From A Chef's Shelf Life

At fifteen and a half, he entered his first professional kitchen.
This is how it began.

Fifteen and a Half

I was fifteen and a half when I entered my first professional kitchen, an age at which eagerness is often mistaken for readiness, and physical resilience compensates—briefly—for a complete lack of understanding about what endurance truly costs.

The restaurant was *L'Abricotier*, in Ouzouer-sur-Loire, a fine dining establishment by local standards, disciplined in its presentation and uncompromising in its expectations. Precision mattered. Silence mattered. Plates left the pass as statements of intent rather than acts of generosity. For a small town, it carried itself with seriousness, and that seriousness extended well beyond the food.

My first meeting for the position was brief and largely ceremonial. I was assessed quickly, with the kind of glance that measures usefulness rather than potential. There were no questions about my background, no interest in why I was there, and certainly no concern about my age beyond whether I could physically keep up. What mattered was availability, obedience, and a willingness to start immediately.

I was told when to arrive, where to stand, and what not to do. The rest, I was assured, I would learn.

The uniform followed soon after. Whites that were too large, stiff with previous lives, carrying the faint but persistent scent of bleach and something less identifiable—old heat, old effort. When I put it on, it did what uniforms are designed to do: it removed distinction. I no longer looked like a boy who had left school too early. I looked like staff.

There was comfort in that. The jacket did not care who I was. It asked only that I closed it properly and kept it clean. Once dressed, I belonged to the kitchen in a way that felt immediate and non-negotiable.

At the time, I was living alone. Fifteen and a half, with a small bedroom and shared facilities—the kind that require scheduling and tolerance rather than privacy. It was not independence in any romantic sense. It was logistics. Rent paid. Door closed. No supervision, no safety net.

I went to work from there and returned there afterward. Nothing in the arrangement encouraged reflection. It simply required continuation.

I did not arrive with aspirations of gastronomy or career. I arrived because my life outside the kitchen had become unstable enough that work—structured, demanding, and relentless—appeared preferable to uncertainty. The kitchen did not ask questions. It did not require explanations. It offered order, provided one was willing to submit to it.

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