

Going for Peanuts
Gustavo Bondoni

“Hold that Last Meal for you, Charlie Brown?”

Mikey slammed through the kitchen doors. “One spaghetti and meatballs,” he said. “Oh, and do you have a couple of peanuts?”

“Peanuts?” Lou looked up from his pans. It was just four in the afternoon on a Monday—there had been no lunch service, so the two cooks wouldn’t be in for another couple of hours.

“Yeah. Some Midwestern farmer out there who doesn’t have the sense to know you can’t have dinner at four o’clock in the city went on and on about his peanut allergy and how he couldn’t eat here if the food had any peanuts in it. I told him that neither spaghetti nor meatballs have got any peanuts in them, but he still repeated it like ten more times.”

“So he’s worried.”

“Well, I’m gonna give him something to worry about. A night on the toilet should teach him not to bug people when they tell them there’s no peanuts in his food. You got them or don’t you?”

Lou pulled a can out of a cupboard to the right of the range and popped the lid. Mikey ground the nuts into a fine powder and, when the steaming dish landed on the counter, carefully mixed the dust into the sauce. “There. Jackass won’t know what hit him.”

They stared at the body on the floor. The guy was well-fed and dressed in khakis and a yellow polo shirt. His face was dark red, and his features frozen in an expression of panic.

“Whatcha bring him in here for?”

“I couldn’t leave him out there, could I?” Mike retorted. “I didn’t want anyone to see him. He was just sitting there, looking like that.”

“You sure he’s dead?” Lou asked.

“Don’t you start on me now. I’ve seen enough dead guys to know when one is in my restaurant. Yeah, he’s dead.”

“Crap. You did it this time.”

“Me?”

“What do you think? The peanuts must have killed him.”

Mikey blanched. “What do you mean?”

Lou wiped his hands on a dishtowel, abandoned the pasta he was flattening with the rolling pin and pulled his phone out of a pocket. He typed a search and scowled. Then he handed the phone to his brother.

“Oh, damn. How was I supposed to know the allergy would do that to him? I thought he’d just get the runs.”

“Well, with your record, the judge ain’t gonna be too impressed with that defense.”

“What am I going to do?”

Lou sighed. “We’re going to do what we always do when you screw up. I’m gonna pull your nuts out of the fire. This body is going to disappear. Go get some trash bags—and look out into the dining room to see that no one is going unserved. Last thing we want is for people to come in here wondering why the waiter disappeared.”

Mikey left, and Lou frowned down at the dead man for a couple of moments. Slowly, his frown disappeared and turned into something that wasn’t quite a grin, but which held a measure of speculation.

“So,” Mikey said, returning with the bags. “We gonna put him in the trunk and take him to the woods?”

Lou let the grin loose. “Nah. I thought of something better. Help me take his clothes off.”

Mikey fell into the pattern they’d always followed, both in their life on the street as in those years they’d spent behind bars: he shut his mouth and didn’t ask his older brother any stupid questions as they lifted the dead weight onto the countertop where meals were prepared.

They stripped the guy down all the way, removed a gold crucifix from around his neck, pulled out the wallet, phone and a hotel card key and tossed the clothes into a garbage bag. Mikey cracked the guy’s phone open and removed the battery.

“Bring me the big cleaver,” Lou said with a wicked smile. “And lock that door. How long before Raul and Sergio arrive?”

“It’s still early.”

“Good.” The cleaver descended with a whistle right onto the guy’s neck, lodging in bone halfway through. Lou pulled it out with a grunt and brought it down again and again until the head rolled free.

“Well, we can’t use this, can we? Toss it in a bag. We’ll bury it tonight.”

Then they quickly allowed the blood to flow down the drain and tossed hands, feet and other protuberances in the bag. They removed the arms and legs—making sure to conserve the buttocks—from the torso, and put that in another bag.

Lou paused and Mikey looked at him. “What about the arms and the legs?”

“Skin ‘em.”

“You gonna put them in the meatballs?”

“Nah. Too obvious. I’ve been thinking of revamping the menu, and this is perfect for it. Everyone loves carpaccio.”

“What’s carpaccio?”

“You’ll see. Now help me skin this stuff.”

“The trick,” Lou said, decked out in a brand new chef’s outfit he’d bought especially for the occasion, “is in the marinating sauce. You’ve got to leave the meat in the sauce just long enough to have it absorb some of the flavor, but not to overwhelm the taste of the meat.”

“But this... it tastes so different.” The critic took another bite. “I suppose you’re not going to tell anyone the recipe.”

Lou smiled. “Does it really look to you like I want to lose the customers?”

The critic returned the smile. This was going better than they’d expected. When the Post had called to say they’d heard about the new dish and would be sending someone over, Lou thought the man would be snooty and look down his nose at just another neighborhood Italian place. But the critic had turned out to be a guy who could have walked in off the street without raising any eyebrows. No starched white shirt and demands for wines that weren’t on the list—just a guy who liked to eat. “And you seared the outside.”

“Yes. That’s just to seal the meat, though. It’s not cooked.”

“Oh, of course not. But it’s my job to speculate on the secret of the raw meat everyone is talking about.”

“I wish everyone was talking about it. I’d be a rich man.”

“Well,” the critic replied after the last bite disappeared into his mouth, “they will be when they read my article. This was truly excellent.”

“Thank you.”

Lou served the pasta dish personally, allowed the man to have his coffee in peace, and watched him leave. Only then did he return to the kitchen.

Raul intercepted him when he entered the kitchen. “Hey boss, we’re running low on the carpaccio meat,” he said.

“How much do we have left?”

“Probably until the end of tomorrow night. Maybe a little more.” Raul paused. “Unless the article comes out first.”

It was Saturday night, so Lou just nodded. “Don’t worry about that. The food section goes out on Wednesday.”

“Well, get in touch with the supplier. We need to ride this train as far as we can. I don’t remember ever having a week this good.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that.”

“You okay, big guy?” Mikey asked on Monday, just after they finished setting up the tables, and just before they opened to the public.

“Yeah. Just worried about the supply situation.”

“The special meat?”

“Yeah. We’re all out. I checked the stuff that was left, and it’s just the offcuts. We can’t use it.” They sat in silence thinking about the consequences of that. Most people who’d heard of the dish didn’t actually want to eat raw meat, but the restaurant had filled up anyway and bought other stuff. They were buying the same spaghetti as always, except now they were buying the stuff by the tub-full. If the article was as positive as the guy said it would be...

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes before Lou got up and sighed, the sound of a man about to do something he was pretty sure he’d regret.

“Mikey?” he said.

“Yeah?”

“You still in touch with Johnny Balls?”

“Yeah. Haven’t seen him in years, but I’m in touch. Why?”

“We might need his help on this one.”

“You want me to call him?” Mikey asked. “Maybe tell him that we can make his bodies disappear if he’ll bring ‘em over?”

Another sigh. “Not yet. I’m still thinking this through, but we ain’t got much time.”

The front door opened and they lifted their heads to see a big blonde woman enter and sit at a table beside the window.

Mikey grunted and stood, grabbing his dishcloth and a menu on the way to the table. It was always a drag to get early customers, especially on Mondays, when they had the restaurant to themselves.

Lou chuckled.

“What?” Mikey said.

“Ask her if she has any food allergies.”

Mikey shrugged and walked out of the kitchen.

A couple of minutes later, he was back. "She'll have the vegetarian lasagna. And no, no food allergies."

"You actually asked her?"

"Wasn't I supposed to?"

"Not really. It doesn't matter. I know what she's allergic to."

"What?"

Lou brandished a small transparent plastic bottle which held a clear liquid. "This."

Mikey peered at the label. It looked like something you'd get in a pharmacy. "How do you know she's allergic to that?"

"Because everyone's allergic to cyanide. Now, you said vegetarian lasagna, right?"

Lou hummed as he worked, happy to have solved the supply problem for the time being.

Mikey shrugged and took the woman her water. Instead of pouring from the jug of iced tap water, he opened a Perrier and gave her that.

A last meal deserved decent water.

The end

Gustavo is another returnee to another realm and I can always count on him to help me with my diet. Thanks, Gustavo. I'd put on some weight recently and your story has inspired me to return to Weight Watchers. To our readers: here's hoping that this doesn't put you off your dining. Avoid restaurants like the one in this story and you should be fine . . .