-nous de le voir, nous permettre de voir le mamelon!’
the two girls had screamed out over the rumpus of music.

Kane was in seventh heaven. Groped by two young French backpackers. Oblivious to their French chant of, ‘Let us see it, let us see the nipple!’ He never understood why he didn’t see any action that night. He thought he was in, for sure! After the gig, Charlie and Casey sat together on the beach with a six-pack, rejoicing in the fact that they’d both studied French in Year 12, cackling with laughter. The picture being rewound in their head, over and over, was priceless. Liquid gold.

Inside the little bungalow, Charlie turned to Kane from his bed and opened his mouth to speak. ‘Seriously, Kane, I reckon that song is dead and buried. Anyway, I’ve got a new song I’ve been working on. You guys want to hear it?’

‘Actually, I got to go,’ said Luke from over Kane’s shoulder, bringing any debate to an abrupt end. ‘I promised Trace I’d grab a DVD with her tonight. And anyway, we don’t really have time to learn a new song.’

Kane pushed his fingers through his hair and collapsed onto the blue beanbag by his side. As he hit the beanbag,

a few white balls leaked from a split and fell to the floor. 'Fair enough, Luke. Pick me up here around six o'clock tomorrow, will you? We'll head over to do a sound check.'

'Sure Kane. See you then, fellas.'

'See ya, Luke,' came a roughly harmonious reply.

With that, Luke stood up, shoved his drumsticks into his back pocket, picked up his car keys from the floor and stepped out the door.

'Hey Luke, hold up a minute, give us a lift, will ya?' came Casey's voice from the bed. Ten minutes later, Luke and Casey were gone.

In the meantime, Kane repositioned himself in front of Charlie's mirror and started to search for blackheads on his face. 'So, have you given Melbourne any thought, Charlie?' he asked, his eyes hard-pressed to find any imperfections in his skin.

For the past six months, Kane had gone on and on about wanting Charlie to move with him to Melbourne. He had drilled his plan into Charlie's head at every opportunity. At the pub, for instance, Kane liked to corner him and throw his drunken arm over his shoulder. 'Just think about it, Charlie – gigs in Melbourne, a share-house together, I could go to uni. It'll be sweet, absolutely sweet – just think about the girls!' he'd slur, his words rich with grog.

Charlie looked up at his best mate, standing in front of the mirror, and exhaled.

'Nah, I'm staying here in Warrnambool. Nothing has changed. Dad still needs me here.'

'Well, you know what I think, don't you? And I'll keep

banging on about it. Melbourne's calling. It's waiting. You know it is. With your songs and my voice, life would be sweet.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

'There's no "yeah, maybe" about it! Look, you'd get a job, no worries. I'd study. And at night, we'd go off. I reckon we could get gigs at the Espy or even the Punter's Club if we tried.'

'Look, like I said, maybe. Maybe in the future, not now. Maybe after Grandpa's gone.'

'That could be bloody years away, Charlie. Shit, I don't get you at all. You bitch and moan about your dad. You go on about his stupid loyalty to Frank and how it's going to send him to an early grave. Well, truth is, you're just like him. Like father, like son. He's pissing his life up against a wall for Frank, and you're doing the same thing for him.'

Kane turned away from his reflection in the mirror and stared down into Charlie's face. 'How many times have you told me you don't want to end up like your dad? That you don't respect him anymore? That he's a loser?'

As Kane finished his sentence, the bungalow door creaked open. Standing in the doorway was Charlie's dad, Roger, looking less dishevelled than he did earlier this morning. Roger readjusted the tray of steaming food balanced in his outstretched hands and cleared his throat.

'I saw Luke and Casey leave, so I figured you were finished, Charlie. Thought you might be hungry.'

Without another word, Roger took a couple of steps into the room and laid the tray on Charlie's desk. Turning

around, he quietly retreated towards the door.

A sweet pungent smell filled the room and, looking over at the tray, Charlie could tell his father had made stir-fry tonight: overcooked rice, chicken, vegies, and lashings of Kan Tong Sweet and Sour Sauce, straight from the jar.

It wasn't often that his dad went to the effort of bringing his dinner outside. As his father was opening the flyscreen door, Charlie tried to gather the courage to speak. Sitting on the edge of his bed, the events of this morning slowly came flooding back. The guilt. The regret about the things he'd said. And now this. The words Kane had spoken must have felt like a knife in the back.

'Dad ...'

Roger paused, his body a statue, hard as marble, waiting.

'Dad, don't go. Kane was just leaving.' Charlie flicked his eyes towards the door, hoping Kane would get the hint.

'Um ... yeah ... Charlie's right, Mr L., I was just leaving, don't mind me.'

With red cheeks, Kane picked up his backpack and moved quickly to the bungalow door. As Roger turned back inside to face his son, Kane slipped past Roger's right shoulder, careful not to catch the old man's gaze. 'See you tomorrow, Charlie,' came Kane's voice a few seconds later from down the driveway.

An awkward silence fell, blanket-heavy over the room. 'What now?' Roger said quietly, leaning his shoulder into the door frame.

Charlie looked up at his dad's tired-looking face, back

at the steaming tray of food on his desk, and then back up to his father's face again.

'Thanks for dinner, Dad. I suppose I don't deserve it after this morning.'

There was a pause before Roger responded. 'No, probably not.'

'You know Kane's full of crap, don't you? You know that, right? He just says those things to get me to move to Melbourne.'

'Do I?'

Something inside Charlie wanted to die. Why couldn't his dad just see it! 'Yeah, you do!' The guilt inside him felt again like a crushing weight. 'I was just explaining to Kane that I've decided to stay here with you and Grandpa.'

Roger stood in silence, crossed his arms across his chest and stared down at the carpet. After a few seconds he spoke. 'I'm no fool, you know, Charlie. If you want to go to Melbourne, that's alright. Frank and me will be just fine – and despite what you might think, I'm not pissing my life up against a wall.'

Roger's words cut deep. Charlie had been a real asshole lately and he knew it. Clogged up with regret, he started grasping at words, any words, words that might make things better. 'Dad, just stop and listen, will you. Bloody hell, I'm not going, alright? I'm staying here. I ... I ... I love you, Dad.'

As soon as he said the words, Charlie knew they weren't a lie. It was as though the plug inside his heart had been removed and all the foul fluid of the day had suddenly



been set free. Benny's mental snap. His bloody nose. The crazy surfer chick who thought he was a wanker. Kane's annoying self-obsession and vanity. His grandpa's shit. It was all set free. Leaking out and down. Down through the cracks in the bungalow's floorboards.

Lifting his shoulder off the door frame, Roger stepped over to the bed, past the wall that was plastered with Radiohead posters, and sat himself down on the bed beside his son.

Charlie's breathing started to labour and, hidden from his father's sight, his eyes glazed over. Seconds later, all the frustration, all the guilt, all the regret burst free as tears coursed down his cheeks.

It had been a long, horrible day, and Charlie remembered it all; remembered it into weeping.



Roger looked down at the bent-over figure of his son and gently put his arm around his shoulder, pulling him close.



Charlie didn't resist. He buried his head into the folds of his father's pants and just lay there, curled up beside his father's familiar body. He lay there on a pillow of tear-damp pants, his fiery red hair stroked by his father's weary hands.