

DELTA BOOKS

## HENRY FIRST

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He has published short stories. *Henry First* is his first novel.

He lives in London where he is currently working on his second book.

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Plays

*Modern Eating Habits*

# *Henry First*

A Story of Excess

Basil Lawrence



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*To my parents*



PART I

# The Competition





## CHAPTER 1

### Down in the Kitchen

**H**ENRY FIRST was dying in the kitchen. Today's competition was conspiring to kill him: it felt like his chest was about to implode.

He watched Xun's knife slicing carrots – *whut-whut-whut* on the board – and as those orange strips marched away from the vegetable chef's blade Henry was convinced that he was doomed. It was his only thought – his brow showed the lines – and, for the moment, contemplating death seemed to be the only way of surviving the competition.

'Two minutes, everyone,' Henry said, and his sous chef, Zhou, nodded. 'And get Xun to sort out these vegetables.' Henry picked one up. 'I need them thinner. I could nail someone to a cross with this carrot.'

'Yes, Chef.' Zhou peered over the fryer, his face still rough from that morning's hasty shave now basked in the oily steam, and he began shouting at the entremetier in Mandarin.

Henry caught sight of the juicer. He had been trying hard to ignore it all morning. His restaurant was failing but his wife had insisted on buying a juicing machine the size of Wyoming.

On top of this, his early start meant he'd skipped his run and now he could feel his muscles growing loose and unloved. He really should go for a jog when he got home that evening, or run twice the distance the following morning. Perhaps the pain in his chest meant that he wasn't strong enough to withstand the perseverance that success entailed. If only he'd already finished with this compe-

tition, and then he could thank everyone sincerely and get on with his life . . .

The juicer squatted on the shelf, taunting him. ‘Chin, unplug that thing and put it back in its box.’

‘Mrs Dolores –’

‘*In the box,*’ Henry said, unable to talk about his wife. ‘I need you cutting meat.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

Henry watched the man return the chrome monstrosity to its cardboard box and haul it to the delivery door which opened onto the alleyway. As Chin was about to return to his station, where he operated the meat slicer, Henry motioned to his sous chef. ‘Zhou, get them together for a meeting *dun shi.*’

Zhou waved his arms about as though fanning flames or bringing an aircraft in to land, and most of the staff moved towards Henry.

‘Where are the waiters?’ Henry said. ‘Do I have to think for everyone . . .’

Henry had arrived in the restaurant kitchen at 4 a.m., and already it felt as though he’d been there for years. The roast cook had been joking at the grill, but now he saw Henry watching him.

‘Jiang, leave the sauce and get over here,’ Henry said. ‘Zhou, are we having this meeting or aren’t we?’

Shoes then legs then torsos as the waiters ran down the stairs. Zhou herded everyone to the area in front of the cold store.

‘As you know, we’re on full staff today for a reason,’ Henry told his employees. ‘In one hour the judges arrive. They’re our number one priority. Everything else waits – our success depends upon it. Ng and the others will keep them happy front-of-house. It’s our job to make sure this kitchen produces something extraordinary. Ng, if the judges decide to tour the facilities, let Zhou and me know pronto. Understand?’

Nods all round and ‘Yes, Chef,’ in unison.

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‘Chef, it’s only one course?’ Ng, the head waiter, asked.

‘Yes, lampreys with lemon. I’m preparing the fish with Kong. For everyone else it’s business as usual. Questions? No? Let’s get this show on the road. *Dong shou.*’

Zhou began shouting like a drill sergeant and soon everyone was back at their station. Kong, meanwhile, collected the fish from the cold store. Henry pressed his thumb into the flesh: ugly little mothers, but as fresh as can be. He sliced lemons for the sauce, his knife working faster than thought. Around him everyone settled and the earlier disarray was transformed into a professional kitchen with its noise and aromas and heat – elegant to watch. Smiling because he loved the harmonious machine that he was part of, he began working on the lampreys.

The printer made a short high-pitch noise before spitting out a piece of paper with an order from the dining room upstairs and soon these little white paper rectangles formed a neat queue on the steel shelf above the serving area.

‘Two times lamb cutlets, one time sole *lasserre*,’ Shui read out loud. ‘One time winter salad table seventeen.’ Someone acknowledged the order and repeated it.

*Whut-whut-whut.* Xun’s knife sliced through acres of vegetables. Behind him Chin cut through the bone of a dead mammal with the meat slicer.

‘Keep them fine, Xun,’ Henry shouted, ‘or you’re back on the boat.’

‘One tomato soup with garnish, partridge and olive starter, chestnut soup and stuffed marrow. All table thirteen. Where’s salad for seventeen?’ Another blip.

There was spluttering at the grill and flames leapt up at Huo.

‘Bring more lemons,’ Henry said to Kong as the kitchen filled with the smell of burnt hair.

‘*Re huo shao shen,*’ Zhou said and the others laughed. If you stir up the fire you burn your fingers.

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‘As long as it’s you and not the customer’s food, Huo,’ Henry called, then wiped his knife on his apron before taking a quick tour of the kitchen, from station to station – quizzing, tasting, shouting.

‘Two shrimps *mariette*, table eight. One asparagus *nordaise*, one winter salad and one crab starter, all table two.’

‘Lim, we need those salads today. Keep it together, people.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

Kong had fetched the lemons.

Ng ran down the stairs two at a time calling out, ‘Table seventeen!’

‘One gazpacho, one lamb cutlets, one stuffed marrow and two hollandaise soups, table five.’

‘Table seventeen!’

‘We need winter salad,’ Zhou shouted. ‘Anyone?’

Good man, Henry thought.

Earlier that morning he’d told Dolores that out of adversity came greatness. She’d told him not to get his hopes up yet, but today was his day – yes, he could feel it. A positive attitude conquers anything.

*Whut-whut-whut.*

‘Table thirteen’s clear,’ Shui said and Lim grabbed the four plates and was up the stairs. He was replaced by two more waiters.

‘Winter salad,’ Ng shouted.

‘You tell them, Ng.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

Kong stirred the sauce and Xun worked the knife and Huo and his brothers used flame and the machine yelled as Chin cut through bone and flesh.

‘This is all you do, Kong – you keep that spoon moving. I don’t care if the restaurant burns down around you. I need this sauce as smooth as your mother’s milk. I don’t want to come back and find it’s curdled and rancid.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

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The orders were coming quickly – the blips now a continuous bleep – and as he watched Zhou directing this orchestra an underground train screamed past in a nearby tunnel and Henry heard its carriages jumping and hopping along the pitted tracks. Kong worked the spoon, Xun the knife, Huo the flame, Chin the blade.

Ng ran down the stairs. ‘Chef, a message from Mrs Dolores. The judges going to be here soon, Chef.’

Damn. ‘When?’

‘Next ten minutes, Chef. She’s not so sure.’

‘Kong, focus on the sauce.’ The kitchen was noisier still, each station an industry of chopping and slicing and preparing; spoon, knife, flame, blade. ‘Get Dolores down here,’ Henry said as Ng went back up with eight steaming plates.

Kun beat the steak. Kong dared not look up from the sauce. Xun had gone AWOL. Huo had burnt his sleeve. Zhou was losing the plot. Still no Dolores.

‘Mu,’ Henry called over a waiter, ‘get Ng back here pronto.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

The man scampered up the stairs with three soups and a stuffed marrow starter.

‘Chef, I need to talk to you,’ said Zhou. Something about the washing-up area, about the reasons for Fang’s behaviour yesterday: an imprisoned brother and an unwanted operation. Zhou’s mouth chewing the difficult English words while around them the kitchen deciding between inefficiency and failure.

‘Do you think now is the best time to have this conversation?’ Henry said, but Zhou didn’t stop talking. His glasses looked like two smudged discs hovering in front of his eyes; a cobweb of fingerprints covered their surface. Constant readjusting and lifting those plastic frames. The verbal onslaught continued. *Not today!*

‘Kong, how is that sauce coming along?’ Henry shouted.

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Kong nodded. 'Fine, Chef.' Huo grilled. *Whut-whut-whut*. Xun was at his station. Zhou opened his mouth once more –

The air turned pink.

Afternoon light underground? Henry speculated. Or am I having a stroke?

There was another burst of warm light as the blade took a second bite of Chin's left hand. The engine yelped like a kicked dog and the slicer spun to a halt.

A fine spray of blood and bone settled on their white tunics.

Everyone stopped work. Meat was left burning on the grill.

An afternoon that had been quick and that lacked thought or spontaneity began to wobble. Everything around him lost balance. Henry lost control of his life. He looked at Chin then closed his eyes. Now he really was dying. He'd meant to speak to Dolores about the machine. And yet . . . He felt sick.

Chin stared at Henry. Flecks of red had arced across the tiles and the cement floor. Bao's podgy walk had been interrupted first by the slicer's short sharp cry and then by a half skid; his left arm slammed into the steel countertop to prevent himself from falling, the bang making them all jump. Eyes found Henry, eyes were on him, eyes waited for him to . . .

Henry ran past Bao, looking at the floor – the red dots had smeared into a long skid mark that ended in a shoe-print – careful not to slip. And as he ran he heard a siren – how the hell did they get here so fast? – but then he realised the sound was Chin screaming.

Chin held his left forearm snug against his chest. His armpit was wine red. Up close Henry could see the thick liquid moving from fibre to fibre in his white shirt.

'Get First Aid,' he called out to Zhou. 'And an ambulance.'

'Yes, Ch—'

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‘And Dolores. Someone get Dolores down here.’

Henry knelt before the man, uncertain what to do. He prayed that the blade hadn’t eaten anything vital, and then he was amazed to see a pair of clean hands lifting Chin’s meaty right arm and extracted his bloody left hand. His own hands. Chin was crying. Henry caught a glimpse of Chin’s stubby hand. Only the little finger and thumb remained. He could make out only a few of the words the injured man screamed: *‘Shou zhi! Shou zhi!’* Fingers.

Henry called again for Zhou to bring the First Aid box as he watched the blood ooze. Then he had the box. He threw back the plastic clips. Dolores was next to him, yelling and calming everyone at the same time. Henry’s hands shuddered against the hard dimpled case as he searched for something – anything. Now Dolores was on the phone. Fang knelt down beside him. Tied a cloth around Chin’s wrist. Staunched the dark flow. Henry kept searching the box for something to assist. Anything to ease the man’s pain.

‘Dolores,’ he said softly as he felt himself calm down and start thinking about what to do next, ‘tell them that we’ll meet the ambulance at the delivery entrance. They can get in back there. No sirens.’

She nodded.

‘And tell them to get here now.’

He asked Zhou to take the others away. Give Chin some air. Fang’s knots were precise and methodical. He neatened the bunny-eared flaps of cloth before tying and pulling the fabric stiff and tight.

‘*Shou zhi,*’ Chin said. ‘Chef, please help me find my fingers.’ His cries had turned into a soft lament: my-fingers-my-fingers-my-fingers . . . Of course.

Henry, Dolores, Zhou, everyone searched frantically for the fingers. They peered down the gaps behind the counters and between the red-splattered pans.

There was a clatter of shoes running down the stairs and he heard Ng announce that the judges had arrived.

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‘Ng, stay up there,’ Henry said. He watched Ng take in the scene and realise what everyone in the kitchen was looking for. ‘Go up and let them in. No, don’t come any closer.’ They were all tainted with sprinkles of blood. ‘Get back up there, keep the other waiters up there, and let the judges in. You need to stay calm. Mrs Dolores has called the ambulance. Ng, go!’

Ng ran back up.

‘They’ll be here soon.’

Chin shivered. ‘I need something,’ he said. ‘Alcohol.’

‘Let’s wait for the ambulance.’

‘Yes, Chef.’

Henry called Zhou who was helping the others with the search and told him to take control. ‘Xun will look for the fingers. Get the others back to work. Dolores will close the restaurant after the judges leave.’ Chin shook uncontrollably. ‘Close your eyes and try and relax,’ Henry told him.

‘The ambulance will be here shortly to take you to City Hospital, Chin,’ Dolores said.

The kitchen was quiet. Xun, searched for the fingers. Chin closed his eyes.

‘They’ll be here soon,’ she said as she held him close, comforting him.

‘I’ll go with Chin to the hospital, Dolores,’ Henry said. ‘I’ll need you to stay down here.’

Behind him he could hear Zhou beginning to fill the waiters’ orders.

‘Close shop when the judges leave,’ he told Dolores. ‘And please ask Zhou to prepare the lampreys. Until then, we need to pretend this isn’t happening.’

The paramedics arrived and carried Chin on a stretcher up the back stairs and out to the old loading bay. Henry felt strangely deflated; there was no adrenalin rush, nothing punchy. Someone was injured and they were there to help.

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He followed the men closely and watched them slide the stretcher into the ambulance as if they were showing a roast into an oven. There was something televisual about that action – he had watched these scenes many times before, seen similar paramedics elevating arms and loading ambulances. The nightmare afternoon rumbled on.

‘What happened?’ the paramedics had asked when they first arrived. ‘He’s cut his hand?’

‘He cut his hand on a machine,’ Henry said.

As one emergency worker climbed into the ambulance he was still asking questions: ‘He’s cut off a few fingers?’

‘What?’ said the second paramedic.

‘Fingers’ – Henry nodded – ‘and I’m coming along with you.’

He climbed into the ambulance and huddled on the empty stretcher beside Chin. The vehicle sped down the alleyway, sirens blaring, and turned into the nearest avenue where they were confronted by the lunchtime traffic jam.

Henry watched the paramedics working. One clasped the stiff white-bandaged hand and raised it slightly. An oxygen cuff masked Chin’s face. The other located a strap and shimmied it up Chin’s good arm, and then began prodding and inspecting the veins. Then the man tried puncturing the skin with a needle.

‘I don’t think I’ll get a fourteen in him,’ he said, and this was followed by a *pok* noise. ‘Nope, I was wrong. There you go.’

The ambulance leapt forward. The medic strung up a plump bag of liquid with the word lactate printed on the side. They lurched back. The man neatened the cable and then fastened a tube to the needle and secured the tube to Chin’s arm with an inch of white tape.

Around them the ambulance’s plastic Lego interior vibrated. The windows were edged with thick black rubber and on a shelf between the biohazard container and medical appliances was a box of tissues – household and non-

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threatening beneath the calibrating equipment and an old No Smoking plaque.

Henry peered through the back window. Behind him cars were being angled into the gaps between the rows of trucks and vans. They were turning the four-lane road into a seven- or eight-lane highway.

He jumped as the driver gave a blast of a loud, business-like siren. The people in the cars behind them looked away from the noisy ambulance.

‘We were parked behind your place eating lunch,’ the first paramedic was telling Henry.

‘Let’s go!’ their driver shouted, her head slamming back against the seat as she hit the horn. ‘Scoot! Move it!’ An even louder siren cut through the van.

‘We couldn’t find my fingers,’ Chin was saying.

‘What did he say?’ asked the paramedic.

‘It’s no use,’ Henry said. ‘We looked, but they could be anywhere in the kitchen.’ He saw what he thought was a picture of an archangel stuck onto the oxygen canister; he shook his head.

The ambulance jerked forward, stopped suddenly, and then they were on the move again, pounding up the road.

Henry hit the side of the vehicle as it turned a corner into a slow-moving tributary that had been dammed by a bus at the next cross-street.

‘How much longer?’ he asked.

The paramedic beside him looked out the window. ‘Who knows with the traffic? Twenty, thirty minutes.’

‘Nah,’ the driver shouted. ‘It only takes about ten minutes to walk.’

‘Uh-oh, he’s going,’ the paramedic said as Henry felt the cars and city soften around him, everything losing focus.

Cold air. The confusion inside the ambulance returned when he opened his eyes. Its back doors were open and snow had settled on his arms.

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‘Welcome back, Cook,’ the paramedic said.

Outside the city blocks had given way to a squat hospital surrounded by white trees. More dots floated about the air and Henry leapt out of the vehicle unassisted. After the grinning paramedic had helped him up from the gravel he caught a glimpse of Chin being wheeled through an entrance marked Emergency.

Henry never thought about calling Dolores until the forms had been signed, the bills paid, and he’d spent three hours in a bar across the street, worrying about Chin. By then it was too late and Henry knew he was a dead man.