

CHIPS

Frankie peeled off her gloves and dumped them in the bin. She looked down at her hands, pale from a seven hour shift trapped in blue plastic.

Marjoram. Black garlic. Fish stock.

Where other 17 year olds had faded nightclub stamps, Frankie had scribbled ingredients in biro. Things she'd never see at work. Things she could only get at the Polish shop on the corner or in the 'Big Sainsburys'.

Frankie pulled off her hair-net and gradually, as if in slow motion, her matted curls fell to her shoulders. There was almost no point in washing her hair every night, she thought. Might as well just wring out the grease and go to bed. The smell of stale fat never really went away anyway.

She'd wanted to be a chef since she was 12. When her mum left, it had fallen to her to cook for her brother and sister. At first she'd combine whatever was left in the fridge - a bit of bacon, some cheese and a splash of milk and *voilà* – you had a decent pasta sauce. Frankie called it her 'bit of everything' meal, but really it was her 'all we've got' meal. Eventually, her siblings' approval (and Dad letting her take over the weekly shop) led to more ambitious attempts based on the recipe books she had found in the kitchen.

Her mum's name, Katherine, was written in the first page of each, and her favourite recipes had the corners turned down, with annotations and additions noted in the margins. When Dad threw the cookbooks out, Frankie would close her eyes during class, picturing the stroganoffs and paellas in her mind, and try to jot down the ingredients she could remember on her hand.

She had applied for a waitressing job at the local Italian, but the staff there were expected to work for tips. They'd offered her some trial shifts washing the dishes, but to Frankie, that was like getting a job at a theme park and never going on any of the rides. She wanted to work with the food, not just flush the remnants of it down the sink. So, even if what she served at 'Rock and Roe' (or 'Frying Nemo' as Frankie called it) had as much nutritional content as a clothes peg, at least at the chip shop she was *cooking*.

Catering college was out of the question, but Frankie thought if she started at the bottom, and worked hard, she could get the experience she needed to work in a proper restaurant one day. Not Gulliano's or Taverna on the high street - who churned out over-cooked 2-for-1 carbonara and cheap wine to the same revolving cast of undiscerning locals - but a proper restaurant, in London, where diners knew the difference between a jus and a jar of Dolmio.

One day, she thought. But for now, shovelling chips into paper bags and dipping battered fish into boiling fat every weekend would have to do.

Sanj called it 'soul food for white people'. But Sanj had been frying chips for nearly ten years and Frankie reckoned his brain was probably fogged with vinegar fumes.

He was the one who served her back when she'd nip in after school for a sneaky bag of chips. Rushing to finish them before she got home, she'd stash the paper in the wheelie bin outside, innocently arriving on the doorstep clean handed, ready for Mum's old favourite - potato dauphinoise. Back then, she'd whine about having the 'weird creamy potatoes' *again*, but now, Frankie would gladly swap every chip, every saveloy, every pickled egg she ever ate, for one mouthful of that dish.

Sanj was very happy to have her help out at the weekends, said she added a touch of glamour to the place. Vaguely offensive, Frankie thought, but it was far worse when the girls from school would descend on a Friday to make fun of her hair net. Or when the 11pm crowd, already filled with four to five pints of IPA, came to add oil and vinegar to the heady cocktail already brewing inside their stomachs.

There was no more satisfying sight than a drunk man inhaling fat, salty chips at quarter past eleven on a Saturday night, Frankie thought. Like nourishment for a damp soul. Head over bag, breathing in the steam like it was smelling salts, reviving them long enough for either a fight or a quickie with whatever lucky soul was waiting for them at home.

And then were the regulars – or 'the fam' as Sanj insisted on calling them. Like Colin, all big puffa jacket and corduroys, who'd count out the money for the whole order in grubby twenty and fifty pence pieces.

'Plenty of ketchup please,' he'd say, every Friday night.

'It's on the counter Colin,' she'd tell him, every Friday night.

And then she'd watch him jerk the unlabelled red bottle over the pile of chips, until they were so slick that they slipped off the little wooden fork as Colin jabbed at them fruitlessly. She wondered if he even *liked* chips, as their only purpose seemed to be as a vessel to deliver mouthfuls of tomato sauce to his lips.

'Thanks love,' he'd smile as she cupped the coins into her hand and dropped them individually into their corresponding compartments in the till.

Then there was Sarah, sour-faced Sarah who'd been in her brother's year at school, picking up the same order every night: a cheese burger for her mum, (beef patty, slice of bright yellow cheese and a handful of the chopped lettuce that was always topped up rather than replenished) and a chicken burger for Sarah ('the healthy option' she'd say). Sometimes Frankie would give her a free portion of chips – 'something for the walk home' she'd tell her.

And of course, there was Tomasz. Tomasz who came in after his shift at the building site for a large chips and saveloy, washed down with a can of own-brand cola and peppered with clumsy flirtation.

'How's your boyfriend?' he'd asked her that night.

'Piss off,' she'd said with a sigh.

Tomasz knew very well that her boyfriend had moved to London for a job in media sales. He'd found a flatshare in Bethnal Green, and the odds of Frankie joining him seemed to be rocketing in inverse proportion to his increasingly scant Whatsapp messages.

'He's a big shot banker in the city now Tomasz!' Sanj had yelled at him from the fryer. 'So yeah, piss off!'

'See you next week then,' Tomasz said, shooting her a hopeful smile as he stuck a five pound note in her hand.

At a quarter to twelve, Frankie's shift was finally over. She could unchain her bike, cycle home and dream of a world filled with saffron, white asparagus and choux pastry. A world with no Colin and his pockets of change that never quite added up, no Sarah and her healthy burger. No Tomasz and his limp saveloy. And definitely no chips.

L'Artiste, just off Regents Street, was the perfect restaurant. In fact, a recent review in the Times had literally called them “parfait” and insisted that no one was truly alive until they’d tasted their deconstruction of a poire belle Hélène. Frankie was incredibly lucky to have a job there. It had been four years of hard work. Four years of saving. Sure, she was only a back waiter, promoted from kitchen porter that summer, but another year of hard work and she could maybe get to commis chef. And she’d already learnt so much - where to place the soup spoon, how to carry three plates on one arm, how to smile without smiling *too* much.

And the food. The duck breast with fig coulis. The cassolette of morels mushrooms. Sometimes on her break Frankie would just watch the chefs, their hands blurring as they chopped, their eyes darting from one steaming pot to another, seemingly not settling long enough to take in any information. The Head Chef, Jason Manec, insisted all the staff - even the escuelerie - had sampled every dish. “You cannot sell a dish if you have no idea how it tastes!” he told them, dramatically.

Mostly though, Frankie’s job had been filling bread baskets and removing empty plates. But tonight was going to be different. Samuel had called in sick, and Frankie would take his place out front. By 7pm, the restaurant was in full flow.

‘Four top on table six,’ the Maître, Gregory, said, quickly and quietly. ‘Same on two.’

‘Okay,’ Frankie thought to herself, practising her best non-smile as she approached table six. ‘You got this.’

As the four diners read out their orders dutifully from the menu, Frankie memorised them. No need for notes on hands now. She knew this menu off by heart.

‘And some sparkling water for the table?’ she asked.

‘Thanks,’ said one of the diners, without looking away from their companion.

‘I’ll be right back with that,’ Frankie said, rifling through the starter orders in her head, one duck, one crab ravioli, one scallop and one *pâté*.

But seventeen minutes later, as she carried the four plates back, her mind was suddenly blank. She'd memorised the order perfectly, but not who was having what.

She slowed her walk to the table, eyeing the diners on her approach. As she scanned the faces around table six, they seemed to blur into one. The two men wore crisp shirts, each in a very slightly different shade of pink. No ties, top button undone. The women, both slim with shoulder-length brown hair, suddenly looked interchangeable.

Frankie put the *pâté* down in front of the woman with the *slightly* longer hair, and hoped.

'Ah, sorry, crab is here,' the woman said, moving the plate across the table to her companion.

'I'm so sorry,' Frankie said. 'You must be the duck?'

'I'm the duck, that's right,' she said.

'And salmon for you sir, and your scallop sir,' she said, smiling at the men in turn.

'Other way round,' the lighter-pink-shirted man said, not unkindly.

Frankie smoothly slid the dishes into their correct places, remembered to stop smiling and, after asking if they needed anything else, made her way to table two. It was only when she was two feet away did she allow herself to blush. It had been a minor error, but a potentially fatal one if repeated.

At table two, she scanned the four diners. More crisp shirts. More off the shoulder black dresses and brown hair. As they began to reel off their orders, Frankie froze. It suddenly felt like the whole restaurant was starting to spin. Ingredients, dishes, faces – even memories – whirled around in her mind like plastic horses on a fairground carousel.

'I'll have the steak,' the marginally younger man said.

Frankie closed her eyes momentarily. As he spoke, she pictured Tomasz, selecting the biggest saveloy from the heater.

The man's partner choose the chicken. The 'healthy option', Frankie thought, just like Sarah. When the older male diner ordered the tomato

ratatouille, Frankie imagined him wearing Colin's puffa jacket, pockets jangling.

And his – wife, she guessed? – who had asked for the potato dauphinoise, Frankie named her *Katherine*.

Exactly 17 minutes later, Frankie delivered their orders, correctly, to the table, refilled their water glasses and made her way back to the pass.

The rest of the night seemed to pass in a moment. Dishes, which had previously existed to her only as pictures in her mum's cookbooks, were suddenly alive, balancing on her arms and inches from her mouth. She could smell the roast garlic puree, the glazed shallots and the apples still caramelising on the tarte tatin as she ferried plates to and from the pass, and that was almost as good as eating them.

By the end of service, she was exhausted when Gregory passed her a congratulatory shot of sambuca. As she put it to her lips and tipped her head back, she realised she'd eaten nothing since breakfast. Maybe she'd get some chips on the way home.