

Off the Line

The storm hit the Alabama coast like an angry fist, leaving Gulf Shores a slagheap. Broken glass sparkled in the sun like a million shiny diamonds. Karl sat on the wreckage of the Hobart that had washed dishes in the kitchen of Nolan's for 17 years. He poked a busted piece of broomstick around in the beach sand that had sluiced up over the highway with the surge that flattened the restaurant when the storm made land. He was hoping he would find his knife. Karl pulled the brim of his Bama ball cap down tight over his large head to shade his crooked nose and wide set eyes. Still, he squinted looking out at the Gulf of Mexico, quiet now, rising and falling like the chest of an old man sleeping.

Karl looked up at the sky, milky blue from the webs of cirrus that hung above the gulf. He missed seeing the pelicans flying in formation along the shore like they always did, dive-bombing into the waves when they passed over easy pickings of mackerel and

drum. Karl figured that most of the pelicans had not made it. He saw the carcasses among the twisted rebar of the cement spans from the fishing pier that had been snapped apart and thrown ashore like sugar wafers.

The seagulls had survived. They were indestructible, like rats. The gulls ran back and forth across the sandy debris bickering over the spoils of the storm that covered the waterfront like garbage piles at a dump. Karl sat still, his lips pursing in and out like they did sometimes when he felt hinked up. He listened to the screaming birds, the Coast Guard helicopters, the clanking of earthmovers and all the other sounds of disaster that drifted in the wet stink. He didn't move. There was nowhere for him to go. Everything was gone and he knew that Riley had gone too.

He had lost track of his friend Riley when the state troopers sent buses in to evacuate the people in Karl's trailer park near the intercoastal. The troopers had said that the surge would make the waterway flood, swamping the trailers and all the other buildings nearby. Karl got on the bus and rode it east down the coast to Pensacola where a shelter had been set up at the Naval station there. Riley had told Karl that he had seen a tornado once back in Minnesota and there was no way he was going to ride this storm out. Riley said it was time to head out anyway. He said maybe to the west coast. "A year in somebody's kitchen is about all you should do," he said. "After that there's nothing more to learn." Karl thought that it could be his fault that Riley left.

Riley once said he had been cooking up in Minneapolis. "Doing some good shit, too," he said. He said he came south because he was sick of winter. "Winter blows," he told Karl. "Sometimes up in Minnesota in winter, school buses full of little kids get lost

in these humungous snowdrifts and all the kids freeze and crack apart. Then when everything thaws in spring it's a mess to clean. Some years the drifts don't melt until the Fourth of July. Then it's really something else. You guys down here don't know how good you got it." Karl had never been north of Magnolia Springs and had no idea where Minnesota was. He wondered what Riley would say if he could see all this.

It took the National Guard four days to open up the section of the waterfront where Karl sat on the Hobart. And then only to the locals. Karl rode the bus from the shelter up to Orange Beach. The Guard had barricades set up just west of there, blocking the Parkway into Gulf Shores. They said that most of the road into town had been washed away or was underwater and everyone in the bus would have to walk the rest of the way on the beach.

The soldiers told people to watch for debris in what was left of the sand. "It is important that you keep your shoes on at all times," a Guardsman shouted into a bullhorn. "We don't know what the storm left buried in the sand." Karl looked down at his Chuck Taylor's. The thick rubber soles had kept his feet safe so far. Karl dug down deeper into the sand with the busted handle hoping to find the chef's knife he'd left on his station the night he ran in panic from Nolan's.

Karl looked over at where the Convention Center had been. The swimming pool had been torn from its concrete berth by the surge and now lay upside down, jutting through the busted glass of the center's main meeting room. Toilets washed from their moorings were strewn across the gutted parking lot; PVC snapped and shattered like broken pickup sticks. There were mattresses scattered about like old kitchen sponges

oozing storm water over the smashed asphalt of the ruined Parkway. Karl watched the people from his bus slowly pick their way up the ravaged sand towards town. They moved slower as they went, like they were afraid of seeing worse. Some shook their heads, some wept on their knees on the stripped shore, mourning the sugary sand that had been swept back into the gulf when the surge retreated.

Without the walls of Nolan's around him, Karl felt like the loose flotsam that drifted in and out with the waves he watched from the Hobart. Karl always felt safe in the confines of the kitchen with its' smells of roasting bones, onions being sweated, stockpots bubbling and the occasional waft of vanilla from the pastry station. Most days he was able to set up his veg station at the steel table in the middle of the kitchen where he could look out over the pass through the large glass window to the gulf. He could see the fishing pier that jutted far out into the water, standing firm on its thick wooden trestles 20 feet above the soft green curls of long, rolling breakers.

Karl was cutting chives at his station when Riley first popped into the kitchen a year ago. Chef introduced them. They shook hands, Karl keeping his head down, his face shielded from judgment by his ball cap. Riley glanced down at Karl's cutting board. He pushed the bridge of his thick black-rimmed glasses up his pointy nose.

"Jesus, Karl. Those chives are awesome. Those are some of the best chives I have ever seen. You do a better job than the amigos back home and they do most everything perfect."

Karl felt Riley's soft slap on his shoulder and watched him walk away with Chef from under his visor. Karl had flinched and now took a deep breath. Nothing from

Riley about having a hammerhead or fishlips or anything else Karl was used to hearing, before he quit school. When those guys from the high school had laid for him near the old stables on the Fort Morgan road where Karl got off the school bus. Where they laughed at his encephalitic head and punched him in the arms then made him pee on the electric fence strung to keep the horses in. He could still feel the jolt that sent him to his knees in the weeds along the road. While the guys howled, Karl zipped his zipper, his lips pursing rapidly in and out. He stayed on his knees and decided all he wanted was a hiding place and he found it inside Nolan's.

Karl scooped the chives he had cut with the palm of his hand and the edge of his chef's knife. He put them in a nine pan that sat next to his cutting board. He grabbed another fistful of chives from a plastic produce bag and started on another mince. Karl took a second to admire his work and his knife. He loved the old eight-inch Wusthof, the balance, how it felt like a part of his hand. Chef gave the knife to Karl when he took him off dishes and put him on prep. Chef showed Karl how to hold it where the blade met the haft. Keep it steeled, maybe fifteen, twenty times on each side every time you go to cut something, Chef had said. You keep that edge on it and it will be your friend. Karl did what Chef instructed and now he sawed the flat edge of his knife along the curled knuckles of his left hand, keeping his thumb carefully tucked in behind them, doing a mince that Riley said was awesome. Karl thought with the knife he was special.

Karl got to his feet off the dead Hobart. He knew it wouldn't wash any more dishes, like he wasn't going to cut chives. Nolan's was now nothing more than a few low stands of cinderblock and busted porcelain. Karl held tight to his stick and walked

carefully through the mess of muck-covered flatware and mixers and sauté pans. The pointy cone of a china-cap poked up behind the junked grill that had been pushed over and lay alongside dead jellyfish looking like pools of mucous. Karl looked for the walk-in but it was gone along with most everything else, either pushed up into the low scrub behind the derelict restaurant or dragged back into the gulf. He wondered how much of Nolan's was sucked out to sea; forks, drink glasses, razor-sharp mandolins, things that poked and cut, maybe even his knife. Karl knew he wouldn't swim out there, at least not without his Chuck Taylor's.

Karl felt naked in the sun standing amidst the piles of storm-shit. With no roof there was no protection. The Bama hat couldn't hide him from the sky. It couldn't hide him from people who didn't like how he looked. Green trucks with men wearing brown State of Alabama uniforms drove up and down the beach. Karl hoped someone would come help him.

The helicopters overhead were relentless, buzzing along the smashed coast like angry dragonflies. Karl wanted a drink of water. He needed something to eat. The hand holding the stick began to tremor; gatorshakes that came when Karl's guts balled up and he didn't know what to do. The people from the bus had moved on into town. He began to walk tight circles in the refuse. If he didn't move he would freeze up like he did the night Riley put him on the line.

Karl had never seen anyone move like Riley. His movements were manic, bouncing from station to station in the busy restaurant with the spoon he used to taste this and that then tucking it back into a pouch on his sleeve. Karl wondered how Riley stayed

so skinny tasting all the time. He wore his apron to his ankles and Riley's black skullcap was always snug around his shaved head. The sleeves of his whites were rolled up. Every time Riley's thin arm moved, a silver bracelet would ride up and down over purple cooking scars on the whitest skin that Karl had ever seen.

Sometimes Karl would stand motionless, mesmerized by the sliding bracelet. On the bracelet were the letters MDC. Every day he would look at the bracelet trying to figure out the letters.

"You want to know what it stands for, right?" Riley finally noticed Karl's interest.

Karl nodded.

"Millions of Dead Christians. They're my favorite band. Ever heard 'em?" Riley asked.

Karl shook his head. He couldn't listen to music. It messed up the tidy boxes he built in his brain to keep things straight. Like the way things were stored in the kitchen at Nolan's. Chef called it *mise en place*, everything where it should be when you needed it. No clutter; no messy stations. Music only screwed up Karl's mental *mise en place*.

"You never heard 'I Wanna Fuck the Dead'?" Riley's eyes widened like he was surprised. "It's an awesome song, dude. If I wasn't a cook I'd be in a throw down hardcore punk band like Millions of Dead Christians." Riley leaned down to grab a grouper from a waxed box filled with crushed ice. He stuck his hand in the gills of the fish and flopped it on a cutting board. He steeled his filet knife. "You'd be in my band, wouldn't you Karl?" Riley made a cut just in front of the fish's tail and ran the filet knife up along the spine. "We'd tear it up. Just throw down. Like you throw down on your veg. You gotta work the line with me some night. You and me. It would be great.

Like being in a band.”

Riley was screwing up Karl’s mental mise. No one had ever wanted him to be in a band. Nobody ever told him secrets, like the letters on the bracelet. Riley wanted him on the line. Karl had to let that sink in and find a place to settle.

“Hey Karl.” Riley had finished with the grouper and was wiping down his station. “You wanna know what MDC really stands for?”

Karl was a little confused but he nodded his head yes.

Riley glanced over one shoulder, then the other. He leaned into Karl’s ear and whispered, “Many Dumb Confederates. But, you gotta promise you won’t tell anyone. If you do, I could be dead before service and they’ll find my body dumped out in the Bon Secour.”

It took a moment to process, but then Karl cracked a smile. He swiped the blade of his Wusthof 20 times on each side like he was told and dug into a case of mushrooms.

Karl started hanging around the kitchen later after punching out. He tried to be inconspicuous but it was hard to keep his large Bama-hatted head from view as he watched the line cooks at work during dinner rush. The noise unsettled him. Sauté pans still snapping with hot oil were tossed into metal bins, clanging, waiting to be washed. Chef stood at the pass expediting orders and shouting at the new cook on salads, wondering why in the fuck he kept burning the bread. Oven doors slammed shut with the kick of a heel as someone turned to do something else. The little printers at each station rat-a-tatted out the never-ending tickets. Karl saw Hannah, the little gal that did pastries, cry because her madeleines all scorched in an oven that was left too hot.

But mostly, Karl watched Riley. He watched the skinny cook with the thick

glasses turning side to side in his black pants and stained apron, his kitchen whites spattered with the juices and sauces of whatever was on the menu. There was always a drip of perspiration hanging from Riley's nose and he wiped at it constantly with his sleeve. Never once did Riley lose his cool. He just put his head down and cooked his fish, plating his orders and getting them up on the pass. He spent the rest of his time keeping everyone else out of the shit. Karl decided there was no way he was going to get in the middle of all that. He didn't care what Riley said.

Riley told him not to be nervous. Riley stood right next to him and coached him quietly as the following night's service got underway. He told Karl how simple his job was going to be. All Karl needed to do was put this much oil into a hot sauté. Then spoon a chunk of butter into the oil and wait until it foamed.

"Then you add a handful of the leeks," Riley said, "and then some of the fingerlings. All you gotta do then is toss them in the pan until I'm ready to plate the scallops. I'll let you know."

The first couple of tickets came across and everything seemed to go well. Then the cook on meats yelled, "There's no pans in my oven! Somebody tell those amigos to quit screwin' around by the dishwasher and get some pans in my oven. Like right now!"

Riley was calm. He said, "That guy's a panic sister, but you already know that. Just stay cool, Karl."

Chef leaned into the pass from the front of the house. His black, curly hair fell over his forehead. He asked Riley what Karl was doing up on the line.

"Teaching him to throw down, Chef," Riley told him.

Chef looked at Riley unbelieving and said okay, but no one better get in the weeds.

The timer for the bread went off but the kid on salads who was responsible for bread was around the corner in back talking to Hannah. “The baguettes are burning,” Chef shouted. “Somebody better get their ass up to their station now! Riley,” Chef’s voice had come back to normal. “Make sure all that burned bread makes it on the waste log.”

“Yes, Chef,” Riley answered.

The tickets started to come faster and everyone was calling out what they were dropping and what they were firing. Karl’s tongs fell to the floor and all the tidy little boxes of his mental *mise en place* spilled out and he had no idea of what to do next. He stood frozen, like those kids in the buses Riley had told him about; shivering, afraid he would break into pieces.

“Karl,” Riley said softly. “Go back by the amigos.”

Karl couldn’t move. Chef shouted that Karl needed to get off the line now. He did. Karl ran out of the kitchen through the double swinging doors and the front of the house, past the reservation table and out the exit. He didn’t stop. He ran across the Parkway, his big head bobbing up and down, over the dunes and the sea oats, across the beach and onto the fishing pier. Karl didn’t stop until he couldn’t go any farther. He stood at the end of the pier and gulped the iodine air trying to get over his gatorshakes.

Karl was shaking again now as he walked in circles in the ruins of Nolan’s. He thought maybe he was just hungry. He had nothing to eat since leaving Pensacola on the bus earlier in the morning. Karl felt a little weak. It could be his empty stomach or just the smell of the dead stuff that had begun to melt in the sun. He hadn’t found his knife and it made him more hinky. Karl heard the rumbling clanks of steel treads as large Cats

slowly rolled in off the good part of the Parkway to begin pushing back the sand piles. He watched a green pickup bounce up over the dunes from the shore. It was a State Park truck. The kind that was used to haul trash from the beach. It came to a stop in the erosion that used to be Nolan's parking lot. Two men dressed in brown State of Alabama uniforms got out of the truck and walked closer to where Karl stood. He recognized them from the Pier.

"You okay, son?" one of the rangers asked. He pushed a pair of mirrored sunglasses up to the top of his head.

Karl shrugged. He didn't know. There was nothing to know about.

The other ranger had his hands on his hips as he kicked his black chukkas in the scrap. "This is just a damn shame. That's all I can say. The whole thing. Just a goddamn shame. You gotta wonder who made God so mad that he would destroy the entire coast."

The Coast Guard buzzed low overhead. Karl covered his ears and looked up to watch the gray chopper swoop by. He felt a slight wash from the blades.

"Don't know why they think they gotta fly so low," shouted the ranger with the glasses.

"Lookin' for floaters." The ranger with the chukkas continued to kick away at the junk.

"They can't do nothin' now." The ranger with the glasses left them perched on his head and shielded his eyes with his hand as he turned to look out to sea. He turned back to Karl. "Anybody else been by here?"

Karl shook his head no. He hadn't seen anyone since before the evacuation. The

night he had messed up on the line and Chef yelled at him. When he ran away and hid on the Pier. Karl hoped he wasn't the one God was mad at for being such a screw up. He hadn't meant to. Riley said he would protect him if something went wrong.

After Chef had kicked him off the line, Karl hid out alone on a wooden bench near the fish cleaning station at the end of the pier. He watched the sun get low in the southwest, slowly being erased by the first edge of clouds preceding the storm. The three-quarter sun shimmered shiny on the slick skin of a school of dolphin rolling their way east in the growing surf. Karl wished that he were a dolphin. Everybody said they were smart and he had never seen a dolphin with a too-big head. If he were a dolphin, all he would have to do is swim and nobody would be yelling at him for dropping his tongs on the kitchen floor or firing this and firing that and freezing up and standing quivering while someone shouted that he needed to get the fuck off the line. Karl thought the dolphin had no idea how good they had it.

“Karl, your choice of beer down here sucks.”

Karl had been too busy thinking about being a fish. He hadn't heard Riley coming down the pier. Karl started at the voice.

“You rednecks have two kinds of beer to choose from, Bud and Bud Light.” Riley had a six-pack in his hand. “In Minneapolis I can find Dixie any time I want. You can't get it here. Here we are, right in the Heart of Dixie, and there's no fuckin' Dixie.” Riley tore a can of beer from its plastic ring and handed it to Karl. He tore another can loose and set the rest of the beer and himself on the bench next to Karl. Riley popped the beer open and took a long drink.

Karl opened his beer. He didn't like it much. He would have rather had a coke. But he sipped his beer to show Riley his gratitude.

"Got kind of slow and Chef cut me. I think people must be leaving town. Sorry things got so fucked up for you during service. Chef was more pissed at me, not you so much." Riley stood up and leaned forward on the guardrail at the end of the pier. Dusk was turning purplish like a bruise and the timers on the large lights over the pier popped on. Riley turned to Karl. "Look at me, Karl. What am I you think, one-thirty, one thirty-five tops, right? I played violin all the way through school. And look at these fucking glasses. I've been getting my ass kicked most of my life, just like you." Riley finished his beer and tore another from the plastic pack that sat on the bench.

Karl stared at Riley. He thought that Riley was too tough and too smart for anybody to pick on. He had tattoos and cursed all the time. Smart guys like Riley were usually able to wriggle away from trouble. Karl could never think fast enough to get away from it.

"When I went to cooking school I found out I was pretty fucking good." The wind off the gulf had picked up and Riley had to speak louder. "I could throw down against anybody. I learned that as long as I was in the kitchen, I could kick anybody's ass. Hey, you want another beer?" Riley tossed the second empty Bud can like a basketball into a garbage container near the fish cleaning station.

Karl shook his head no. He had only taken a sip from the can that was getting warm in his hand and he knew he wasn't going to have anymore.

Riley took a third beer from the plastic that had held it. He tore the empty rings open. "You gotta do this, Karl. This plastic shit falls in the water and you haven't

broken it up, some pelican will get his beak caught in it and he'll starve and die." Riley finished tearing the four open rings and set the last of the beer down on the bench. He opened his and took a swallow. "I'm sorry about the whole line thing. It's my fault. I just thought you'd love working the line as much as I do. But you don't have to be on the line, Karl. You gotta great touch with that knife and you could kick anybody's ass on veg." Riley took a drink and looked out at the noisy sea. "You're fucking awesome on veg."

The ranger with the chukkas was still kicking around the pieces of Nolan's that were left in the sand. He kicked at the crusted, upside down china cap, turning it on its side. "I loved this place. Best damn soft-shell crab ever."

"You look a little shaky, son. You okay?" the other ranger asked Karl. "You know, they're serving sandwiches and handing out water up by Souvenir City, or what used to be Souvenir City. Looks like you could use a sandwich."

Karl didn't know what he could use right now. He didn't have anything. He couldn't find his knife, Nolan's was gone and Riley had told him that night on the pier that he was going to San Francisco. He was leaving that night, he said. Riley told Karl no one seemed to know exactly where the storm was going to hit, but he wasn't going to wait for things to go to hell. He said some place in San Francisco had invited him to trail for a couple weeks to see how he liked working there. Riley said Chef was cool with it. It had been about a year down here and it was time to move on. He said Chef would hold his job in case things didn't work out. Its all good, Riley told him. He said he just had to get all of his gear together back at the restaurant. Karl watched Riley grab the

plastic around the last two cans of beer. Riley said he would stop by Karl's trailer later before he left town. He wanted to make sure he said goodbye. Karl felt a pat on his shoulder and turned to watch Riley walk back up the Pier to Nolan's.

"We gotta go up the beach a ways," said the ranger, lowering his sunglasses back over his eyes. "We can give you a ride as far as the Pink Pony. Standin' out here in the sun with all this crap ain't doing you no good."

Karl thought that he would take the ride. His hands shook. He was feeling woozy. Karl was feeling worse thinking about Riley going away. He felt about as bad as he had when he got kicked off the line. He thought Riley would be mad. When people got mad at Karl they got mean. But Riley didn't and now he had left and Karl felt sick.

"What the hell?" shouted the ranger in the chukka boots. He crouched down next to a glimmer of silver in the sand. "I was just kickin' around and this thing turned up." The ranger reached for the shining piece of metal.

Karl hoped it was his knife. If it was the Wusthof, he could cut veg again and Riley told him he was fucking awesome when he was on veg. Karl watched the ranger pull the thing from the restaurant rubble. It wasn't the knife. It looked like a bent spoon.

"Could be an ID or something," said the ranger, turning it over in his hand.

"Anybody working at Nolan's with the initials MDC?"

Karl swayed. His guts felt like how the dead jellyfish looked. He lost his balance and he felt himself starting to crash into the junk. The Chuck Taylor on his left foot planted itself on broken brick. The ranger with the sunglasses reached out to steady him.

"Like I said, standin' out here in this heat 'n all ain't no good. Here, let me help you." He cupped his hand under Karl's elbow.

The Guard flew over again, blades whapping loudly. It gave Karl a moment to get his bearings. He watched the shadow of the chopper scuttle east across the ravaged shore. He got his CT's planted together. Karl was glad he was wearing them, the shoes would give him some protection. He took his elbow from the grip of the ranger, turned, and began walking down the mottled sand away from Nolan's.

"Hey there, son," said the sunglassed ranger. "I thought you were riding back up with us? Not a good idea to go down there."

Karl walked faster. His eyes were focused on the soft curling water that pulsed in and out on the torn up beach, like he was expecting something to be delivered up.

The chukka-ranger had gotten to his feet. He began to chase after Karl. "Hey, chief, you gotta stop! That water ain't fit for nobody right now."

Karl ran, his head bobbing back and forth, his palsied hands pumping him forward. His Bama ball cap had jarred loose and flew from his head, landing behind him joining the rest of the storm's litter. The Chuck Taylor on his right foot was the first to splash into the dirty jade of the gulf. Then the other shoe hit and he tumbled wide-eyed into the sea. Karl kept his eyes open. There were things in there he needed to find.

