Story for performance #599
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Writer/s: Caroline Lee

He talks a lot, my Uncle Andy, mostly crap, especially in the kitchen. At work that is, not at home, 'cos I've never seen him at home. It seems that he likes to keep the two separate, work and home. He craps on about football or cricket or soccer, even the tennis if he gets desperate, if there's nothing else on. Well, not really the tennis, more the tennis commentators; the relative merits of John Alexander, Sandy Roberts and the much-maligned Jim Courier.

The other thing he loves to talk about is food, which is good, I guess, seeing as how he's a chef. He will talk for hours about, say, rabbit, where to buy it, how to choose it, how to skin it, and at least ten different ways to cook it. And it's pretty interesting. I got really excited about the Rabbit Provençale he described, I'd like to try that on my new flatmates, see if they baulk at country food cooked up all special like that. But if I want to talk to him about Mum; or about Wagga, about the things he used to get up to in Wagga when he was my age, like did he prefer the Arthurs Road swimming hole or the sunflower pool…nothing, he just clams up, won't say a word. It's weird. And I've never even met Suzie.

It upsets me. I mean I'm glad he gave me the job, really glad, because otherwise I would have ended up in the canneries for sure, but sometimes it seems as if he doesn't even remember what he's done, given his desperate young niece a foothold in the big city. It seems that to him I'm just another of the annoying, irritating, clumsy, useless but very occasionally worthwhile apprentices. Rachel, or 'R', as I'm slowly becoming. Never 'my niece,' or 'my sister's daughter.'

But when I get too lonely, or too sorry for myself, I make myself remember the bead of sweat.

One Friday night, we were all frantically scrabbling around the kitchen in the middle of service. Of course all the customers had come in at the same time, eight o'clock on the dot. Yes, they'd said they were coming at seven or at seven-thirty, or at eight-thirty, and instead, 28 of them, five tables, arrived at eight. It was a nightmare. And things kept going wrong. Of course. The glass washer in the bar broke down, at about seven, so the bar staff had to come in and out of the kitchen with racks of dirty glasses. The radiccio hadn't been washed properly and was full of grit and so piles and piles of it were being re-washed, and dried and put back in the fridge. We ran out of cotechino, so everyone was ordering steak. But there wasn't enough prepared and so Andy and I were squeezed at one end of the central bench, him slicing and me seasoning. He was swearing under his breath. His knife was really getting too blunt to do a good job and he got more and more frustrated until he slammed it down on the bench and reached up to the hooks above us and grabbed the cleaver. I didn't know what he thought he was going to be able to do with that. But I didn't get to see anyway because it was jammed on its hook and he just tugged and tugged, and swore and swore, trying to force it off, but it wouldn't come. The rack up there was swaying and swaying, like those boats you see in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race, bits flying all over the place.

And then it happened. One of the bolts holding the rack to the ceiling came out, with an almighty crack, and the entire rack, with saucepans, frypans, woks, knives and pretty much anything stainless steel you can imagine, dropped right towards my head.

I ducked, I think I did, or tried to, and kind of got stuck, but it didn't matter, because Andy somehow let go of the cleaver and grabbed the bar of the rack as it fell towards me and held it, held it six inches above my head.

When all that metal finally stopped vibrating, in the moment of unimaginable silence that followed, I turned my face to look at him. His body was stretched out as far as it could go, and his arm…I could see the muscle on his forearm shaking.

As I watched, a single bead of sweat squeezed out of the skin on his wrist and fell on my cheek. All at once I wanted to cry, but you can't, you can't cry in a kitchen.

He saw me, looked at me very seriously and said, 'You can keep that, kid.'

I laughed, and so did everyone else in the kitchen. Everyone started talking. And then he said, low, so no-one else heard it. 'A reminder. We look after each other. This is the family. Right here.'

It's good, when I go back to Wagga. I love seeing Mum, and my mates. I don't tell them of course, but I love it even more when I leave, when I get onto the train and head back to the family. Yet another temporary family maybe, but it's my own. I hold it, inside myself, inside that tiny drop of sweat.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Caroline Lee.