

UNCLEAN JOBS
FOR
WOMEN AND GIRLS

ALISSA NUTTING

Starcherone Books

Buffalo, NY

D INNER

I am boiling inside a kettle with five other people. Our limbs are bound and our intestines and mouths are stuffed with herbs and garlic, but we can still speak. We smell great despite the pain.

The guy next to me resembles Elvis because of his fluffy, vaguely-pubic black hairdo. It may be from the humidity.

Across the kettle a man is trying to cry, but his tears keep evaporating before they can roll down his cheeks. For a moment, I have the romantic thought that maybe we are actually boiling in tears, hundreds of thousands of them, the sweetest-true tears of infants and children instead of a yellowy, chickenish broth.

I am the only woman in the kettle, which strikes me as odd. I'm voluptuous and curvy; I can quite understand why someone would want to gobble me up. The men do not look so delicious. One, a very old man across the kettle from me, keeps drifting in and out of a semi-conscious state. His head droops down towards the broth then suddenly, just as the tip of his nose touches one of the surface's bubbles, he snaps upright and utters a name. "Stanley" is the first. The second, "David." We think he is saying the names of his children; we even continue to humor him after he gets to

the fifteenth (perhaps he's moved on to grandchildren?), but as he yells his fortieth name it's clear that he is not poignant but nuts.

"He *isn't* crazy," the crying man sobs. "These are the last few moments of our lives. Shouldn't we all be calling out the names of everyone we've ever met? Ever known? Ever loved?"

"Uh-huh," agrees Elvis.

But the man to Elvis' left is not as fond of this idea. A series of teardrop tattoos on his upper cheek indicate victories in multiple prison-kills. Ironically, he is tied up right next to the crying man. "I like quiet," the tattooed man says.

The man directly next to me on the right, he isn't really my type. His features are youthful and feminine in a way that makes him resemble a boyish Peter Pan. But he's smiling at me through the spices and trimmings shoved into his mouth; despite them he manages a nice, soft look.

Since we're about to be eaten, I lower my standards and choose to be bold.

"I love you," I say. It's coming from a good pretend place. I just want to pack as much into these last few moments as I can.

Yet when I watch the impact my words have on his face, the effect is very real. Maybe, I figure, since we are all cooking towards the finish line, things are kind of fast-forwarding. Maybe what I'd just said could actually be true.

And then it is. Seconds pass and love for him grows suddenly, like ice crystals or sea monkeys, all over my body.

We stare at one another and he scoots towards me as much as our fetters will allow, enough so that our fingertips can touch. "I love you too," he says. "If we weren't tied up, I'd give you the softest kiss you've ever felt in your life, right on your steamy lips."

From the corner of my eye, I notice the tattooed man, who up until this point hasn't been very chatty, is suddenly showing multiple upper-teeth. His lips pull back wide in order to verbalize the list of things *he* would do to me, were we not tied up. They are not romantic or legal.

"You're a monster," my lover says to him. "The rest of us shouldn't have to boil in your juices."

"Uh-huh," agrees Elvis.

"We're dying just like this criminal," weeps the crying man. "It isn't fair."

Suddenly the old man raises his head. A drop of yellow broth falls from his chin. "Amanda," he rasps, then his eyes roll back and his head falls down. I smile.

"That's my name!" Glee fills me though I don't know why. "He just spoke my name," I tell my new lover, whose fingertips squeeze my own.

"Amanda." My lover whispers my name into the hot mist.

"What if it's some kind of death list," the crying man snivels. "What if that old codger has been here for ages, been in pots with hundreds of people who've all been eaten, but he always gets left behind because he's so old. It would drive a person crazy. It might make him repeat over and over again the names of people he's had to watch die in a half-hearted attempt to bring them back." After pondering this, the crying man lets out a long, shrill sob that is chirp-like. It reminds me of a parakeet I had when I was young. I try to remember its name.

"Dan," the old man says.

"That's *my* name," my lover laughs, bouncing a little in the water. "He just said our names back-to-back. It's like our love planted them in his head!"