

## PIE IN THE SKY PIZZA

Alice squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face to the passenger window when her father began singing. Rudy, who always sang as soon as he turned over the van, crooned a Sinatra tune, an old favorite from his Rat Pack repertoire. He sang in the car the way other fathers sang in the shower. As a child, his singing had embarrassed her, but as an adult, she embraced it. Except on this morning, Alice was in no mood for a song.

Groggy from a late-night date that had gone sideways, she would have preferred extra sleep before work, but no, her father insisted that their vending machines must be replenished at the butt crack of dawn when day shift employees arrived and night shift employees left, even on a weekend. Routinely, on the days they needed to restock snack inventory or change things up, they stood among the first customers when Costco opened its doors. For her, the machines constituted a hobby, something she did with her father, despite having invested in them. For Rudy, the machines represented the foundation for a retirement job that would require less physical labor and be more lucrative than his plumbing company. A business they could operate together. At thirty-four, Alice couldn't imagine a retirement job. The whole idea of "retirement job" seemed like an oxymoron to her, and the vending machines simply provided her a good way to spend time with her dad.

Rudy had owned and operated Oliver's Heating and Plumbing since before she was born. She'd spent many hours as a child in the squat building of his plumbing business, where she

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 2*

helped—first by answering phones and filing invoices, and then with scheduling. In high school, she had computerized the scheduling and accounting systems. Then after college, she started a real job with the Baltimore Port, where she worked her way up to port master, where she excelled thanks to the practical skills honed helping Rudy. She loved her job, loved knowing the comings and goings of the ships, tugs, and commercial vessels, loved solving problems they brought when sailing into the harbor. She managed more people and a bigger budget than Rudy's plumbing business, but she never mentioned that to him. Instead, she wondered again how she'd let him talk her into owning half a vending business with him. They both enjoyed opera. Why hadn't she suggested season tickets to the opera when he raised the issue of vending machines? She'd given him the green light for two machines—the old-fashioned sort, relatively cheap to buy—and then somehow heard herself agreeing to the acquisition of six more "smart combos," computerized gizmos that offered both snacks and drinks and emailed them reports. Alice used the reports to prepare the data sheets for the Costco runs. Now eight machines later, she imagined them as baby birds needing constant attention. A pair of brainy machines sat in three different downtown gyms, and the "hobby" increasingly required chunks of her free time. At

Costco, they'd purchase enough inventory to last several weeks, storing them in the office supply room at Oliver's Plumbing. A vending machine Rudy had installed at the plumbing company became part of the plumbing operation and his baby.

"Did you eat the chicken's ass? What the hell's wrong with you?" her father asked without looking at her. She recognized his exasperated expression, a single gray eyebrow raised under the unruly silver mop brushed away from his beard and mustache. She had nothing new to say.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 3*

"My cat died," she said, surprising herself. Bella's absence had created a feline-shaped hole in her heart.

"Still with the cat? I thought that cat died ages ago," he said.

"Only a month."

"You're still upset about a cat that's been dead for a month? She was a cat, for Pete's sake. She lived a long time. Get another one," he said before belting out the lyrics of Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon."

Alice shrugged. "They're not interchangeable. They have individual personalities," she said over his singing.

"It's not complicated," he sang, then changed the lyrics to the song. "Get another one," he sang, holding the tone of the word "one" while Sinatra sang "moon."

How would he understand? He did not grow up with pets nor allow Alice any when she'd been a kid, saying he didn't have time or money for one. But she'd had Bella for nineteen years. Aside from Rudy, the cat proved to be the longest relationship she'd ever experienced.

"A new cat will have its own personality. End of problem," he said in a regular tone, turning in to the Costco parking lot. "Why do you overcomplicate things?" Rudy, a precise man who credited his success to being the neatest, cleanest, and most organized plumber in the city. He pulled their collapsible wagon from the van's rear doors. Later, they organized the snack boxes inside the van's cargo area, where plumbing equipment sat in ordered rows with smaller tools affixed to the bulkhead. This echoed the pattern of all the businesses Rudy had launched in which Alice had worked, including delivering greeting balloons and the homemade rum he baked in a church basement kitchen.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 4*

With the grace of well-practiced choreography, they prepped for their route—first, the three gyms where the six smart machines were located, followed by the employee break rooms at the Baltimore Port and at the railroad depot, next door. From the data sheet, Alice read the names of the items needed for the first two machines while Rudy cut open the boxes and placed them into the wagon. The combo machines offered different, healthier snacks, like protein and energy bars, enhanced waters, sunflower seeds, and packets of nuts and trail mix, whereas the two regular machines in the employee break rooms provided sweet, fatty snacks like cinnamon buns, mini-donuts, and packages of cookies that could be eaten by pulling the packaging back, eliminating the need to touch the food with dirty fingers. She checked items on the data sheet as

Rudy loaded them into the wagon before pulling the spray glass cleaner and paper towels from the bulkhead and handing them to him; he arranged them into a specific place before locking the wheels and setting a purple Crown Royal bag atop the load.

When they pulled out of the parking lot toward the first gym, Rudy resumed singing, and she wondered if her father's driving would suffer if he simply listened to the radio or drove in silence. Just before reaching the first gym's parking lot, Rudy stopped.

"When I was your age, you were alive for two whole years," he said, seriously.

"You told me a hundred times already," she said.

"Listen, kiddo, maybe you need a husband and a kid, not a cat," he said. "It's perspective."

Her mother had died the day she was born, and Alice often wondered if Rudy wouldn't have busied himself in endless work if she lived.

"That might mean I'd be too busy to be in this seat right now."

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 5*

Her father laughed. "A husband would outlast a cat," he said. "So would a kid." Bella had only expected to be fed and loved. Nothing else. No school tuition, music lessons, clothes, sleepless nights, or all the other necessities related to a kid. Alice's window had not yet closed, but she couldn't seem to land a committed man and had no interest in the arduous task of single parenting like Rudy. Now the cat who'd stayed by her side through nineteen years—multiple promotions, boyfriends, apartments, and a house—was gone. The vet had informed her months earlier that Bella had cancer, but it still shocked her when the kitty began to drool. She'd attributed Bella's weight loss to age. She'd expected the vet to prescribe some medicine to control the drooling, but instead, he showed Alice a bloody tumor in the feline's mouth, saying, she's nineteen, and it's time to let her go. Alice wept uncontrollably as the vet inserted three needles into the cat's front paws. She'd held the soft, black, furry body close until Bella had stopped breathing. Recriminations and guilt for all the ways she'd failed Bella overwhelmed her, and a gauzy blanket of grief enveloped her as she left the vet's office zombie like with Bella's empty carrier in hand.

"You're going to outlive every animal you get," he said.

She shrugged. He thrust his bearded chin forward and scrunched his brows, his expression of contemplation.

Last night's date neglected to ask her a single question about herself, talked nonstop about his gaming achievements, and referred to video characters like they were real people. She ended the date before midnight, using the early call with Rudy as an excuse.

Rudy unlocked the first gym's vending machine's front door and reached for the overflow coin hopper and handed it to her. She dumped the coins into the purple Crown Royal

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 6*

bag before returning it to him. They left the upper coin hopper alone so that the machine could make change for a five-dollar bill. He passed her the cash hopper. She emptied and returned it, inserting the cash into a white envelope labeled with the machine's number. They kept small

envelopes numbered for the cash from each machine in the Crown Royal bag. They worked in silence: Alice handed Rudy the snacks, which he placed in their designated spots before checking the trays and machine's innards to make sure everything worked. He shut and locked the machine door and moved to the second.

"Not like there's a cat shortage anywhere," he said, breaking the silence. "Animal shelters have a boatload of cats." He unlocked and opened the second machine's door and repeated the process. "Why stop at one? Get a pair? Three?"

"Give it a rest, Dad," she said, dumping coins into the purple bag and cleaning the front glass doors and keyboard panels of both machines.

"Meeeeeow," he said, stretching out the sound as he walked toward the door, pulling the wagon. "Maybe you'll talk more if I meow."

Alice couldn't help laughing. "Okay, Rudy!" she teased him.

In the parking lot, her father pulled the wagon toward the van, the yellow, red, and black Oliver's Plumbing logo brandishing both side panels. He situated a narrow, portable ramp from the van floor to the ground and maneuvered the wagon into the van, where they filled it with items for the next pair of machines, repeating the process for all eight machines. At the end of their run, the purple bag bulged with coins and the cash envelopes. They picked up lunch from a nearby diner before returning to the plumbing building. In the reception area, Helen, the office manager, was writing the next week's job list next to plumbers' names on a large whiteboard.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 7*

She stacked clipboards with data sheets for each assignment in the cubbies labeled with plumbers' names. Helen's hair was neon purple. She'd dyed it when she turned seventy, she said, to be "visible." It's also why she regularly wore fluffy pink slippers and black cat-eyed, rhinestone-studded glasses.

"How's tricks?" she said, without looking at either of them.

"Routine," Rudy said. "Except Alice's cat died last month, and it stole her tongue."

He laughed at his own joke.

Helen stood to hug Alice, embracing her with her wide arms. "Aww, honey. I'm sorry." She squeezed Alice tight. "If you meditate, you can try to connect with your cat's energy," she said in Alice's ear, voice sotto, but loud enough for Rudy to hear.

"Don't listen to Helen's woo-woo crap," he said.

"It's real," Helen said. "Like gravity. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not real."

"Gravity, my ass," Rudy said, placing the lunches in the office's kitchen for Helen and Alice to handle while he unloaded snack boxes and drinks from the van.

"Smells yummy!" Helen said, opening the bags. "I'm starved."

"Can you really connect to Bella?" Alice asked, washing her hands at the kitchen sink.

"Without a doubt," Helen said.

They heard Rudy dumping coins into the sorting and counting machines; the sounds of

swirling coins and the hum of the machines made the walls vibrate.

“Are you telling Alice ghost stories again?” he said, entering the kitchen and washing his hands before joining Alice and Helen at the table.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 8*

“I want to connect to Bella’s energy,” Alice said, between bites.

“If connecting to dead people and pets were real, everybody would be doing it,” he said, sounding annoyed.

“Never said it was easy. Only possible,” Helen said, biting into her sandwich. Rudy waved the thought away. “Helen’s endless ghost stories,” he said. “You believe that, next thing you’re paying a charlatan who tells you he talks to dead people.” Helen shrugged. “Believe. Don’t believe. Charlatans are out there, but so are woo-woo people who didn’t ask for the ability.”

Rudy shook his head. The counter/sorter machines stopped. He left to reload them. “How?” Alice whispered.

“Meditate,” Helen said.

The answer disappointed Alice.

###

A few weeks later, everything in the world started shutting down. A new virus was infecting and killing people. Alice began teleworking, while Rudy complained about an avalanche of extra emergency plumbing calls.

“Jamokes flushing wipes down their toilets at home like they do at work, except now they’re screwing up their own pipes,” he said, showing her a postcard he and Helen made instructing customers what not to flush.

Gyms closed. Schools closed for a few weeks, then reopened virtually. Restaurants and eateries morphed into curbside pickup and carryout operations as emergency rooms and ICU units overflowed. Rudy and Alice lost access to the vending machines at the three gyms, but the

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 9*

two located at the employee break rooms at the Port and railroad depot needed more frequent replenishing for supply chain employees, who were now considered essential. “Let’s get two more machines for the supermarkets,” Rudy said.

“Maybe after the virus goes away,” she said, sidestepping the question.

“I can ID locations while you think about it,” he said.

“I’m not ready for more machines.”

“It’s a good return for little work. You’ve gone soft with your cushy government job.” Now masked everywhere they went, she and Rudy replenished and maintained two machines

four times a week. They used copious amounts of hand sanitizer, wore medical gloves while handling products, wiping them down with sanitary sheets before inserting them into the machines; they cleaned the machine buttons before and after servicing them. Vending machine income plummeted to a fraction of what it had been before the pandemic, motivating Rudy to push for an expansion. She wanted to sell the six gym machines, but Rudy wanted to ride out the disruption.

Months into the pandemic, he called saying he couldn't make the run.

“What's going on?”

“Emergency call,” he said.

“You can't send someone else?”

“We're short-staffed,” he said. “Can you handle both machines alone?”

Maneuvering the wagon in and out of the van and into the two buildings presented Mt. Everest-size challenges. At the railroad depot, she parked close to the entrance. The wagon rolled too fast down the portable ramp, catching her left heel multiple times. Fuck, she screamed aloud  
*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 10*

as pain seared her heel and radiated into her shin, her eyes watering from it. She bent over to rub her shin and heel and to collect herself once the wagon sat on flat ground. Then, the stupid wagon wobbled from the weight of cans and bottles as she pulled it toward the entrance. At the entrance, it tilted, sending a lemon-flavored soft drink flying. It hit the ground and exploded, spraying her, the wagon, and everything around her including the depot's glass door with sticky liquid. Sticky from soft drink residue, she collected the still spraying can and tossed it into the trash. Although the paper towels felt damp, she cleaned the railroad depot's glass door, instead smearing the stickiness. The hand sanitizer made her sticky hands worse. She rubbed her palms on her jeans.

Employees requesting snacks had plastered adhesive notes with suggestions on the machine's door. She slipped them into the cash envelope. It took twice as long to replenish the machines and check the innards. She washed up in the restroom and with a wet restroom paper towel cleaned the front door before leaving. She missed Rudy. He handled the wagon with ease. It took an extra thirty minutes to restock a single machine. She set the snacks required for the second machine into the wagon. At the Port break room, a note taped to the machine notified her it wouldn't take change. Rudy would either repair it himself or they'd call a service company.

She completed the coin count and paperwork after midnight and headed home without dinner. She texted Rudy, “Done. Change collector on Port machine is broken. Do you want me to call the repair service? Or do you want to fix it?”

At home, hungry and exhausted, she showered in the quiet house. Bella's absence felt palpable. She'd been an exceptionally talkative cat, which Alice loved about her. She meowed for sardines promptly at 6 a.m., and Alice appreciated that her feline alarm clock kept her on  
*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 11*

track and gave her focus. The kitty also discerned shitty people, swishing her tail and staring at those she disliked, people who later always exhibited a less than stellar character. Without Bella, she felt unmoored. She fell into bed. Solo trips represented a vulnerability, she thought, drifting off to sleep.

She struggled to stay awake at work the next day and realized she should have used leave but gave it no thought when Rudy hadn't texted or called. She knew the pandemic had increased plumbing emergencies; after work, she slept. The next day, when he failed to respond to her text about the broken machine, she called and texted his cell again. When she called his line at the office, the call went straight to voice mail. Helen didn't pick up either. The following day, she called again: "Dad, what's up for tonight? Do you want me to call a repair service for the broken machine?"

A few hours later, he phoned. "Hey, kiddo. I can't make it tonight. You got this. Get the number from Helen for the repair." His voice sounded subdued, scratchy. "What's wrong?"

"Emergency call," he said, almost in a whisper.

"Emergency call, my ass," she said. "You're sick."

"It's nothing," he said. "Just a bad cold. Maybe the flu."

"I'm taking you to the ER."

"For a sore throat? No way."

"Stubborn old man," she said.

When she let herself into her father's house, she found Rudy lying on his stomach on the sofa, barely able to stand, still wearing work clothes. Knowing his routine of showering after  
*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 12*

work, this alarmed her.

"Can you make it to the car?" she asked.

When he shook his head, she called 9-1-1.

At the ED, she handled the billfold biopsy, and then the nurse gave her a sheet with phone numbers and told her to leave. She left Rudy's ID and insurance cards but took his wallet and phone. Later, a nurse called, saying Rudy tested positive for the new virus and was being admitted. How a careful man like Rudy became infected baffled her. He'd worn gloves and a mask in public places. She considered his plumbing service calls into sick people's homes and called Helen. The entire staff, and customers who Rudy had called just before he fell ill, needed to get tested and possibly quarantine.

"Visualize him coming home," Helen said. "I'll put his name on a bunch of prayer lists. And with my friends who do energy work."

Helen's friends doing "energy work" offered Alice no solace. Returning to her empty house—1,946 square feet of solitude—felt brutal; doing everything for herself and by herself seemed like watching herself die a little inside every day.

She played phone tag with nurses who kept her updated. He'd spent one night in a regular room before being moved to the virus' ICU unit, where nurses dressed in yellow protective gear that made them look like astronauts. Within two weeks, they put him on a ventilator. Several plumbing employees, including Helen, tested positive and were quarantined. Alice told Helen to close the shop until everyone quarantined for two weeks. Even more puzzling, Alice did not test positive despite the proximity to her father.

"He could have gotten it anywhere," Helen said.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 13*

"Maybe plumbers shouldn't be going into homes where people are sick," Alice said.

"They wear protective gear. You know how careful Rudy is."

"He was still exposed," Alice said.

Maintaining two machines exhausted her. She collected mail and watered his plants at Rudy's house. She imagined selling all the machines while he was in the hospital, but she couldn't face his disappointment when he returned. Although his nurses called often, they reported discouraging news, a Ferris wheel of days with ups and downs. On the fortieth day of his hospitalization, a nurse called, saying Rudy had taken a turn for the worse.

In the ICU anteroom, she donned all the protective gear—shoe and head covers, gloves, scrubs overtop her clothes and a yellow gown overtop the scrubs, two masks, a shield. She left her purse in a bag at the nurse's station and then stepped into his room. She clutched Rudy's hand in her gloved one. Still attached to the ventilator breathing for him, he appeared absent, his beard unkempt. She came to say goodbye, clutching his hand as the ventilator stopped. She'd wept uncontrollably over her cat, but now in Rudy's room, no tears came. Dazed, she asked for a chaplain.

###

A muted funeral forced her father's friends to pay their respect from their cars in the cemetery. A month later, she still hadn't made any decisions about Rudy's assets. Helen continued operating the plumbing business with Alice signing documents for her father. Alice made vending runs, and she started the process to establish his estate with the state. Unable to focus on any one thing, she looked for signs from Rudy, signs that Helen said would appear: coins, feathers, songs on the radio with messages, cardinals, dragonflies. No signs came.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 14*

The man at the pizzeria, bald with silver earrings, asked her what she wanted from behind his mask.

"Picking up. Alice Oliver."

The man looked through his orders, then shrugged.



“Sorry. Nothing for Alice Oliver,” he said, barely audible through his mask.

“I phoned it in. Cauliflower crust pizza with artichokes and vegan cheese.”

The man laughed, his eyes crinkled with mirth. “We don’t sell that here.”

“It’s on your website menu.”

“Maybe you called another place.”

She was certain she’d called this place, Vinny’s Pizza Palace. “I paid for it over the phone.”

“Not here,” he said.

“Yes, here. I called it in. I paid for it. You said twenty minutes. It’s twenty goddamned minutes. What the fuck do you mean, ‘not here’?” Alice surprised herself, slapping the counter, shouting at the man for something as dumb as a pizza. She couldn’t stop the tears either—crying seemed to be happening too much lately. She had stepped into an alternative world where everything looked familiar but felt different, where she wanted to slap the man behind the counter.

“Pizza Pie in the Sky,” the man said, pointing toward the south wall.

“Stop mocking me,” Alice shouted.

“Pie in the Sky Pizza, down the street. Sells those froufrou vegan pizzas.” She’d come to the wrong place. Face flushed, she yelled an apology and fled, realizing

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 15*

how ridiculous she sounded.

At Pie in the Sky Pizza, she picked up her order and hurried home, grateful for a night free of a vending run. She had not yet decided to keep or sell the machines. Ever prepared, Rudy had long ago outlined his arrangements and registered his will, providing a road map of what he wanted her to do with his stuff. There was too much of it. She’d inherited his house and plumbing business, but she wanted to preserve everything as if he’d return. Before she could open the pizza box, her doorbell rang. Through the peephole, she saw a man wearing a red bandana overtop long, curly black hair. He held a large cardboard box. His cheekbones jutted against his surgical mask, and he was humming a sea shanty. He looked suspicious. “Who is it?” she yelled, sounding mean, without opening the door.

“Andre,” he said. “I have something from Rudy.”

“Rudy who?” she said, testing him.

“Rudy Oliver, the plumber,” he said. “Your dad, right? Months ago, he paid for what’s in this box for you.”

Alice opened the door. Andre, dressed in cycling clothes, slipped off his shoes before entering and walked straight into her house carrying the box, which he set on the living room

floor. He stepped six feet away from her. She put on her mask. Tall, lean, and muscular, she guessed him to be about her age.

“How do you know Rudy?”

Andre shrugged. “Friend of my father’s. Aunt Helen works for him.”

Nonplussed by her hostility, he hummed the sea shanty and opened the box.

“Helen never mentioned you,” Alice said.

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 16*

Andre shrugged. “She never mentioned you either,” he said. “Until Rudy called about what’s in this box.”

Alice heard loud meows.

“Your dad asked me about them months ago. But they weren’t born yet. He planned to give them to you himself,” he said, pulling out two tuxedo kittens; both fit in his large hands. He handed one to Alice.

“Meet Sylvester and Luna,” he said. Both kittens had green eyes. “You need to get them spayed and neutered. You know the drill.”

The male refused to be contained and wiggled free from Alice’s hands. Andre set Luna on the floor.

Alice felt her heart beating in the barrel of her chest. “Where did they come from?” She fished Sylvester from under the sofa and held his tiny body close. He purred into her neck. She tried holding them both close to her chest, but they wriggled free and scampered away. “My ex split and left me her pregnant cat. Rudy had said yours died.”

“She was nineteen,” she said.

“That’s a long life,” Andre said.

He pulled two folders, one red and one blue, out of the box. “You need to sign these,” he said, handing her two sets of adoption papers. “Rudy already paid the adoption fees. Basically, you’re agreeing to get them fixed and to take them to the vet. They’ve had their first round. Due to the pandemic, I’ve been asking adopters to make written plans naming who’d take care of the cats if anything happened to the adopters.”

“That’s macabre,” Alice said. She signed and returned the papers. “It’s just me.”

*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 17*

He placed a sheet in each folder and kept two. “Nope. It’s practical.”

“Who knew about this?”

“Everyone at Oliver’s Plumbing,” he said. “Rudy got all this,” he said, pointing to the contents in the box. He set a pair of litter mats on the floor, two stainless steel litter boxes atop and two large bags of litter. “He insisted on the stainless steel litter boxes, just so you know. He also got

kibble and some cans of kitten food, enough for a month. That's still in my car."

Andre hummed to himself. Alice picked up the beaded air freshener containers from the box and pictured Rudy. Of course he'd insist on scented beads. Andre pulled a box with a cat water fountain in it and handed it to Alice. "This too."

Alice led him down the stairs into the basement, where she had kept Bella's litter. Andre arranged the boxes side by side and poured litter into each one. Alice set the kittens down, one in each litter box, as soon as Andre finished.

"I hate to leave them," he said. "They're the last two. I kept the mom. She's a tuxedo. She had seven kittens, all mostly all black or gray. These are the only tuxes." The kittens climbed out of the litter boxes and scampered into the front room of the basement, where household goods sat lined on shelves in neat, organized rows. When Andre saw the shelves, he chuckled. "Looks like the house version of the plumbing shop. I'm sorry about Rudy," Andre said. "He was a character."

She didn't want him to leave.

"Helen said to tell you 'signs come in all ways.'"

"Thank you," she said.

"Not me. Rudy. He insisted on stainless steel litter boxes. Didn't know they existed, but  
*Scalia/Pie in the Sky Pizza/page 18*

they're easier to clean."

"Goodness, where are my manners? How about something to drink? How about some pizza?"

Andre shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm vegan."

"It's from Pie in the Sky Pizza."

Andre set the folders on the kitchen table and sang the sea shanty aloud as he washed his hands at the kitchen sink.

THE END