

Death by Dinner

by Howard Giordano

I can't believe it's Frankie, but there he is at a table on the far side, just in front of the big picture window. I hold the menu close to my face and peek again over the top, watching as he reaches under the white linen tablecloth to plant his hand on his newest bimbo's knee. He used to do that with me, before we were married. It must mean something special to him, like showing who's in charge, or his way of letting you know what he expects later on. Once we were married, though, he stopped doing it. That's because he was too busy doing it to all those bimbos he had on the side.

I feel my anger beginning to fuel my appetite. It's a reaction I've lived with since early childhood. Of course, my mother's ethnic family tradition of overfeeding their young never helped matters. Both of my brothers—large, beefy figures today, each weighing in at better than 250 pounds—achieved their size with little more incentive than hearing the word, “Eat!”

Better be careful, Mazie, I tell myself. This is how stress used to affect you, always with the same results: a pig-out on junk food, ice cream, chocolates and enormous amounts of in-between-meals snacking. In high school, these binges would take over my life until I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror. I had to go on a crash diet after each one, which was nearly impossible at my mother's dinner table. Thank God, I had the two jumbo bookends sitting on either side of me to take up the slack.

I smile, remembering somehow in between binges and diets, I managed to get myself voted Junior Prom Queen, and in my senior year, Homecoming Queen. No matter how heavy I got, I still had the prettiest face in my class at Southside High School.

Ah, but ten years of Frankie, putting up with his constant cheating, was the worst. Those binges nearly destroyed me. And, that bastard had the balls to call me a blimp right in front of the judge granting me the divorce? I wanted to kill him. I think the judge did too. She was on *Weight Watchers*, she told me later, and

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wanted to know if I thought I might like to see some of their literature.

"Ma'am, have you decided?" The waiter has returned to take my order.

"No Chester, I'm still trying to make up my mind. I need a little more time."

"Yes, ma'am."

I scan the inserted list of specials first before moving on to the restaurant's standard bill of fare. I've dined here so often, I can almost recite the menu by heart. I feel like it's my home away from home, cozy and family-like, only without the fat bookends.

Damn it! What the hell is Frankie doing in my place? He said he'd never come back here after that first time. He hated it. He knows it's my favorite so the chances of running into me are pretty good. Damn him! He's just trying to piss me off. Don't pay attention, Mazie. Shut him out of your mind.

Let's see, should I skip the appetizer? Oooh, wow, they've added stuffed Portobello mushrooms to the menu. I love them. Stuffed with sausage, prosciutto, onions and roasted peppers, topped with fresh mozzarella cheese, baked and served in a rustic tomato sauce. Boy, does that sound good. Maybe I'll start with that.

Will you look at him . . . that son-of-a-bitch . . . he's actually blowing in her ear. I can't believe it. Stop looking at him, you fool. Mushrooms, Portobello mushrooms, yeah, I think I'll order it. I can take it to his table, make like I'm about to bend over to kiss him hello. Then I'll grab his big nose, hold it and cram the mushroom down his throat--sausage, mozzarella and all--until he chokes to death. Enough, Mazie, you're letting him spoil your dinner. Stop looking.

Okay then, should I order a salad? Their salads are always wonderful. Oh, here's one I've never had. Sliced beefsteak tomato, sliced French Roquefort cheese and fresh white anchovies over wilted baby greens with balsamic vinaigrette dressing. Frankie hates anchovies, always picking them out of his Caesar salads. I remember how he almost threw up once, that time in Miami when

he accidentally swallowed one he'd missed. He turned blue, gagging. I thought he was going to check out. It scared the hell out of me. That's it; I'll have the salad and order it with double anchovies, pick them out, go up behind him and stick them, one by one, up his big Roman nose. That'll do him in, for certain. Cut it out, Mazie. Back to the menu.

What's the soup special? Let's see. Ooh, Chef Michel must be on tonight. They have his wonderful onion soup. Heritage onion soup topped with a toasted crouton and melted Swiss cheese. Maybe that'll be too much after the stuffed Portobello and salad. Aah, what the hell, how often do they have it on the menu? I'll go for it.

Will you look at that moron. What's he doing now? Is that the worse display of table manners in the world? He's such a classless act. My God, how embarrassing was he that time on the cruise to the Bahamas, sitting at the captain's table? He insisted on drinking his Coors right from the bottle instead of using the stupid glass. You'd think he was in some roadhouse with his buddies or something. For God's sake, now he's wearing a napkin tucked in over his tie. What did the fool order, the lobster? He hates lobster. Use the bib, you moron. Oh, shit! Who cares? Don't look at him.

Anyway, I'm going to have the soup. Heritage onion is Chef Michel's own version, made with Swiss cheese instead of Gruyere. It's unusual, but it's also delicious. Yeah, with Swiss cheese, Frankie. That's why it's not called French onion, you dope! Just couldn't get your pea brain around that idea, could you Frankie? Gave me such an argument that first time we came here. Boy, would I like to feed it to him again. Get him a great big bowl and when he bends down to slurp off his spoon, shove his puss in the bowl and hold it there until he drowns. Hey, Frankie, can you smell the Swiss cheese now? I wonder if that's possible, to drown in a bowl of soup? All right Mazie, now you're going off the deep end. Get a grip and take a deep breath, will you? Pretend he's not here.

I fold the menu, lay it across my lap and reach for my Rob Roy. Before ordering dinner, I generally have two drinks, for medicinal reasons, I like to tell myself. I discovered some time ago about the

digestive benefits of angostura bitters and made the switch from Scotch on the rocks to Rob Roys.

We'd been at one of those boring white tie, construction industry dinners that Frankie was always dragging me to. Before dinner, he'd suggested I try a Manhattan and I protested. Like he thought it was more sophisticated than Scotch on the rocks. "I don't like the taste of whiskey," I said. "I like Scotch."

"So, have a Rob Roy," Frankie argued. "It's the same as a Manhattan only with Scotch." It was at that moment the overweight wife of one of Frankie's foremen at our table told me of the digestive benefits of angostura bitters. I was promptly converted and the first thing I did when the drink arrived was to eat the maraschino cherry. Boy, did Frankie ever shoot me a look?

Chester suddenly appears. "Have you decided, ma'am," he says glancing down at the folded menu on my lap.

"Oh, gee, I'm sorry, Chester. I'm just taking a breather. But I think I've narrowed down the starters. Give me a few more minutes and I'll be all set."

"Yes ma'am, take your time."

I open the menu again and turn to the entrée listing. I scan down the page and read each item carefully. When I arrive at the leg of lamb, taste buds explode on my tongue. New Zealand leg of lamb encrusted with Dijon mustard and chopped pistachios roasted and served with mint pesto sauce. Accompanied by oven roasted Parmesan potatoes and green beans amandine. I can almost smell the heady aroma of roasting lamb and the sweet scent of mint sauce wafting from the kitchen except that a strong, choking veil of cigar smoke is filling the air and fouling my senses. It has floated across the restaurant from the smoking section. I look in that direction and spot Frankie with the largest cigar I ever saw planted right in the middle of his face.

Oh, Frankie likes his cigars, long, thin panatelas from Mexico, but he never smoked anything that large before. It looked like you would need two hands to hold it. But, why the hell are they allowing him to smoke a cigar? I thought most restaurants prohibited cigars,

even in the smoking section. Good lord, everyone's looking at him and he's puffing away like a chimney. I can't believe him. What an inconsiderate jackass! Maybe when I finish the leg of lamb, I'll go over there and beat his head in with the bone. I bet no one in the restaurant would care. Probably applaud me.

I finish my second Rob Roy while I concentrate on the dessert portion of the menu. Leg of lamb deserves to be washed down with something sweet, I tell myself. I think I'll order The Devil's Own Sinful Sundae. Vanilla ice cream rolled in toasted coconut, covered in chocolate sauce and topped with whipped cream. Oh, God, that'll put me in traction, for sure.

I blink my eyes, irritated from the enveloping cigar smoke, and try to visualize how funny Frankie would look wearing the Sinful Sundae on his head like a hat. Better yet, maybe I'll just knock him out with the lamb bone, not kill him, and then keep his body covered entirely with vanilla ice cream until he dies from hypothermia. That would be poetic. The son-of-a-bitch dying like the cold fish he is. That's real good. Kind of like a Mafia rubout. His construction crew could appreciate that.

At first, I think my eyes are still watering from the smoke, but as I blot the moisture on my cheek with the heel of my free hand, I realize I'm crying. Ah, Mazie, what the hell are you doing? Why even bother. He is so yesterday, and I don't need to go back to my old habits over his shenanigans any more. I haven't binged since the divorce. I'm a beautiful 120 pounds and that's the way I'm going to stay. I raise the menu in the air and wave it at Chester as he passes.

"Ready now?" he says when he arrives at the table.

I set the menu down. "Sorry, Chester, I've changed my mind. I'm not staying."

"Ma'am, something wrong?"

"No, not like that. I just decided I don't need to give in anymore."

I retrieve my handbag and sweater from the adjacent chair, lay a twenty-dollar bill on the table, stand up and look back at the

puzzled expression of the waiter. "Don't worry, Chester, I'll be in again, some other time when the smoke clears."

I feel like this week's big lottery winner as I lace my way unobserved through the tables of diners. I hesitate at the door just behind the huge palm that divides my current world from the past, and stare back at Frankie with his newest acquisition. I shake my head. I wonder how long that'll last. Ah, Mazie, who gives a rat's ass?

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