

THIS IS HOME

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LEAMINGTON

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Down at the potwash (Keto's blues)

I don't even like people.

Leave me alone at the potwash, tell me what to do.

Italy, Ghana, Nigeria, Angola, Spain, Hungary, Greece. These are the countries we come from. A variety of millenary cultures, all squeezed in the same underground, mice-infested kitchen. Hardly ever seen, we are the kitchen porters.

Up above, behind plates of lobster tail medallions on champagne mousse, suit-and-tie business folk hold pompous chats with stats and acronyms. Inebriated, they whisper confessions of extra-marital *affaires*, pronounced *à la française*. Food is arranged as abstract art framed for a social media post, because the camera precedes the fork.

The Rêverie.

The sort of place where the head chef earns five grand a month with a complimentary three-bedroom flat in central London. At least, according to kitchen hearsay.

Down here, adjacent to the chef's area, is our potwash with its water gun. Two massive sinks, resembling metal craters – almost never empty – always calling for company: day and night, twenty-four-seven, as we've learnt to say these days. On the right, the dishwasher pass, grey metallic beast: at the same time, the KPs' best friend and nemesis. The beast swallows blue trays filled with dirty crockery and regurgitates everything a few seconds later: plates now so shiny, we see our faces reflected in them. That's when the machine is our best friend. The fight begins when the machine gets overheated or breaks down. It grumbles and stalls, causing blue trays to queue up on the belt, while plates and glasses pile up all around us and the feeling of betrayal kicks in.

All we can do is press random buttons and hope the machine stops being temperamental.

Tonight, I am working with Keto, a 40 year-old dad from Ghana. He's been stuck in this place for six years and I am having a hard time believing it. In fact, I think he must be lying or suffering from some sort of time perception disorder. As a newbie, I can't imagine anybody being able to survive down here for more than three months, and – quite bizarrely – I struggle to even picture what a *Rêverie* kitchen porter veteran does in his spare time.

In spite of that, Keto is a comforting presence here. Having him behind my shoulders makes me feel safer. He's got a shiny bald head on top of a gangly body. His smile is as big as his jaw and a set of white teeth gives him the look of a jolly TV presenter. As always, we greet each other with a handshake, or rather a plastic glove shake, and he towers over me and says: "*Carlos*, my man, I am so glad you are here! Today is busy."

See, Keto is the only guy I don't mind mispronouncing my name. It's CARLO – C-A-R-L-O: screw the "s"! Anyway, I don't have time to correct him as I'm a bit confused about what he's just said, pleased too, but in need of a clarification.

"Why are you glad I'm here?"

"Cause you are good. You know the other guys? They are all lazy bums. Take Jacek, for instance, or Sergio." He shakes his head and reiterates his point, "Sergio is rubbish."

"Can't deny that, Keto," I say. "Can't deny that." And by that I mean: yes, they are all lazy bums, but no, I am not that good. I've just developed the skill of pretending to be hard-working: it gets you through a lot.

At a closer look, I'd be exposed in the blink of an eye. I don't change the water in the sink very often, so I rinse old pans in a weird oily liquid verging on slime, and don't even ask me where we keep new sponges or why the cookware should be left to dry upside down.

I am at the potwash while Keto whistles catchy tunes to the machine, maybe hoping for good luck. The air is hot and dense, I

sweat underneath my blue uniform, and I have a feeling the uniform itself is sweating too in solidarity. I roll up my sleeves and stretch my arms out, hearing shouts coming from the kitchen. "Two chicken, one seabass, one ravioli, come on guys! Fast, fast, fast!"

"Carlos, I'll go pick up the dirty pots," says Keto. And off he goes amidst the shouting and yelling. A twelve-square-metre place for ten cooks. Looks like somebody hasn't done the maths.

I can't see him, but I know what Keto is doing right now. He's sneaking through narrow passages, brushing against the ovens, almost burning his sleeve after having lost his balance next to the big hob for giant cauldron-sized pasta pots. Sweat and rush, pick up that dirty pot, shove the ladle in, hold it tight against your chest, carry it like a heavy metal baby.

"Back! back! back! baaaack!" the cooks shout in your face, in your ear, while the other ear is assaulted by metallic clangs and chinks. "How can you be so slow, Keto!" shouts the head chef. "How long does it take you to carry that stuff?"

In a couple of weeks, a reprimand like that will make Keto quit his job. Now, I can't help but picture his face: he isn't smiling anymore, head tilted to one side, furrowed brow, his lips murmuring inaudible insults. He speeds up and comes back to pot-wash land.

"There you go, my man." He throws the big pot in the pot-wash and the ladle spins in it, all over the edge, like a grey dirty planet. "That stupid man. That stupid, silly man," I heard him mumbling on his way back to the machine.

I start spraying the inside of the pot with the water gun, water spurting all over the place, my uniform is already a dark blue around my stomach. The fabric gets stuck on my skin, but I can't change it now. I can't change any of it.

There is one rule here: one shift, one uniform. I put the pot on the shelf, ladle in a metal crate. *Everything has a place*, the chef says. How many more times are they going to be used by the end of the shift? I bet three or four.

For a moment – a feeble second of stillness – I stand there,

holding the water gun in my hand, wondering about today. In my head, only fantasies: a shower, shampoo, a fresh, crisp duvet. And I am having Caulfieldesque thoughts. Where do the ducks go when the lake gets all frozen over? And my version is: where do the mice go when we work, while the cooks cook, and the dishwashers wash dishes?

I picture mice underneath the cabinets, waiting for a bread-crumble to fall from above, like biblical rain, an evening feast. In the dark they sniff with trembling whiskers, while tiny liquid eyes dream of the freedom of an empty kitchen. What do the mice think? Do they have preferences? Do they like the bakery area better than butchery? Funny how, when you are dirty, smelly and constantly peckish you start resonating with mice, you get to like them even, and if you don't see them for long you sort of miss them.

My thoughts fade away when I feel Keto's hand on my shoulder, bringing me back to reality. "*Carlos*, my man, I am busy at the machine." I glance back and notice three piles of dirty dishes on blue trays, ready for the wash. "Now I can't go round picking up stuff from the kitchen." Keto says. "You'll have to, my man."

"Shit! Sorry, got distracted."

And off I go.

Hot steam, sizzling pans, volcanic temperatures. I worry that I'll roast faster than the salmon fillets in the ovens. I speed up in the kitchen, agile, followed by the head chef's eyes. His bearded face always seems impatient to say something. Tense jaw, tense cheekbones, his nostrils trembling as if he were about to sneeze.

There is a lot more to pick up this time, no big pot nor giant ladles, but a whole set of frying pans, from the size of a table tennis racket to the size of a lorry tyre. I pile everything up in a plastic crate, throw some wooden spoons in and a whisk, and *oh wait*, this chopping board too. It feels like a treasure hunt, dirty tools appear in every corner of the kitchen. Some look like they have been there since the opening in 2003. The plastic handles have multiple burn marks and the metal hosts brown rusty spots, as if it were infected by a kitchen disease.

"One risotto, one pie, two scampi on three," the head chef shouts.

"YES, CHEF!"

It's the soldier-cook response. Their faces are getting redder and the sleeves of their white and blue striped uniform could not be more rolled up, covering now just the top of their shoulders.

I carry my tray full of pots with the help of my hips, one-two, one-two, and when I get into the potwash area I almost trip over. The weight is dragging me down, making just a hunchbacked KP of me. Almost out of breath, I throw the tray next to the sink, shove it against the wall and, two by two, I dunk the pans in the water. Some are still hot, the sound they make when in contact with the surface of my soapy water resembles a quick, sporadic gust of wind hitting the back of the ears. I hear Matias, one of the runners, bringing back dirty cutlery and empty plates from the hall.

"Need some more clean plates, please. Fast!"

Keto throws the cutlery in a deep transparent bucket filled with hot water and yellow soap, *splash!* I turn around and see the water becoming brownish, small bits of fish and meat floating up to the surface, while Keto is muttering "fast... fast... They want everything fast. Why don't *they* wash their stupid plates for once?" He sticks the plates in a blue tray and shoves it with one arm into the machine.

In the meantime, some cooks bring me more oily pans, they want them rinsed quickly, ready to be used right away. I don't even see their faces, there's no time for that. Pans appear from behind, underneath my nose, or in my hands. All I can hear is a voice – sometimes a man, sometimes a lady. "Could you wash this, please? I need it now!" Or "my friend, this one! Please, fast!" And I can finally understand Keto's frustration. Who am I? I don't think I look like a robot. *Scrape-spray-give it back*, that's the mantra. I bet some of my sweat drops fall into the pans, but it doesn't matter, They'll be dried up by the cook's white cloth in a fragment of a second. All of the above, just like Groundhog Day, over and over again. Only worse.

I dunk my arm too deep into the sink and hot water slips into my glove. Keto hears my grunt and shouts: "All good, my man?" As I am raising my hand up, water drips all over my sleeve before I take the glove off. Like a dog with wet fur, I shake my hand to cool it down. *Breathe, chill, one more hour, just one more hour...*

Then, the head chef comes in and looks around with the fierce eyes of a sergeant. I can see his eyes getting smaller, almost invisible, swallowed in wrinkles.

"This kitchen is filthy!" he shouts. "Look at that!" He is pointing at a rusty brown stain underneath the machine.

"Sorry, Chef, very busy. We'll do it *asap!* *Asap!*" Keto says in the tone of a 10-year-old child, blushing out of embarrassment. For a moment, I picture young Keto running on a street in Ghana, kicking a ball made of old leather. He must have been the tallest kid in the village, I think.

The head chef takes a deep inhale. "When it's quiet, I want you to deep clean this kitchen. Deep clean! Ok?"

"YES, CHEF!"

And I am standing there wearing one glove, doing nothing. He must think I am just slacking off, so I put my wet glove back on and dunk my hands in the sink, once again. I don't know where we keep the new gloves, but it doesn't matter. Nothing really matters when we have one hour to go. But I can already see my wrinkly wet hand at the end of the shift, the palm all white and squishy.

As soon as the chef goes back to the kitchen, I look at Keto, just in time to read his lips: "Stupid idiot, you stupid idiot. Can't you see we are busy?" I wish I could join him in a nice, satisfying rant, but I remember I am buried in dirty pans and pots. I am about to repeat the kitchen porter mantra once again, when the sink pipe gets clogged. The drain seems to be regurgitating brown-yellow slime, which should be a combination of grease, oil, burned steak, chicken skin, and God knows what else.

I crouch down, unscrew the sink pipe and collect all that vomit looking mud into a bucket. Of course, I do it with my eyes closed, I mean *really* screwed shut, and I dream of Greenwich

Park. I am lying in the grass, sun beating on my cheeks, earphones on and this restaurant hidden somewhere behind the skyscrapers, far, far away. I am off.

I screw the pipe back and throw the contents of the bucket into the bin. The air feels dense and heavy, it's got a texture, I'd say even a taste. It smells of burned butter and window cleaner liquid. It gets into my nostrils but I manage to close the bin before I sneeze.

Less than ten minutes later the bag is full. I tie it up and lift it, praying it won't break in the middle of my journey to the rubbish room – a two-square-metre box of cement full of black bags and mice. Fast, fast, fast. The faster I go, the less probability of ending up with a mountain of leftover food blocking the aisle. As soon as I open the rubbish room door, a bunch of mice sneak away and hide in the narrowest places between bags. They all squeak in fear, not knowing that I am just giving them more food. They should be grateful.

I throw the bag in and close the door almost simultaneously in what must have been a nanosecond. Boom! Clack! Back to the potwash. It's my lucky day, the black bag only dripped a little bit, marking the aisle with a long, yellow trail. Not my problem, the night shift guys can deal with that. Or that's what I hope for, but I'm not very optimistic given that the night shift guys are Sergio and Jacek. I smile, thinking of Keto's words. "They are all lazy bums."

Twenty minutes to go. I can finally make use of a word I've learnt this week: knackered. I feel its meaning now. My legs ache, my back sore as if it had been the target of a tennis ball launcher for the whole shift. My elbows, knees and wrists are hot and swollen, overheated, temporary pieces implanted in my body that I'll need to replace before the next shift. Everything seems to be happening in slow motion, as if I were underwater. Lifting a pot is an endless move, Keto's words echo in my head (or in the room?) "Come on, *Carlos*, we're almost done."

All I can do is nod. I am not fit for this job, and I don't think I'll ever be. It's simple, fit people have a different job. Before I go,

there is one more rule I have to follow: all pots and tools have to be clean before the end of the shift. I gather the last whispers of energy down from my body and scrape a bit more, with a sponge resembling an old green mushroom. I spray the pan and the water sprays back into my face, but I don't really care. One more done, two left. Another done, one left. Keto sighs so loud it almost drowns out the sounds of the machine. "I am done, my man. I am done. Let me push this through, let me push this through..."

When I put the last pasta pot on the shelf everything trembles, the sound of a thunderbolt in open water. A vast sensation of freedom gives me goosebumps. "Keto," I shout. "I am done! I am out of here!"

"No, no, *Carlos*. We are done. I am sick of this, end of story!"

He comes over and pats my back, while I take off the gloves. As expected, my right hand is the hand of an eighty-year-old man.

"By the way, Keto, where can I leave my gloves?" I ask. "Yesterday I left them next to the sink and today they were gone..."

"Your gloves?" Keto says. "Throw them in the bin!"

"Throw them in the bin?" I am confused, and I can't help but look at the bin, so as to make sure that in Keto's vocabulary a bin is a bin, meaning a big container for rubbish.

"Of course," he nods. "I always throw them in the bin at the end of the shift."

"Why?"

"Cause if you leave them around, then the chef comes in and says: 'Look! Look how many gloves we have! How come we keep spending millions on gloves?!' So, what I do is... I throw them away!"

I am still confused, but I find myself smiling at him. Maybe I am so tired I can't really process what he's said. For a moment I hesitate and soon the hesitation turns into a chuckle. "Alright," I say, still holding a silly smile on my face, still holding the gloves.

"Let's go, my man. Come on," He grabs my gloves with a quick move and chucks them in the bin, *pam!* "See you next time,

Carlos. I am so hungry, gonna be home soon. Rice and meatballs today."

On my way up to the changing room I think that through once more. *"Cause you know the chef... he comes in and goes: look how many gloves we have, look! And we spend millions on gloves! "*

So, what Keto does is he throws them in the bin.

Finally, I burst out laughing.

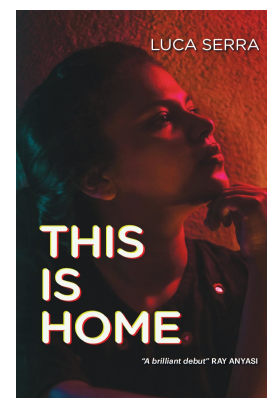
If anyone heard they'd think there was a seagull on the stairs. My whiny laugh runs up and slides down, the echo reverberates as much as it takes me to walk up three floors. Overwhelmed by an impetuous stream of consciousness, I think of minimum wage, unpaid holidays, mice, stuck pipes, leftover food blobs, sweat drops, long hours, night shifts, leaking rubbish bags, *back! back! back!* Chef shouts, the smell of blood in the butchery area, waste, waste, and more waste, and I realise the society we live in is summed up in this underground kitchen in central London.

Only, today I think of Keto's glove story and have a laugh.

Keto, what a fucking hero. I didn't think I was going to say this, but today, it was worth it.

Today it was.

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Luca Serra's debut novel *This is Home* unearths the hidden corners of city life, where dreams simmer in kitchen sinks and friendships bloom in the cracks of hardship.

A multicultural cast of workers, immigrants, and dreamers in Glasgow and London navigate hard jobs, post-Brexit identity, and the bittersweet search for home. Four young people, a Brazilian, a Ghanaian, an Italian and Latvian navigate the complexities of identity and belonging in a new country.

This is Home expresses humour and playfulness in describing the interplay between maintaining one's native language and culture while integrating into a new society. Stories of various individuals who come together, in a fragmented structure, creating a sense of fate and the interconnectedness of human lives to drive its narrative.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Luca Serra is a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award awardee and this is his first novel in English.