

A Banquet of Onions

by Rafael Alvarez

“It’s hard to imagine civilization without onions ...”

- Julia Child

It was a negotiation worthy of a stevedore’s strike: protracted, rough, hammered out in the back of a waterfront saloon, and, at the 11th hour, resolved.

“Deal?” asked Sister Dolores, extending a dark, heavily veined hand.

“Deal,” said Basilio, taking it.

The aging Franciscan’s grip – firm, bony and without compromise – pinched like a message, a memo that the struggling artist who lettered shop signs and painted shellfish on the sides of seafood trucks - missed in his relief.

This is how a 12-year-old named India Jean Boulosa – a prodigy of promise and pluck, a kid bouncing between parents wrestling with problems they didn’t know they had - joined the last graduating class of St. Stanislaus Kostka in Baltimore.

“One more thing,” said Dolores, draining her glass of beer.

Anxious to tell India’s mother that he’d taken care of everything, Basilio stood up.

“No,” he said. “We shook on it.”

“You’re right,” said the nun. “We did.”

Down the road, Basilio would forget the singe of her eyes but not the voice and never her fingers (too long, as though they carried an extra knuckle) or the tops of her hands -- a blackish purple, paper-thin and bruised from brushing against a font or statue or the edge of the Formica table in the convent where she took her meals alone.

A stone, a leaf.

An unfound door carved with the faces of the faithful.

Basilio would paint those hands over and over in the years to come – floating above the tarred rooftops of Baltimore, at the end of the wrists of other artists – and he'd flinch at his impatience, how he'd stupidly talked beyond the sale.

O Lost!

And by the wind grieved.

Trudy, come back ...

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Labor Day weekend, 1993.

Two days earlier, Basilio Boullosa had been stared down by another woman.

“Get her in a good school,” said Trudy, threat unspoken. “I’m out of ideas.”

She hit Basilio the moment he walked through the front door of her house (briefly theirs) after a summer long road trip he'd taken with India.

A summer without having to care for her daughter had left Trudy exhausted, defeated by a crippled city's crippled schools - *“...broken words never meant to be spoken, everything is*

broken ...” – and sickened by the suspicion that all of the men she’d trusted since leaving Basilio were just like him, only worse.

Trudy had changed in the months that Basilio and India were away, two clicks to the left of the Yaquis and still turning: burning sage at dawn, solitary dinners of cucumber and yogurt (pretzels for protection, nutmeg for power) as father and daughter traveled 10,000 miles in a station wagon someone had given Basilio in exchange for an oil painting of Moe Drabowsky.

Whatever she was surrendering to, it did not include her soon-to-be ex-husband.

“Jesus Trudy,” said Basilio. “School starts Monday.”

India had nearly forgotten these conversations over the months away. Breaking free of her mother’s embrace, she took her backpack and violin, went upstairs to her room and closed the door. Trudy took the plate of grapes she’d been eating, passed Basilio on her way to the stairs without looking at him and left him alone at the bottom of the steps.

“Get her in a decent school,” she said from the landing. “Or I’ll take her someplace where good schools are free.”

“THAT WOULD BE KANSAS!”

She disappeared at the top of the steps and he shouted louder – “TRUDY!” – detonating months of manicured hope that she would miss him enough (the three of them together) to keep trying. “WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU EXPECT ME TO DO OVER A HOLIDAY WEEKEND?”

Trudy opened her bedroom door and said, without emotion, “You’re Mister Baltimore. You know people.”

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“How do you know Tony Abato?”

“He cut my mother’s hair when I was a kid.”

A far corner of Zeppie’s in the last true neighborhood gin mill on a waterfront where – back when St. Stan’s still had its own priest, in the days before containerization – the pastor would bless crates of Krakow ham poached by the stevedores before the booty was divvied up.

A couple of hams for the poor (as long as they were Polish) and the rest sold from behind the bar or traded for one of the thousand favors that blew through the cobbled streets where the tugboats tied up, all of them named by Limeys more than two centuries ago: Lancaster, Durham, Aliceanna and Shakespeare.

“Mine too,” said Dolores, remembering when Tony cut hair at the convent; two dozen nuns living together in the 1950s, before the first Roman Catholic president of the United States was here today and gone tomorrow.

Before hippie shit and personal fulfillment and the trouble-making Berrigans began calling the sisters not *to* the world but *into* the world, where, of course, they lost their way.

Tony Abato had a Franciscan aunt – half-Polish, half-Italian, all Baltimore. Two, maybe three times a year, after weeks-long binges of booze and dope, guilt and remorse, he’d show up at the convent with combs and scissors and his trumpet.

Free haircuts and Glenn Miller numbers after supper, the sisters dancing together and laughing, Tony redeemed, if just for an evening. Dolores was younger than the rest, and Abato played “A White Sport Coat and a Pink Carnation,” especially for her. Now she was the last, alone in a small castle of granite where she’d lived since taking vows as a teenager.

“It was cloistered when I was little and it was an honor to help the sisters clean,” said Dolores, wiry at 80, a tough old hammer running what was left of the show. “When Mother Superior wasn’t around, we’d sneak and peep and see what we could see.”

“What did you see?”

“Floors you could eat off of.”

Dolores lived alone a few doors up from the tavern in the three story convent – 23 cells, large parlor and a dining hall, a chapel identified with the word *kaplica*, and life-sized statues of plaster statues of saints and martyrs succumbing to all manner of atrocious death and rapture.

Principal, janitor, math teacher, boiler tender and charwoman – laundering cafeteria dish towels along with the altar linens - Dolores did everything at St. Stan’s except say Mass and hear Confession. The other day, someone saw her balanced on a bosun’s chair a hundred feet above the ground and thought she was trying to hang herself or jump when she was simply washing the convent windows.

Still, there were enough old-timers left in the gentrifying neighborhood to stop Dolores at the market, her canvas shopping bag with just enough in it for that night’s dinner, and dump their troubles.

“Goddamn Greeks threw me out of the diner, Dee. Put me on the shit list,” said Miss Josie the other day. “Banned me.”

“How come?”

“’cused me of stealin’, made me empty my pockets.”

Dolores feigned sympathy, shook her head – *tsk, tsk*.

“Stealing what, Josie?”

“Sugar packets, right there for anybody to use. That ain’t stealin’, Sister.”

“What is it, Joze?”

“That’s just taking.”

Dolores took Josie's hand, her small gold cross lost in the burrs of an old blue sweater, and offered succor if not absolution.

"Forget about it."

Basilio had not come to Zeppie's to confess, certainly not the dead-to-rights trespasses that led Trudy to walk away. All those hours on the road with India as she slept or read or stared out the window, led him to conclude that Trudy would have left one day no matter what, that his shenanigans simply made it easier for her to go.

"Tony and I belong to the same club," he said.

"The crybaby club?" laughed Dolores. "The ones who sit down our basement on Thursday night drinking coffee and boo-hoo-hooing? Throwing their cigarette butts in the gutter?"

"Woe is me," smiled Basilio.

"Good for you, I'm having a beer," she said, raising a finger in the air to get the bartender's attention. "Thank God for that basket they pass around. It's a big help."

Zeppie came out from behind the counter, something he did for no one else, with a tall draught for Dolores and a bottled soda for Basilio.

"There was a heavy faith around here back when drunks knew what an act of contrition was," she said, licking the froth from the lip of the glass. "You could almost touch it."

"I came up with Vatican Two."

Dolores sniffed: "God is love."

"Right," said Basilio. "God is love."

And tuition at St. Stanislaus was \$2,300, about \$2,220 more than Basilio could get his hands on at any one time.

“Has she been baptized?”

“Yes.”

“Communion?”

Basilio shook his head.

“We dropped the ball.”

“What does she believe?”

“You know,” he said. “Don’t cheat, don’t lie, don’t steal.”

“Do unto others,” said Dolores and Basilio brightened. But the nun did not, holding Basilio’s gaze just long enough to make him feel like he’d stepped in dog shit.

“Her God is music,” he said; the truth abrasive enough for Basilio to hope the old woman would get up and leave.

“Where did she go last year?”

“Public school.”

“Why not keep her there?”

“Not safe.”

“Grades?”

Basilio shrugged, *so-so*.

“Why aren’t you with her mother?”

"It's not safe."

Silence.

"That was a joke, Sister."

"Funny," said Dolores and she asked the question again.

"I was not a good husband," said Basilio. "She threw me out."

"But you're a good father and I like you" said Dolores. "I'm gonna help you out."

Voila!

"We need more people at Mass. I want her to play at the Sunday folk Mass."

"No."

"No?"

"Come on, sister. A Catholic folk group? She's too good to pick up bad habits."

"Both of you have to be invested."

"She can teach," said Basilio, unsure of where the idea came from.

"Teach what to whom?"

"Music to the little kids. The ones who want it."

"Want what?"

"Something they can be good at."

"Has she ever taught before?"

"I learn something from her every day."

Dolores' mind scanned decades of obituaries in which violins and clarinets survived the forgotten polka stars of yesterday, wondering how many kids would be content with an accordion; remembering the weddings and church hall dances that rocked St. Stan's every Saturday night and Sunday afternoon of the year.

"I like it," she said.

"She's in?"

"You're in."

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India taught (usually music but sometimes math) and – along with an African-American kid who went to a Baptist church near Johns Hopkins Hospital - did join the other kids preparing for Confirmation. She was not required to attend religion class (though often she did) and used the free time to worship her God in one of the many empty classrooms.

Some of the kids – goodie-goodies and bad-asses alike, one boy who was already shaving and would do something very stupid to get India's attention before the year was out – spied on her when her violin echoed in the halls.

Until Dolores marched down the hall and broke it up: "This isn't a concert, children, move it along..."

She put Basilio in touch with a businessman who supplied the paint. He brought his own brushes and found scaffolding in the basement.

"No blas-feemin' once you're up there making it pretty," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you artist types," said Dolores. "Don't get any big ideas."

And this is how Basilio Boullosa – a sign painter with ambition so big it embarrassed him, a fine artist who put the face of Elvis Presley on a hundred and one wheat pennies over the summer, trading them for gas and food when the adventure was close to collapse – exchanged weeks of back pain and neck cramps below the ceiling of a century-old Polish sanctuary in a city holding on by the skin of the few teeth it had left.

One Sistine Chapel on the Patapsco for a year of Catholic education.

He'd done what Trudy had demanded and still managed to upset her.

Baptized in infancy (as was Basilio) and long dutiful (as Basilio was not), Trudy had come to despise Catholicism and the scold of its patriarchy; once nailing a crucifix above the front door to haunt her husband's comings and goings (replaced by a watercolor of a toad, the cross of rosewood now in a forgotten drawer) and, finally sick of pulling the sled by herself, had no interest in a trip to the rectory for a load of sacrificial hogwash from a man in a dress.

Basilio got up to leave and Dolores stopped him.

"How'd she get that name?"

"What?"

"India," said Dolores. "What kind of name is that?"

"Colors," said Basilio. "Because of the colors."

India in the backyard, reading under the Fleckenstein tree when Basilio came home with dinner and sheet music for gypsy folk songs she'd been asking for. India closed her book, a door stopper she'd picked up at a junk store on the road, and looked up to see her father smiling.

"You're in," he said - holding up a large, brown bag streaked with grease. "Crab cakes from the Sip and Bite! French fries and gravy!"

India almost smiled. She knew kids who went to the Catholic school near her mother's house - an oasis in the city with big ballfields and a huge kitchen for spaghetti dinners - but not one squeezed between bars and tugboats and places where, if you knew what day to show up, you could still get a freshly butchered duck.

Basilio gave her the sheet music – "Keep it away from the food" – and asked her to bring out glasses of water. As she did, he stared up at the Fleckenstein tree and considered all that had happened in the past 36 hours.

It was to the maple's majesty ("that tree's too big for the yard," his father had said more than once, the roots eating into the terra-cotta sewage pipes, back-ups in the basement and complaints from the neighbors) that Basilio had prayed since getting sober.

A stone rolled.

Leaves falling across a door open just wide enough for unexpected grace to greet an unlikely candidate.

["I like you kid. I'm gonna help you out..."]

Less than a month after Bessie Fleckenstein became a widow her son moved her into his house somewhere out beyond the Beltway. About to hang her last line of wash on Macon Street after a lifetime there, the kindly German Catholic leaned over the wire fence separating her yard

from the Boulosa's - the last neighbor who had known Basilio's grandparents - and said, "Hon, do you want my house?"

She just about gave it away for nothing (just about nothing was all Basilio had), saying with the peace of someone who's life has been well-lived. "I know you'll take care of it."

The unerring punctuality of chance.

To Miss Bessie, who shed a tear: "Thank you."

To the tree, rustling its response: "Thank you."

India returned with the water and Basilio set a crab cake in front of her, lump back fin, as big as a softball.

"Not only are you in," he said, "but you're in the eighth grade."

Another hiccup in a long weekend of surprises. India nodded. She would have been happy to quit school and travel the world as a minstrel, acquiring songs the way other girls collected false friends. Or go the other way and earn a Ph.D.

It was all the same to her, for the first gift she'd received from the God of the Fleckenstein tree was her talent (no other musicians on either side of the family) and the second was knowing that the black case lined with velvet held everything she needed to survive in this world.

"Come on, kid," said Basilio. "Let's eat."

He set out a Greek salad to go with the crab and fries. Rice pudding sprinkled with cinnamon for dessert along with a couple of kebabs for India's first-day-of-school lunch the next day.

Skewers of lamb and vegetables on which the old man, still working the grill at 80, always put an extra hunk of onion in memory of his family's misfortune -- *megalos limos* -before making it in America.

Whenever Basilio came to the diner - sometimes to eat, sometimes to sketch faces that didn't exist anywhere else but Baltimore - the Greek would tell war stories as he flipped eggs.

"For months, dinner was just an onion, maybe roasted, not even oil," he said, his back to Basilio as though he were regaling the bacon and eggs. "If you had two onions you were better off than other families. Three and you were rich."

And now they used a thousand pounds a week and the grill was never cold.

In dreams, the appearance of an onion – red, white or purple; sweet or tart – symbolized strength to overcome grief.

And green!

Wisps of translucence, a thin leafy stalk in your hand like a brush dipped in crimson. If you are eating one in a dream it is promised that better days are coming.

Who but the very few have experienced *smell* in a dream, waking up to wipe the sting from their eyes?

A breeze blew the napkins away. Basilio got up to chase them and used India's book for a paperweight, the red and black cover showing a shifty rake and his three sons.

"Your Mom was reading this when she was pregnant with you."

India put a forkful of crab on a saltine – a golden rarity anywhere outside of the Chesapeake watershed, a lesson she learned the hard way on the road trip.

"I know," she said, taking a bite.

“What’s it about?”

“Well,” she said, sipping water. “The part I just finished was about a mean old woman, a witch.”

Basilio nibbled feta.

“Did she fly on a broom?”

“She was selfish.”

“How selfish?”

“Super duper selfish.”

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