

Ghost Kitchen by Ross Raisin from the Guardian (*Italics are from Alison*)

5 Already, he had mastered these streets. He knew the cuts through the alleyways and service areas; where there would be vehicles parked over the cycle lanes; which lights could be run. He had also, finally, mastered the bike - which had been Frank's and was, in truth, a piece of shit - and as he rode now onto Museum Street, past the theatre, the memorial park, the old boy playing his penny whistle outside the library, he knew to downshift softly, before the bike got wind of the climb ahead, letting the gears decide for themselves when to catch.

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At the crest of the hill - the momentary view over yellow fields beyond the city - Sean pushed on, down towards the outskirts. He was two minutes behind. He moved into the middle of the lane and pedalled harder, nervous energy coursing through him, until at the end of the street he was forced to stop. Commuter traffic crawled thickly across the junction in front of him. For a whole minute he waited, watching the slow procession of drivers alone in their cars - before the release of the light when he could slice through the congestion, out onto the other side of the ring road.

20 The roads were at once quieter here. Sean rode quickly, feeling the new strength in his legs. The dark was coming on but he left his lights in his jacket pocket, not wanting to stop and lose more time attaching them, or to make himself more visible. There was nobody about, though. No figures in the shadows of the buildings, no police, yet he remained watchful, checking around him at every turning, the entrance to every enclosed street. The dyke was close to here. He could turn to look down the passageway where part of it would be visible, but he resisted the impulse. He glanced at the wristwatch on his handlebar. He'd gained almost a minute. Still he kept up his pace, moving deeper into this untouched part of the city where blue, spiked metal fencing ran along the backs of industrial units - an electrical distributors, a meat wholesaler, a document shredding firm - and massive tangles of blackthorn and brambles grew undisturbed on the roadside scrubland. When he turned onto the final lane he twisted round to look behind him. Nobody. The roller shutters of the house clearance depot were down and the only sound anywhere was the clicking of the front wheel as he slowed, stealing around the side of the next warehouse building, and dismounted. (*Es ist offensichtlich in einem Industriegebiet.*) However long he was made to wait, he was exactly on time.

40 The door was open. Sean left the bike and walked up to it. Behind the grilles of the warehouse wall's two thin, cracked windows, the glass was fogged with condensation. Sean paused briefly, just outside the entrance, then went inside. Syrupy heat immediately enveloped him. He could see all the way down the gangway. A snarled mass of cables, dangling wires, hung down through the cloud above it. Below, the hands and arms of men, silent as ghouls, were moving in the brightly-lit mist of each pod. Even now, a couple of months since he had first come to this place, Sean was amazed by the smell. The smell was wild. Pungent. Weird. On that first night, he had walked down the gangway looking into each pod¹) in turn, mesmerised by the stink and lights, the men with their quick hands, working without speaking inside their small caverns, until a man had appeared and told him to get back to the collection area². 1) "a detachable or self-

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contained unit on an aircraft, spacecraft, vehicle, or vessel, having a particular function". This is a factory. It is some kind of unit/Bauteil. ² Collect = abholen

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An order was on one of the collection shelves, the paper bag stapled and ready. Sean checked the code on his phone against the one on the wall screen. It was his. Outside, a car was pulling up, its engine just perceptible underneath the churning of the ventilation fans. He took off his bag and put the order inside - stooping to take in the smell of it through the mingled fumes of beefburgers and shawarma and Vietnamese food. He lingered for a few seconds before zipping the bag shut. Fish and chips. A smell that reminded him of childhood, of Frank; reminded him too that he had not eaten before coming out to work. He registered the collection and studied quickly the route that came up on his phone. He was about to set off when a movement in one pod, Unit 3, caught his eye. He stepped to the opening of the gangway, from where he could spy in. A tall, thick-set man, foreign, it seemed to Sean through the mist, stood with his back against one of the line of deep-fat fryers. A shorter man was standing in front of him, their faces close together. The short man laughed, pointing to the floor - and the tall man, bending down, went out of Sean's view, then stood up again. He held out a pair of tongs (*Zange*), which the short man took from him. Laughing again, and speaking to somebody out of Sean's sight, he raised the tongs towards the tall man's face and arranged the pincers around him, first from cheek to cheek, then from his chin to the top of his forehead, as if measuring his head. Sean could feel a familiar trickle of fear entering his blood. Suddenly, the short man threw the tongs to the floor, again the other man bent to retrieve them. There was a sound behind him - the man from the car coming into the building. Sean stepped back from the opening, put his bag onto his back, and went outside.

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He got on the bike and raced into the growing dark - security lights, mounted beneath the barbed wire coiled along the warehouse roof, firing on him, one by one, like search beams. In the shower, he let out a long moan of exhaustion. He knew that he should massage his legs, or at least stretch them out, but he was too tired to bother. And the aching in his thighs, his calves, felt good, a kind of release; it felt, as the water slid down the expanding muscular shapes of his legs, like somebody else's body.

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He towelled himself dry and left the bathroom with the towel wrapped around him, crossing the corridor into his room. For a moment, the incident at the warehouse played again in his mind - he was too tired, though, to think about that, and it was nothing to do with him. He was doing okay. This was what he needed now. He could do as many, or as few, deliveries as he wanted. There was nobody to tell him otherwise; there was nobody to tell him anything at all. He could go whole days without having to see or speak to anybody, other than a fleeting transaction on a doorstep. He had become invisible. He picked his jeans up from the floor and fished out the night's surprising, pathetic, tip from his pocket, to put into the Tupperware on his window sill. Then he collapsed, naked and already almost asleep, onto the bed. (*He lives in a one-room flat - a 'bedsit'.*)

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Long brown puddles had begun to form at the road edges. He was mostly able to steer around them, until a cabbie or a van driver, speeding past, pinned him to the kerb. The

95 rain had been coming down heavily all afternoon. His skin burned under his sodden jeans
but he did not care - he barely took any notice of the downpour as he rode and arrived
at each office reception, each student house, or waited inside the steaming entrances of
chain restaurants. The rain was good. The rain meant more deliveries, higher fees,
100 because most riders turned the work down. Sometimes, when Sean did see another rider
gliding by on the opposite side of the road, a necklace of water arcing from their rear
wheel, he wondered at the strength of their need to come out into it, to be doing this
too.

The flat's button was the first of three grubby, peeling labels on the entry system. Rain
105 drummed on the top of his bag while he waited on the doorstep. He pressed the button
again. When it opened, a boy looked at him and laughed.

“Hey, man - you look wet.”

110 Sean took the pizzas out of the bag and handed them to him.

“Thanks.” The boy lifted the stack of boxes up to his face, inspecting for damp. “Nice
one.” He turned to go back inside - “See you later!” - and closed the door. The good
thing about students: there was no awkward moment of pause when they didn't tip you.
115 For a little while longer, rain tickling the skin of his back, Sean stayed on the doorstep.
The boy's face, laughing. He was at least five years younger than Frank would be now,
but something about his eyes, the mischief in them. A new request was pinging on his
phone. He shielded the rain from the screen with his hand and saw, below the request, a
message notification from earlier: Alright mate, how's things? None of us have... He
120 swiped to clear it, and pressed on the order request. £5.42. The Harbour Fisheries. Unit
3. He accepted, and got back onto his bike.

He crossed over the ring road and into the industrial zone, where the hard metallic
sound of rain on the warehouse roofs was all around him. At the top of the passageway
125 to the dyke, he paused, looking down it to the wall above the water. Then he forced
himself once again to move, and pressed on.

He arrived at the warehouse two minutes late, but the order was not ready. He stepped
through the collection area and looked into the pod. Four men were at four fryers, all of
130 them working at speed - shaking baskets of chips, lifting golden bars of fish from the hot
oil - the backs of their necks slick with sweat. The tall man from last night was putting a
completed meal box into a paper bag, then carrying it into the service corridor,
vanishing momentarily, before coming back into view behind the shelves of the
collection area. When Sean moved forward towards the order, he was already on his way
135 back to the pod.

“Want to earn some more?”

140 A man with a big, moist beard and white, rubber boots had appeared, like a real
fisherman, in the gangway entrance.

Sean steadied himself, packing the order correctly into his bag. “What do you mean?”
“Two of my staff fucked off this week, no warning for me, and tonight is last Friday of
the month - busy, busy - so if you want that to be your last delivery today, job is yours.”
145 He was watching Sean put the bag over his shoulders. “We pay better than them.” Sean
gazed through the collection shelves to where the tall man had just been. He thought
about all the hours he had ridden since signing to the app, to gain tonight’s priority-
access shift; a part of him, however, had already decided.

150 “It will be worth it for you.” The man looked down at the pool of water on the floor
around Sean. “And it is more dry in here.”

The rain had eased off by the time he returned. The short man from last night, who,
from his clothing, Sean now took to be the site manager, was smoking outside the
155 building. When Sean went inside and looked down the gangway trench into the Unit 3
pod, only the tall man and one other worker were stood at the fryers. The man with the
beard was approaching through the service corridor, into the space behind the collection
shelves.

160 “Good.” He lifted the metal counter flap to let Sean through. “Mehmet,” he said,
clapping himself on the chest. “Follow me.”

Mehmet led him into a windowless breeze-block room behind the pods. Towers of meal
boxes, differently branded for each of the four pods, were lined against one wall.
165 Further down the room, where it ran behind the other pods, Sean could see a large,
clear bag full of burger buns, plump and squished like faces against the plastic. Mehmet
beckoned him to the far corner, where it was darker, away from the light of the bare
bulb above the door. “Here.” Mehmet handed him a navy apron. “I will put you next to
Zac. He can show you, but you can start with just chips. Should be easy now. No rain,
170 less orders.”

Inside the pod, Mehmet spoke briefly to a young man with short, stiff blond hair, Zac,
while Sean waited by the storeroom. The tall man was close to him, at the far end of
the line. He was working quickly, extracting fish from the fryer with one hand at the
175 same time as spooning mushy peas into a frilled paper pot with his other.

Zac turned to face him. “Okay, then.” He pointed at the fryer next to his own. “Mr
Chips.” Zac showed him the correct amount of chips to get onto the shovel, how to
mount and detach the basket, how to submerge it without splashing oil. “Cooked chips
180 go in that tray. Keep them coming for now. I’ll tell you when you can slow down.”

‘How do I know when they’re cooked?’

‘Ever eaten chips before?’

‘Yes.’

185 ‘Then you’ll know.’

For the next five or ten or twenty minutes he fell into the timeless dulled rhythm of the
work, plunging the basket, again and again, watching the bubble and pop of tiny

exhalations that rose to the surface of the black pond of fat. A low hum of unbroken
190 labour was all around him: the shuffle of feet, the soft fizz of frying food, the drone of
the extraction fan. Zac, he noticed, sometimes spoke quietly to himself while he
worked, as if he was inside a dream. Once, a bang and a muffled shout came through
the wall from the next pod - within touching distance, but as separate as another
universe.

195 Sean had forgotten to eat again, and his stomach reeled as he processed the baskets and
baskets of chips. He saw with alarm that the short man was looking at him from the
gangway. Sean focused on another shovel of pale, frozen chips, his skin tightening as he
heard the man laugh. But when he peeked up, he realized with relief that the man was
200 in fact looking past him - to the end of the line where Mehmet was standing directly
behind the tall man. One of the frilly paper pots¹ was balanced, upside-down on his
head, like a miniature hat. Sean tried to ignore the frightened quickening of his blood
when the short man came past behind him. He was laughing again, and when Sean
turned to look, Mehmet was positioning another pot behind the first one. The man
205 carried on at his tasks with the pots on his head, like it was a party game, and then
Mehmet put down a third to make a line, a mohican of pots down the centre of his
skull.¹ *Probably a container for chips that looks like a Blumentopf.*

“Look, Dougie,” Mehmet said to the short man, who was bent over with laughter, his
210 hands on his knees. “That’s how big their heads are!”

Next to Sean, between him and the tall man, Zac was staring at the fish floating in front
of him. Sean plunged another basket, his eyes following the flotsam of lost, blackened
chips drifting against the scummy fatline of the metal, not allowing himself to look up
215 again until the basket was done.

A pyramid of pots was now stacked on the man’s head. Mehmet stood with his arms
folded, admiring his work, Dougie at his side losing his shit as Mehmet stepped forward,
puckering his lips, to blow the pots off the man’s head. They fell to the floor - except
220 for one, which dropped into the boiling liquid of the man’s fryer. For an instant, Sean
was sure that he saw anger flicker in the man’s face, and excitement rushed through him
in anticipation of the man retaliating (*zurückschlagen*). Whatever instinct of reprisal had
come into the man, however, he swiftly restrained (*zügelte?*). Sean watched him - Zac
was openly watching now too - use his tongs to carefully pluck out the pot, brown and
225 crumpled, from the fryer and put it into the bin by his knees, while Mehmet and Dougie
walked away together into the storeroom.

By the end of the night, Sean’s clothes had dried to a crust, and the continuous mizzle
of oil had caused red patches to bloom up his right forearm. Mehmet came up to him
230 while Zac was demonstrating how to drain and clean down his fryer. He told Sean that he
could work the rest of the weekend if he wanted. “Then we see. Maybe you stay longer.”

“Okay,” Sean said.

235 When he looked down the line of fryers, the tall man had gone.

Over the next two days, he fell into a new routine: delivering from late morning through the afternoon; then, after a quick sandwich which he had foiled and tucked into the bottom of his bag, riding to the warehouse to stand at the fryers, into the night. He was
240 upgraded to fish. Zac told him the cooking times for the different ones, which Sean wrote onto the base of one of the meal boxes. The tall man was there, at his usual fryer at the end of the line, on both days. A mute agitation moved through Sean each time Mehmet or Dougie went near him, although nothing happened, that Sean could see. The man simply got on quickly and silently with his work, uninterrupted.

245 As the weekend went on, time continued to stretch, to lose its shape. There were some occasional stiller moments; long periods, too, of intense heat and sweat. The orders never stopped coming in. Day and night. With every ping on his phone, and every new order appearing on the pod's blinking screen, he gave himself over to the ceaseless
250 current of demand, a digitized hunger that could never be satisfied. This new life, he told himself, was the right one for him now. He was his own man, on his own time, able to lose himself in work - and the pod, hidden from the city, from people, was a place where the rest of the world, and his family, and the past, no longer existed.

255 Late on Sunday night, when he had drained the oil from his fryer and was shaving the black warts of congealed batter from the sides with a metal scraper, he heard Mehmet calling him from inside the storeroom. When he went inside, Mehmet was sitting in the corner on an upturned crate. Two of the others were there: a boy who had worked on Saturday, and the tall man. From an inside pocket of his denim jacket, Mehmet took out
260 a handful of white envelopes, which he placed on top of the giant tub of curry sauce beside him. Both of the others moved forward slightly. 'Queue,' Mehmet said plainly. The tall man automatically moved behind Sean as the boy stepped in front of him. The boy, taking the envelope that Mehmet handed to him, mumbled thank you and left the room.

265 "You are okay with cash," Mehmet said, not looking up at Sean for a reply, instead opening one of the envelopes. He pulled out a twenty pound note from the small stash that was there, raising his face now, grinning, at the man behind Sean. "Oops." He slid the note into a different envelope. "Must have counted wrong." He held out the
270 envelope with the extra twenty towards Sean. A compulsion to not take the envelope, to not leave the man alone in this room with Mehmet, rooted Sean where he was - Mehmet watching him, interested - until Sean felt it weaken, and leave him.

275 Mehmet gave a short laugh. "There will be more next week. Now go on - fuck off. Same time tomorrow."

His legs were no longer his own. They ached all of the time, a discomfort that he became able, for the most part, to ignore. Some nights, when he left the warehouse, he stopped off at the petrol station on the ring road and bought two bags of ice. When he
280 got back to his room he arranged a ragged stretch of tarpaulin, that he had found hanging in a bush, over his mattress and lay down with the bags of ice under his thighs. Whole days passed without sitting down - apart from on the saddle, or for the short

pause between his two jobs when he would set himself up a little distance down the
lane from the warehouse to eat his sandwich, in a gap between the bushes, perched on
285 a tyre behind the fencing of a corrugated lock-up unit. At that time of day there was still
some activity in the zone: the shapes of men behind the metal-meshed windows of the
house clearance depot; vans leaving the security-fenced area. Mainly, though, it was
riders. A stream of them, back and forth, each one inside their own cocoon of music and
wind, all indifferent to the risk they might be taking, cycling into this industrial
290 wilderness, the threat of violence.

A couple of times, he got to the warehouse a few minutes early and joined Zac round
the side of the building for a cigarette. Here, during the strange brief intimacy of
leaning back together against the old mattress that had been propped on the wall by the
295 smokers, he learned from Zac that the pods had been in operation for almost a year. Zac
had been here almost since the beginning, after being tipped off by a friend. "Couldn't
believe it when I first saw. Like finding a drug factory in the middle of a forest." He told
Sean that Unit 3's owners, men Sean had never seen, used to have two fish and chip
shops in the city. "Went bust, didn't they? Near as, anyway. So they got a unit out here
300 when all the dark kitchen stuff started. All the expensive stuff gets paid for them,
energy and rent and whatever, so all they've got to pay for is us, fish, and a shit ton of
frozen chips. And the commission, obviously, which won't be cheap - but as long as the
orders are coming in, who's complaining?" While he was saying this, the tall man
became visible through the fencing and scrub, walking down the lane. "They've put me
305 on the roll now, and fair enough - they've got to be careful, right? The only ones not on
the roll, except for newbies like you, is the illegals." He nodded to where the man was
going out of sight past the corner of the building. "But they'll hardly cost much. Far as
anyone else is concerned, they don't exist. Just ghosts."

310 Whether the orders were coming in hard or steady, the tall man always seemed to work
at the same pace - his movements rapid and nimble, his station always immaculate.
Sean had noticed, too, that he took more care than the others to assemble his meals,
positioning the elements precisely - the fish, the pot of peas or curry sauce, the
pointless wedge of lemon - instead of cramming it all in with a slump of chips like Zac
315 and the other boy did. Most nights, he would be hassled at least once by Mehmet or
Dougie: dropping his tongs to the floor; standing behind him to whisper in his ear, or
flick it repeatedly. The hat game was clearly a favourite. Balancing as many of the pots
on his head as they could, trying to break their record. How easy it was, to do nothing;
to let it become normal. But every night, when Sean pedalled away down the lane and
320 through the dark industrial shapes of the buildings, a rekindled feeling of guilt would
cling to him, as he replayed each incident, and imagined all the ways that he could have
stopped them. Thoughts which, by the time he got back to his bedsit with his party bags
of ice, had always taken him back to the dyke.

325 One afternoon, two weeks into the routine of his parallel jobs, Sean's first collection
was a Vietnamese order from Unit 1. When he went into the collection area, where his
order was waiting for him on a shelf, he heard a shout coming through the gangway. He
moved closer and could see Dougie in Unit 3, holding the tall man from behind, pinning
his arms. Mehmet was in front of him, their noses almost touching, speaking into the

330 man's face while he poked him in the belly. Sean could hear his own breathing while he
watched the man start to struggle. Dougie's face and neck were red with the effort of
detaining him, the man bigger, stronger than Dougie - and, with a cry, he pulled himself
free. His fists were for a moment outstretched, either side of Mehmet's head, and Sean
335 him. But Dougie slammed his knee into the man's back and immediately he went limp,
Dougie pinning his arms once more, and together he and Mehmet began dragging him
backwards towards the storeroom.

Sean cycled away, slowly at first, as if a bolder part of him might yet pull up, and go
340 back. Soon, however, he was speeding faster and faster, the chain grinding beneath him.
What, really, could he have done? There were two of them, both stronger than him. He
fought back the nagging awareness of what Frank would have thought about it; what
Frank, in his shoes, would have done. A sudden crunching sound came from below him,
the chain wrenching free of the sprocket. (*Etwas an der Fahrradkette ist nicht in*
345 *Ordnung*)The bike became unsteady, careening, and Sean tilted to one side with the
abrupt weight of the bag on his back, until he was able to bring the bike to a halt. He
paused briefly to regain his composure. Here in the quiet of the passageway behind the
shredding firm, his breath was coming thickly again. He dismounted, and when he bent
to attend to the chain a spasm of pain shot through his side. He fell to the ground, the
350 bike landing clumsily on top of his body. There were voices - darting white faces above
him - and new pain in his right knee, somebody kicking him.

"Fuck's sake, take it off him."

355 He was being pulled backwards across the tarmac - then forcefully sat upright, his chest
echoing with the scrabble of hands that were groping at the bag on his back. Three boys,
keyed up, wild. A new terror surged in him, making him attempt to turn his body so that
he could see their faces - but he did not recognise them, he was sure; these were
different boys. One of them knelt in front of him and straddled his legs. His face when
360 he leant forward was so close that Sean could see a small rash through the hair above his
ear, while he slipped the straps from Sean's shoulders with a skill and delicacy that was
like tenderness, and the others pressed down painfully on his ankles.

"Got it. Let's go!"

365 Sean watched them run away down the passageway with the bag. Then he looked at
Frank's bike, still sprawled beside where he sat, too shit to steal. On the ground near
him a line of paper scraps followed the contour of the building like a trail of confetti.
The boys had stopped running and were opening the bag. The image of the man being
370 dragged into the storeroom flashed in Sean's mind; the thought seizing him that he had
brought this attack on himself.

"Taking the piss?" The voice of one of the boys reverberated between the buildings. He
threw the bag to the ground and held out the stacked meal boxes towards the others.

375 "It's fucking Japanese."

Sean stayed in bed, awake, long into the morning. The pings were starting to come in - he had turned the app on out of habit - but he let them sound, even though he knew he was not going to deliver today. There was a pain above his hip, bruises on both of his
380 ankles. He lay on his back, his thoughts hovering over him. Each new ping, interrupting the floating dream of yesterday, prompting him to get up. Frank - leaning over him, grinning and shaking his head - badgering him to get his arse out of bed.

He got up and walked gingerly to the corner of the room. He was still in his clothes, so he just picked up the hoodie that was on the floor and slowly, carefully, put it on and
385 went out. The rear derailleur mechanism was not right. He had threaded the chain back on yesterday but something was catching more than usual, newly kinked. He would need to get the bike serviced, or finally let it go. When he got to the petrol station, he locked it to the cycle stand by the cash dispenser. An old woman was filling up her little brown car at the pump closest to the shop. She stood in a square of sunshine, gripping the hilt
390 of the fuel nozzle with both hands, her body braced with the physical effort of holding it there. Sean walked towards the entrance, watching her finish filling up, struggling then to pull out the nozzle. He hesitated, unsure whether it would be rude to offer his help, but with a final effort the woman slid it out - and for a moment she stood there, triumphant, the metal dripping in her hands, like a warrior.

395 Sean went inside the shop. He moved straight to the flowers and gave no thought to which of the two varieties he would buy; he had paid and left the shop before the old woman had even reached the sliding doors of the entrance.

400 With the flowers laid across his handlebars, attached by the wristwatch at one end and an elastic band at the other, the petals quivered as he rode. Numbness was beginning to spread through him: the slow drug of ritual moving up his spine, his neck, entering his brain. Only the twinge of his right knee, with every push down on the pedal, cut through. He was close now. The warehouses were spaced further apart here. Between
405 some of them, sunlit clearings of abandoned ground had filled with long grasses, burrows, solitary poppies. Sean cycled on, constantly vigilant, until he came to the dyke.

A worm of dirty water trickled below the far bank. The grass of the bank was bathed in
410 sun - and Sean could already see them all there, laughing, drinking, their feet dangling over the water. He got off the bike and leant it up against the crumbling, graffitied wall that ran along the top of the near side, then walked along the wall to the spot. There was not much there: the remnants of some previous flowers, not his, and their tattered plastic sleeve. The document pouch on its rusty spike in the wall, a blue halo of ink
415 diffused around each of the words on the letter. He slung the old flowers over the wall and put down the new ones. For a moment, he stood there. Then he stepped down the bank and jumped across the dyke, before climbing to the place where the bank creased into a grassy shelf, and he sat down. Behind him, beyond the wall on this side, there was the passing thunder of a train. He took off his shoes and socks and let the brown water
420 swallow his toes, closing his eyes now to the memory of the other group arriving, the four of them stepping through the broken wall. Their catcalls coming across the dyke. Goading - playful, at first - but Frank and his friends bristling, a history with these other lads, and the first bit of brick¹ striking the bank close to Frank's hand, his friends getting

to their feet, shouting, leaping the dyke to get to the boys. Sean could feel it strongly
425 now: the intensity of his need for Frank not to join in, to stay there with him. The
mangled sound that had left his throat, pleading for Frank to come back.¹ *Ziegel,*
Baustein

He opened his eyes. A tiny bird was hopping about on the other side. It moved down to
430 the water and took a drink. Sean watched the bird as it hopped back up the bank to the
top, where the phantoms of young, male bodies were closing upon each other, straining
with intent - one of the other group, his face dark with blood, being held back by his
mate but breaking free and in an instant both groups charging towards each other in a
435 chaos of motion - arms and fists and shouts and the hand, reaching down, to pick up the
chunk of broken brick. Sean not able to see yet, in the speed of it all, whose body it
was, dropping to the ground as everybody else scarpered ¹. ¹ *ran away*

He kept to the middle of the streets, taking the longer routes around the warehouses
instead of cutting through the alleys. But there was nobody about, the air dead except
440 for the muted rumble of traffic girdling the city and the occasional noise of a train
distantly behind him. When he turned onto the lane to the pods he slowed down and
cycled towards the gap in the thick mess of bushes. He dismounted and walked his bike
into the space, to lean against the metal fence that was exposed to the sunshine like a
ribcage, and sat down on the tyre, to wait.

445 Every few minutes a rider rushed past on the lane. They did not notice him, in his
tucked away position. With each bright flash of colour, Sean had the strange sensation
that he was watching himself: collecting, delivering, accelerating always towards the
next order, the next order. Here, in this leafy bunker, everything else became
450 heightened. The faraway hydraulic scoop and lift of a machine. The close, low laughter
of a man behind the wall of the lock-up unit. As he listened to these things, his hand, as
if separate from the goings-on of his brain, went to his pocket. He took out his phone
and put his finger to one of the column of notifications, a voicemail - which, when he
opened the list, brought up a uniform¹ queue of attempts to speak to him. He put the
455 phone to his ear and the voice of his mum was at once inside his head, as easy and
familiar as if she was calling him in for tea. "...wondering how you're getting on and if
you need anything. We just wanted to let you know as well that we're going to pay a
visit, and we know you might not want to, but if you want to come with us then -" He
stopped the message, but before the phone was back in his pocket his mind was already
460 on the dyke. They did not know that he went there; they thought he had severed² that
from his life, that it was only them who kept the memory of what happened there.

¹ *all looking the same* ² *cut off*

Through the fringe of foliage (*leaves*), Sean could see the tall man approaching. It struck
Sean for the first time that he travelled in on foot, and he found himself curious about
465 how far the man came in from; the same distance again walking back home into the dark
later. Home. The thought of his parents - then the alien picture of his bedsit came into
his head: a place that had become, through the press of time, a kind of home; or, at
least, a refuge from it. The man was near enough that Sean could hear his boots on the
lane. When he was a few metres away, Sean emerged from his hiding place. The man
470 stopped still, staring at Sean, confused.

“Got in a bit early,” Sean said. Then, when the man did not say anything: “I work where you do - Unit 3”.

475 The man was looking at the tyre, the drift of rubbish against the fence.

“Shall we walk in?” Sean asked.

480 The man still said nothing, but waited for Sean to wheel his bike away from the fence, and they set off together towards the warehouse. Sean had not thought about what to say to him.

485 When he did glance across at the man, he saw that he was older than Sean had presumed. There were small lines at the corner of his eye, a slim silver current running through his hair. When they were almost at the warehouse, Sean could see Zac reclining against the mattress, smoking alongside a couple of workers from the other pods. Zac was looking at them coming down the lane and Sean could feel his heart rate increasing, until Zac went out of view as they came to the front of the building. Sean pushed his bike to lock up in the shelter, while the man, without a word, went inside the building.
490 Fish and chips from The Fishmarket Chip Shop in Newhaven Edinburgh
Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

The orders came in smoothly, a Tuesday night. Neither Mehmet nor Dougie were in and Sean felt himself relax into the flow of work. His hip ached, standing still, but he did not
495 think about the attack, or about his visit to the dyke. At the fryer beside him, Zac was keeping to himself; there was only, every now and again, one of his daydream whispers audible above the fans and the roiling liquid. Further down the line, the tall man was focused as intently as always on his orders. Sean wondered what went through his mind as he worked; whether he was fearful of Mehmet and Dougie returning, or if he
500 imagined, sometimes, what he might do in response to them.

At the end of the shift, when they had drained and scraped and paper-towelled the fryers, swept and mopped, refrigerated the unused fish, the man was first to complete his clean-down tasks, and left straight away - giving, as he walked out, a single nod
505 goodbye to Sean.

The next day, Sean went back to riding. He accepted his first ping at midday - a large order of deli sandwiches to an assembly of mothers and babies in a park, which filled his bag so tightly that the zip would not properly do up - and he carried on riding all through
510 the afternoon until he could arrange himself, fifteen minutes before the start of his kitchen shift, in the gap in the bushes. The man did not seem surprised this time. He stopped and waited as before for Sean to get his bike, then they walked off silently down the lane. When they arrived, Sean turned to the man before he went to lock up his bike.

515 “Sean.”

The man looked at him. “Ebdo.”

520 Over the next couple of days, the short walk together became a routine. The same time
each evening, the same nod hello and the quiet walk down the lane. On the Sunday
evening, however, Ebdo was a few minutes late. An anxious thought quickly took hold of
Sean that something had happened, or that he should not be doing this - until there the
man was, walking up to him again, just as normal. Sean realized, wheeling out the bike
525 to move away down the lane together, that his arms and legs were streaming with relief,
and he wanted in that moment to know more about Ebdo; to talk to him. He wondered
whether Ebdo thought it was strange, this ritual that Sean had begun. It was raining,
very lightly - the mist of it so fine that Sean, still wearing his helmet, had barely noticed
- but Ebdo’s hair was wet through, and Sean realised that he must walk in from some
530 distance away.

“Where do you come in from?” Sean asked.

535 For a few seconds, Ebdo did not answer. Then, as Sean was thinking that he had not
understood, he said, “Kurdistan”.

“Oh,” Sean said. “Long walk, then.”

540 Sean turned his head, at once worried that he had spoken out of turn, but Ebdo was
smiling.

“Yes,” he said, “believe me.”

545 They were halfway to the warehouse and Sean felt a longing to keep talking like this, for
the conversation not to be shut down as soon as they were amongst the others. “You’re
good at the job, you know,” he said. “Really fast.” When Ebdo again did not respond,
Sean added, “Much faster than me.”

550 “But you have two jobs.” He gestured to Sean’s bag.

“Right, yeah. Sucker for punishment.”

555 Mehmet was in the entrance, watching them. When they got nearer, Sean could see his
eyes moving between them both. “Come on,” he called, clapping his hands twice
together as they came past the drums of spent oil. “Choppity fucking chop.”

560 The orders started coming in immediately, before Sean had chance to get his station
ready or even bring his oil to temperature. Some national event was happening in the
real world, Sean remembered dimly - a match, or a TV competition - and a tension was
in the air of the pod: Mehmet walking up and down behind their backs, clapping or
shouting for them to go faster; the pink streak of Dougie in the gangway going between
the pods. At one point, Mehmet leant in to speak a few words out of Sean’s earshot to
the weekend boy, who was struggling to keep up at the fryer next to him. The boy
nodded and went at his work with still more haste.

565

It was about three hours into the shift, when the orders were progressively slowing down, that they started. They began in the usual way - the paper-pot hats - and Sean detected again the spark of almost-retaliation in Ebdo, but he carried on, transporting his final completed orders to the collection shelves with the pots on his head for all the couriers to see. A fierce heat of shame flared in Sean - and then anger, that Ebdo let them do this to him. Mehmet was standing against the wall opposite the fryers. In one hand, he held a plastic box of lemon wedges. He picked one out, holding it up level with his eye, like a darts player, then threw it. The wedge landed - with a spurt of oil - in Ebdo's fryer. The next one dropped in just as Ebdo was tonging out the first and his hats at last tumbled from his head. A barrage of Mehmet's lemons were now flying through the air, hitting the fryer, hitting Ebdo's back, and a cord of panic twisted in Sean's spine at the memory of the pieces of brick firing across the dyke. Ebdo carefully removed each foaming wedge from the liquid, like it was just another part of the job. A desperation for Ebdo to defend himself was climbing inside Sean's chest. Mehmet, though, had become distracted, moving away to show something on his phone to Dougie. Sean slit open a new bag of chips and emptied them into his drawer.

There was a lemon wedge on the floor near his feet. He tried to bend to pick it up but suddenly his body would not move. He could see the chunk of brick, still in Frank's hand. He remembered the brief moment of nothingness afterwards, Frank muttering, "Shit, shit, shit". Then, the boy's head cradled in his own fingers, and not knowing what to do, and looking up to see everybody else, Frank, running away.

By the time the orders stopped coming in, Mehmet was already in the storeroom, on his phone, or preparing the wages. He had not spoken to Sean yet about putting him on the books. When he came out, he had the envelopes in his hand. He went down the line and told each worker apart from Ebdo that they could turn off their fryer and finish cleaning down. A short time later, the weekend boy and Zac had left. Only Sean and Ebdo, Dougie and Mehmet remained. Mehmet held the envelopes up above his head.

595 "Come and get them!"

Fleetingly, Sean and Ebdo met each other's eyes. Sean went forward to where Mehmet, standing behind Ebdo, was already holding out his wage packet. Once he had taken it, Sean did not move. Mehmet's glare was on him but Sean kept his eyes on the envelope in his hand, and stayed where he was.

"Go home," Mehmet said.

605 Dougie was by the entrance to the storeroom. At the edge of his vision, Sean could see him waving. "Bye, bye," Dougie cooed.

Sean did not look at Ebdo as he walked out of the pod. In the collection area, he stopped. A dark rectangle of night was in front of him. Frank's bike, waiting in the shelter, the ride home - he could visualise himself moving towards it, as if a different person was now stepping out of his body to get away from here, to be on the road and

then alone in his bedsit, clambering stiffly and blissfully onto his bed. But he could sense - even as he watched the ghost of himself leaving - his feet still planted on the floor, and he knew, before he turned to see Mehmet crumpling the banknotes, Dougie laughing, that he would not come back to this place again after tonight.

None of them noticed him at first. Ebdo was looking into his fryer. Mehmet had the flat of his hand against Ebdo's back, coaxing him towards the fryer, and Sean understood. "Better get it out quick," Dougie was saying - and then he turned to see Sean. "Fuck you still here for?" His attention, though, went straight back to Mehmet and Ebdo, the spectacle at the fryer. If Mehmet knew that Sean was there, he was ignoring him. He was studying Ebdo, watching closely as he reached for his tongs.

"No," Mehmet said quietly. "With your hands."

Ebdo stared into the fryer, at his money seething in the oil. His expression gave nothing away although Sean, treading closer, could see that Ebdo's hand, when he raised it to hover above the fryer, was shaking.

The pain, for the first second or two, did not register. Then it came - tearing like a barb of metal up Sean's wrists and forearm.

Mehmet and Dougie stood, powerless, while Ebdo reacted quickly - lifting Sean's hand out of the oil and guiding him away to a sink, the yellowed money still gripped in his hand until Ebdo could tease it out and place Sean's hand and arm under the running water - holding him there - a pure, exhilarating pain moving through Sean's arm and into his shoulder, his chest, until his whole body was alight, a rapture¹ of fire. ¹ *Rausch*

He did not know how much time had passed when he heard the dim wail of the ambulance coming through the industrial zone. He was sitting outside, on a plastic chair that Ebdo had found in Unit 2; a fire blanket, the only soft thing in the building, gathered around his shoulders. He could piece together only fragments: Mehmet and Dougie running away into the night, the boiled banknotes lying on the floor like damp flowerheads, the shock of new pain when Ebdo had slowly wrapped his hand with cling film. Ebdo, sitting on the ground beside him, had heard the siren too. He started to get to his feet and Sean hurriedly reached his good hand into his jeans pocket for his own wage envelope. Ebdo, standing above Sean now, shook his head, smiling, and Sean let the stillness of the night begin to seep through him - the glow of the city, and further out, his parents at home; Frank, waiting for their visit - as he watched the ambulance arrive and Ebdo walking away, his outline gradually disappearing into the soft blue pulse of air.

Ghost Kitchen appears in the BBC National Short Story Award 2024 anthology (Comma Press, £8.99).

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/oct/01/ross-raisin-ghost-kitchen-wins-2024-bbc-national-short-story-award-with-dark-gig-economy-tale-read-it-here>