

The sixth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2018

‘The Glass Kitchen’

by Jane Cammack

The judges for 2018...
Bill Bryson & Lorraine Pascale



‘The Glass Kitchen’

I am watching. From my glass kitchen I can see every table. I can tell from the hunch of the shoulders, the nod of a head if our diners are enjoying their meal. The restaurant is small with a regular clientele and we will customise our menu to suit.

“Table four wants chorizo with his carbonara not bacon.”

I cover the crispy bacon with cling film and dissect the chorizo.

I know what it's like to live life underground. I have worked for years prepping and cooking in basement kitchens where head chefs throw knives and abuse. I am a mole, rarely coming up for air, rarely seeing the light, until now.

I feel exposed in the glass kitchen when I first arrive. It is strange to work in an area lit up with state-of-the-art lighting like a stage. We are in full view, so the peel and mess has to be cleared away, the work surfaces mirror-clean before the audience

takes their seats.

Transparency has brought calm to our culinary stage. Like professional dancers we know our moves. We perform them with balletic poise, with mute precision. We are artists working delicately – sharp knives in place of brushes, squeezey bottles and foams instead of palette and paint. I have banked memories of flavour and I will add them to my cooking like the colour Van Gogh applied to his canvas. I know oils and their smoke points and the different anatomical properties of various cuts of meat. I create sauces with texture, density and flavour.

I often glance at the people sitting at the tables and imagine what kind of lives they lead. A group of fledgling boys comes in quite early every Thursday. They wear suits and ties so they must work for a company in town. By the latter part of the week they need a good meal, something to remind them of home. The boys are at that precocial age, where their behaviour is unpredictable. They are still unsure of their place in society, still testing their wings. The small stocky one's a smart Alec who doesn't stop talking. Tweedledum and Tweedledee snigger at his snide remarks and there's a fourth boy who is beanpole tall and seems uneasy in their presence. I see him undoing the top button of his shirt and looking uncomfortable when the smart Alec tries it on.

“He wants chicken noodle soup without the chicken,” Phil, one of the waiters tells me.

I raise my eyebrows.

“The two side-kicks want fillet steak extra well-done.”

We cook the steaks until they look like tree bark after a forest fire. The meat splinters and they say it's the best they have ever had.

I am used to dealing with problems. A young couple last week ordered champagne to celebrate their engagement and complained it was too fizzy. Another boy said the ice in his water was too cold. A girl, with spiky mascara eyes, sent her whole sea bass back because it was staring at her. I tell the waiters to smile and find a solution.

Thursday is my favourite night for regulars. Table 11, in the most dimly lit corner of the restaurant, is where three men meet over bread rolls and carafes of wine while they decide on their starters and main courses. The leader of the group, ‘just call me Benji,’ has a scar snaking across one cheek, from his chin to his left ear. All three men have thin, hard mouths and dangerous eyes. Their conversation stops when a waiter approaches. A stray word picked up by chance could bring trouble. We see them huddle closer between courses, heads bent, ears almost touching. I crimp the edge of my pastry tart and imagine how pleased their wives must be to have a night off. They'll have their feet up, stretched out on the sofa, in charge of the remote control. The men order brandy and coffee and Benji pays cash – no names, no paper trail.

I sometimes wonder if it's possible to tell a wrong 'un from their face? Are there genetic markers? I often consider how an evil or perverse mind could affect how a person looks. I read somewhere that a software has been created in China that can identify a criminal from a photograph. 'Just call me Benji,' has an upper lip that curves, a flattened nose and close-set eyes. His jacket has a bulge on one side. Something large must be tucked in the inside pocket. I stir my sauce and imagine him pulling a gun or taking a knife to Des, our front-of-house manager. I have wondered what I would do if there was trouble in the restaurant. I have the tools – the knives and blow torches – but would I use them?

The solo diners who come to our restaurant have given me a sense of purpose. In places like Tokyo, dining alone doesn't seem to be a problem. There are noodle restaurants near train stations filled with rows of 'salary men,' with tired faces and loosened ties. Des and I have created an area with a series of higher tables and stools, where they can eat and read and not feel isolated.

My favourite diner comes in on a Thursday. She looks scared and fragile and I find myself wondering about her life. Our cutlery seems too heavy for her small wrists. I see her delicately holding a piece of bread between long fingers and I wonder why she dines alone.

Phil, the waiter notices me glancing at her as I caramelize the sugar coating to my tart. "She's beautiful," he says to me, "and charming. Pity ... she's wearing a wedding ring."

Of course she is, but where is her husband? He could be away on business every Thursday. Or does she work away from home during the week and return on a Friday evening?

"Do you know much about her?" I ask Phil.

"Not really. I try to chat, but she's quiet ... sad I'd say. I witter on about things and she smiles, but I can tell she's just being polite. She doesn't really want to speak. I see her looking at photos on her phone, but I haven't managed to see them. She turns the phone over when I arrive with her food."

Her clothes are expensive. She parks her huge car where the commis chefs go outside to smoke, so money can't be a problem. I wonder if there is some sadness in her life. Sometimes when I glance at her she looks up and our eyes meet, conveying a world of meaning. Then I see her shoulders sigh and I feel a little ashamed.

It's a Thursday, humid and airless, when Des calls me away from the glass kitchen and into the back room. Three police officers and a plainclothes detective are waiting to speak to us. Their faces are cold and emotionless. We stand together in the storeroom and they indicate that I should close the door.

"My name is Hammond." The plainclothes detective shows me his card and a search warrant. "I'm afraid to tell you that in about ten minutes from now, your restaurant will be surrounded. We have to make an arrest."

"Arrest one of the customers?"

His eyes flick skywards and I regret my question.

“Can’t you wait until they finish their meal and leave?” I say. And my mind starts whirring, scanning the restaurant like a CCTV camera.

“I’m afraid the nature of this crime means that we can’t wait. The suspect cannot be allowed to slip away this time or try to get rid of any evidence.”

The camera in my head zooms in on Benji and his friends sitting close, whispering at their table. I knew they were up to no good.

“You look shocked.” Hammond says to me. “It must be difficult to imagine a psychopath dining in your restaurant every week.” He puts a hand on my arm. “But don’t beat yourself up about it. Psychopaths are usually grounded people. They look and behave like any one of us. They fake emotion. Their superficial charm makes them seem normal, but underneath they are pathological liars who like to con and manipulate others. They lack remorse and empathy. They feel only severe emotional detachment.”

“You sound as if you are quite an expert on the subject.”

“I’ve met a few,” Hammond says. “Locked a fair few away.”

“Are you arresting all three or just Benji, the ring leader?” I ask.

Hammond looks at me and shoves his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “What makes you think we’ve come for Benji-boy Ramona?”

I want to say that I can read a face for signs of danger and

deceit. Instead I mumble something about the wads of cash in their pockets, the fact that they never pay by card. And Hammond gives me a weary, knowing smile and tells me they are second-hand car dealers.

“Their dealings can be described as dodgy,” he says, “but they haven’t committed any murders yet, as far as we know.”

“Murder,” Des and I repeat.

My lips press tight. I feel tired and empty as if someone has sunk a hand into my chest and ripped out my heart. It’s the woman they have come for, who looks sweet and lost and vulnerable. I feel sick at the thought of the attractive lady being led away, given the third degree by these gentlemen.

“The world’s a hard place. People you least expect, do bad things.” Hammond says as if shining a light upon my thoughts.

“So sweet ... so normal,” I say.

Hammond grunts. “You’d be surprised. Some get married without feeling any emotion towards their partner or kids.”

I don’t want to watch the arrest from my glass kitchen, but I have to show the police officers the way. My head feels light and I bite my cracked lips. Disappointment is unpleasant.

When the police officers make their move they are fast. I see the woman start and throw down her phone. Her eyes widen, she looks surprised. I expect her to pick up her bag and make a run for the door but she remains quite still.

And I watch as the police officers move past her table to where the four boys are sitting. Tweedledum and

Tweedledee cry out in surprise, the smart Alec starts shouting and the tall lanky boy, who seems the kindest and most normal of the four, makes a run for the door. One of the police officers grabs him and there is a struggle. People jump up from their tables and dive out of the way. The boy is lashing out and kicking but the officer gets an arm round his throat, while another police officer cuffs his hands.

“I didn’t want to take the car. The others dared me. They said I was a coward and had to prove myself,” he shouts as they lead him out through the front door of the restaurant. More officers appear to take smart Alec, Tweedledum and Tweedledee away to be questioned.

Hammond is standing next to me and we walk outside. He has become energetic and amiable now they have seized their man. “What name did he go by when he came here?”

“The short stocky one paid with his card and the others gave him cash.”

“We think his real name is Mr Kit Langtry, but he has about six pseudonyms.”

“What was he shouting?” I ask.

“I didn’t hear. Probably a load of rubbish to throw us off the scent.”

“He doesn’t look the type to do anything wrong. I would never have guessed,” I say.

“Of course you wouldn’t. Tall and good looking, full of superficial charm. Likes to meet older women on dating websites. He charms them, moves in, takes their money, then

poisons them. We’ve been looking for him for quite a while. It was Alice who tipped us off.” He nods towards the sweet, vulnerable woman who dines alone. “Her husband was one of us – a plainclothes detective. A good man. What a waste of a great career – killed a month ago trying to stop a guy from stealing a car. The car-thief-murderer is the other person we need to catch.”

The police leave and I feel numb. Des and I apologise to the diners. Free drinks and pastries are served to every table. I take Alice a glass of wine.

“Sorry,” she says.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“My husband ...”

I put my hand gently on her arm. “I know. DCI Hammond told me.”

“Well, I knew they had been looking for this psychopath for a long time.”

“How did you recognise him?”

“I didn’t actually recognise him.” She shifts uncomfortably on her stool. “Do you remember last Thursday when the boys asked for a bigger table?”

I nod.

“There were two girls sitting with the boys.”

I nod again. I remember them, broad flat faces and nervous giggles.

“I heard them whispering when they were in the bathroom.

They said the tall lanky boy had done something bad and was scared the police were going to catch up with him.”

“Did they mention murder?”

Her lips twist. She frowns. “No.”

“Well, whatever the outcome is, they need to question the boy. You did the right thing.”

Alice gives a nervous smile.

I am the last to leave and lock up. I have packed my things into a holdall. I turn the keys in the lock and take one last look through the window of the restaurant. Shame. I always enjoy the excitement of the chase and she was a particularly pretty widow. Alice has had a lucky escape. The police have their car thief, their hit and run driver. They came close to the real Kit Langtry, a little too close for comfort. I have a new passport, a new name and I must cross the sea and get far away before the interrogation begins. Before they realise.

