

MISCONCEIVED MISDEMEANOUR

JAKE ADDAMS

GET IN AND get out. Tony repeated the words to himself as he approached the diner's door. Get in and get out: that was the plan. It was an oversimplification of course—a way for people in his line of work to downplay the gravity of the tasks they'd been given. It was sweet, at least to the extent that looking after the mental health of criminals could be.

Nervousness gathered in his chest. He had 'got in' and 'got out' several times before, however this was the first time he was doing a job on his own. Comparatively speaking, it was only a small, low-level hit, yet his reputation was on the line; he needed to show the boss that he was capable, and not just another disposable grunt.

The diner was busier than he had anticipated. He patted the outside of his jacket pocket to double check he had his gun. He hadn't fired it outside of his training and didn't think he'd have to, not until he made it to the big league anyway. Still, with the number of people in the diner, he was worried about the increased likelihood of some karate-knowing hotshot coming to the staff's defence—as well as the increased likelihood of bloodshed.

Tony approached the counter and reached a sweaty hand into his pocket; the steel of the gun felt cool against his warm skin. He cleared his throat, internally apologised to his mother, and—

‘Good evening! How’s it going?’ said the waitress behind the counter. She flashed him a smile that lit up her indisputably beautiful face. ‘For one?’

And like that, he faltered. ‘Uh, yeah,’ he said, accidentally slipping into the standard restaurant patron script. ‘Just me.’ *Shit*. Perhaps the old ‘get in and get out’ took a bit too much of the focus away from the ‘rob someone at gunpoint’ part.

‘Hope you don’t mind the counter.’ She gestured to the row of stools, nearly all of which had people sitting on them. ‘Can I start you off with a drink?’

‘A lemonade, I guess.’ Nerves had made Tony’s mouth dry.

‘Wonderful! Take a seat and I’ll be back with a menu in a sec.’

Tony looked at the clock on the wall. He needed to report back, job complete, in the next ten minutes, or else he would fail the test of his lawlessness. He awkwardly shuffled to one of the few vacant seats and sat down in-between an old woman and what appeared to be two people on a date. One member of the couple was complaining about not getting a booth: he wanted the back support.

‘One lemonade,’ said the waitress as she put it down in front of him, ‘and one menu,’ putting that down in front of him too. ‘The special tonight is shepherd’s pie, though I reckon everything on the menu’s pretty special.’ She winked, grinned, and sashayed away.

Her kindness made Tony feel pre-emptive guilt. One of the first things he had learnt from his mentor in crime was to never feel anything for the victims, and here he was getting distracted by a nice face and a push-up bra. What an absolute fuck-up.

‘Not that you asked for my opinion,’ said the old woman next to him, ‘but I would stay away from the specials. Go for somethin’ the chef is more familiar with. Somethin’ classic, on menu.’

‘Thanks for the tip,’ said Tony. He sipped his lemonade. Time was falling away from him. The gun in his pocket felt heavier, like it was reminding him of its existence. Perhaps some of the effort he had put

into telling himself to stick to the plan should have been spent telling himself to actually listen to himself.

‘Been comin’ here for years,’ said the old woman. ‘Back when Frank, Rachael’—she gestured towards the waitress—‘and Robby’s father, ran the joint. Oh, Robby’s the chef now. Yeah, good family business. Smart kids they are. Well, they’re hardly kids now I s’pose.’

Great: a chatty stranger, the last thing he needed. Instead of verbally responding, Tony opted for a smile that he hoped would read as, ‘Thanks for the chat but I want it to stop now.’

It didn’t. Or, if it did, the old woman simply didn’t care about what Tony wanted. ‘Yeah, good family business,’ she continued. ‘You hardly see them these days. Everywhere you go the shops are the same, everythin’s a chain. They all sell the same food, the same clothes. I’ll tell ya what, it’s depressin’. The strippin’ away of variety, I mean. What happened to places having their own charm? The worst part is that everyone seems pretty okay about it. People like knowin’ what they’re going to get. There’s no curiosity, no adventurousness. I’ll tell ya what, everyone’s too comfortable being comfortable. Or at least what they think is comfortable. There isn’t any comfort in the world right now, not really.’

The last thing Tony needed was a sermon on the toxicity of capitalism—the old woman was preaching to the armed choir. He never would have had to resort to a life of crime had the odds not been stacked against him, had the system been fairer.

Thinking about his life and the world he lived in added to the frustration he already felt towards his unintentional deviation from the plan. He looked back at the clock: there were just under five minutes left for him to get outta there.

‘Anyway,’ the old woman continued, ‘I’ve talked your ear off enough. I’ve gotta get home and watch *The Block*.’ She hopped off her stool and called out to the waitress, ‘Rach, I’m headin’ home. How much do I owe ya?’

That was it. Enough was enough.

As the waitress, Rachael, daughter of Frank and sister of Robby, came over to take the old woman’s money, Tony stood up, took the gun from his pocket, pointed it at Rachael and yelled, ‘I’ve got a gun!’

He had been present for over a dozen robberies before that night, had seen how the mere mention of a firearm sent people into a flurry; however, Tony had never seen—nor heard of—what happened next.

The diner fell silent as Tony spoke; Rachael and the old woman paused their exchange and looked at the gun in his hand, and then at Tony. Rachael reached into her breast pocket. ‘And I’ve got this pen.’ She held the pen up between her thumb and forefinger and stared at it proudly.

‘And I’ve got this vintage Rolex,’ said the old woman, pushing up her sleeve to show Tony her watch.

If having a lemonade was a slight deviation from the plan, this was a complete derailment. ‘Uh,’ began a bewildered Tony. ‘I don’t think you understand,’ he said, even though it was he who was struggling to understand. ‘I’m . . . this is a hold up. I’ve got a gun.’

Everyone in the diner looked at Tony. Then, all down the counter, people began to announce their belongings: ‘I’ve got a Zippo lighter,’ said a burly man from behind Tony, taking it from his pocket; ‘I’ve got a baseball cap,’ said a teenager gesturing to his head; ‘I’ve got a copy of Chekov’s *The Shooting Party*,’ said a bespectacled woman, taking the book from her tote bag.

‘This isn’t a game of fucking show and tell,’ shouted Tony. ‘What don’t you people understand? I’ve got. A fucking. Gun.’

A torrent of voices flooded Tony as the other diners declared their belongings: there was a Swiss army knife, a dog leash, various items of jewellery, a trumpet—everything except the fear of his gun.

The last person announced their item—a half-empty packet of chewing gum—and everyone returned to their meals and conversations, as if Tony wasn’t even there.

The clock on the wall showed that his time was up. He felt his face flush. He gave a helpless look around the diner and, with his gun still in his hand, Tony walked to the exit and got out.