

The Alchemist's Anchovies

By Matthew Dunn

Antonio heard the voice, a familiar but unplaced memory lifting above the din of hungry patrons pressed against the counter. He tilted his head, and keeping his eyes on his occupied hands, turned a curious ear toward the source. A droplet of sweat fell from his nose and landed on the floor with an unheard splat next to the drying remains of a dozen other splats. Again, the voice resonated, splitting his thoughts like a wishbone. Surrendering, he set the umbrella of bread dough down and wiped his powdered hands on the drape of his apron, his thoughts inexplicably reliving the triumph of conquering a two-wheeled bicycle. He walked slowly toward the sound. A dozen eyes followed, a dozen more indifferent. The phone rang suddenly, elbowing its way to the front of the line. Antonio ignored it.

"Excuse me," a woman said, waving her arm to gather his attention. "Excuse me, please. I'd like to pay for my order before it gets cold."

Antonio nodded apologetically before popping the cash register drawer open. The woman passed him several bills, tweezered between her curt fingers as if to avoid fingerprints. Eager to complete the barter and feed her family, she had decided not to leave a tip.

He made change, sleepwalking it into the palm of her hand while snapping the drawer shut with a thrust of his hips. His eyes swept the crowd behind her. The man with the grey hair, his mind implored, the one holding the training wheels.

In front of a tower of coolers, enveloped in a halo of Coke and Pepsi, Coors and BudLight, a small but steady man stood empty-handed and quiet. His dark brown eyes were just as Antonio remembered; his thinning locks a shallow stream of silver meandering over a bed of sand.

"I understand you're in need of a pizza maker," the elderly man said. He smiled, the white of his teeth jumping from beneath his tanned, leathery skin like a Fourth of July sparkler.

"Yes, I am," Antonio replied. He returned the smile, hipped onto the counter and swung his legs over. He took two quick strides and there he was, squeezing the

blood from the man's hand and pulling him into a triumphant embrace. Once again, he was riding his bicycle to the rhythm of his teacher's cheers.

Buoyant, his hands painting faint white blotches on the denim canvas of the man's back, Antonio held his grandfather tightly, exhaling his name in a flight of freedom doves, "Poppa Angelo, Poppa Angelo."

A hush fell over the room, the horde witnessing the happy reunion as their stomachs gurgled and their pockets and purses jangled in anxious respite. Miles away, someone's loved-one stood in a kitchen with a cocked hip, examining a timepiece.

Antonio loosened his grip and held the old man out in front of him. "You're smaller than I remember," he said.

"You've grown," Poppa Angelo replied.

For a long moment, they stood there, examining each other, imagining the brush strokes of time that had grayed their kaleidoscope memories. Antonio, now a grown man with a restaurant, a wife, and a baby on the way, had been a small boy when he had last seen his grandfather. Up until then, the two were inseparable, the grandfather teaching the grandson everything he knew, including the delicate art of balancing oneself on two rolling wheels. Antonio never completely understood why he had left and never returned, Antonio's mother explaining only that Poppa Angelo was "a restless soul in search of life's true meaning." Antonio understood restless, a small fragment of his own heart remaining so until this moment.

It was the elder man who finally rescued the observing patrons from a cold supper, saying, "Shall I build or bake?"

With a knowing smile, Antonio disappeared into the back briefly before returning with a crisp, clean apron. He watched his grandfather put it on, never blinking as the man pulled it up over his head and wrapped the drawstrings around his waist, captivated like a boy spying on his teenage sister as she primped in front of the bathroom mirror. His grandfather was home again. Antonio could now ride his bike without a wobble.

Until well past midnight, the old man made the pizzas, pin wheeling the elastic dough on his fingers as he spun tales of Italy and France, Brazil and South Africa.

Antonio stood proudly beside him, listening intently while working the ovens and boxing his grandfather's handiwork, each one smelling more sumptuous than the last. Finally, with the world outside the window silent, Antonio hooked a six-pack from the cooler and escorted his new chef outside to one of the freshly festooned, café-style tables his pregnant wife insisted would help them save for their baby's college tuition.

"You've built a fine business for you and your family, Antonio," Poppa Angelo said. He lifted his bottle, offering a toast to his grandson and to the heavens. "If my son were sitting here, I would insist he remove his shroud and profess his joy." He pressed the bottle to his lips.

Antonio mirrored the toast and swallowed a long pull before settling his gaze upon the empty street where the streetlamps stretched into the distance like miles of knotted rope, connecting this town with the next. His father had died in a hospital room only a week ago, passing during a somber gathering of family oddly reminiscent of holidays past. The funeral had been a few days ago, a few days before Poppa Angelo's arrival.

"Had you two talked of late?" Antonio asked.

"No," Poppa Angelo replied regretfully. "I did not know my son, your father. Perhaps had I been here..."

"I was here," Antonio interrupted. "I never knew him either." There was no bitterness in his words, only the illusion of gravity lost floating across his face.

That night, they drank beer and ate a small pizza Poppa Angelo made with the last of the tomato sauce and cheese. They watched the stars tiptoe across the sky, never uttering a word of long ago days until finally Antonio asked his grandfather if he planned to stay. Poppa Angelo simply nodded.



Rebecca stood beside her seated husband, rubbing his sleepy head while she finger-combed his tussled hair. Her other hand sat on her bloated stomach, caressing the other man in her life, the unborn child she knew in her heart was a boy. She hadn't told Antonio of her feeling. She didn't want to raise his hopes if her intuition proved wrong. How badly he wanted a son; how badly he wanted

to be a father to a son. She knew this as much as she knew the Little Tonio growing inside her.

“Drink your coffee, my love,” she instructed adoringly. “Momma gives you permission to play hooky today.”

Antonio exhaled a happy sigh as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pressed his ear to their creation. “If only we had elves like that shoemaker in the fables. We would be rich and I could make love to you all day and night, leaving our bed only to fetch more cakes and wine.” He lifted her curtained blouse and kissed her bare stomach, gazing up with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

“What makes you think I want you to make love to me all day and night?” she replied, feigning repulsion. Betraying her words, Rebecca’s heart hurried, stirring the life growing inside her into a parade of kicks.

“Antonio Jr. likes the idea,” Antonio said proudly. He cupped her stomach with his hand and began to rub, polishing her skin to a glistening amber glow. “He will need a brother.”

Giggling with shocked delight, Rebecca wrestled free his grip and replaced her veil. “I’ve yet to deliver the first and already you’re eager for a second.” Her smile mirrored her husband’s desire, surprising her in a rush of anticipation. She wanted more children but her thoroughly modern mind warned against assembly line reproduction. So why was her body swaying her thoughts, serenading her in the swing of motherhood? She formed a cross with her index fingers, warding off her lover as she backed away toward the gurgling coffee maker. “I think perhaps I should sleep in the baby’s room for a while, at least until your overly-eager Elvis has left the building.”

Antonio laughed hazily, rubbing his eyes to wake and scratch the itch of an old memory. Rebecca had affectionately named his manhood after the King of Rock ‘n’ Roll during their honeymoon in Las Vegas. Antonio had entered the bedroom that night wearing nothing but an Elvis wig as he pronounced to his bride, “I’m in love, I’m all shook up.” For months now, he had kept the “legend” off-stage—his carnal desires held in check, that is—focusing on the restaurant and its role in feeding the hungry mouth expected to arrive in less than a month. His lustful outburst caught him by surprise. *Why this morning?* He thought. He gazed at his wife as she stood at the counter pouring a cup of coffee. She looked more

beautiful than he could ever remember imagining. Elvis requested a sound check. Antonio knew he needed to go to work.

“He’s already down there,” Rebecca said as she watched her husband descend to the factory below, a smoke-signal of steam rising from the cup hidden behind her interlaced fingers. *I’m happy*, it read.

The old man raised the ball of dough from the giant mixer, its weight dangling from his arms like a puckish water balloon, and dropped it with a wet smack onto the table. He gave it a few playful pokes, kneading and spreading it, before taking up a rosewood-handled cutter and loping off a chunk. On the small scale beside him, he laid it down gently, his hand remaining perched like an eagle’s claw as he accessed the quivering needle. *Perfect*. He tossed it aside and chopped off a second piece.

“You’re making me look bad,” Antonio said to his grandfather, his lips staggering into a sleepy grin. He walked up to the table next to Poppa Angelo and picked up one of the small lumps of dough. Working the edges in, he massaged it into a ball and placed it on the metal tray parked at the end of the table. For Antonio, prepping was like his first sip of morning coffee.

“You should be in bed, spooning with your beautiful wife,” Poppa Angelo replied. “Allow an old man to be useful.”

“There’s too much to do,” Antonio said. “Sausage to cook; pepperoni to slice; onions to chop. What kind of host would I be if I took advantage and worked you like a dog?”

“A rich one,” Poppa Angelo replied with a snort. He kept his eyes on his work, hacking off slices of dough, each one tipping the scale as precisely as the last. Tossing the final piece to his grandson, he told him the sausage was already in the oven and all the other toppings were sliced, diced, and chilling in the cooler.

Wondering if he were still asleep and dreaming, Antonio asked him what time he had gone to bed last night.

“Sleep is for the tired,” the old man replied.



The shade of a willowy maple tree cast a deep shadow across the sliver of lawn where Rebecca drooped in a rocker, looking like a thirsty daisy in the summer heat. Antonio had carried the chair outside, insisting that his wife escape their apartment before the ovens below brought their home to a boil. He had promised her air conditioning the year before and it pinched his pride that he could not yet afford it. Business was improving but not as quickly as the size of his family.

Scolding him, Rebecca reminded her husband that they had been living there for three years and that she was used to the heat. "It's never bothered me before," she said, tipping her chin into a sudden, afternoon breeze.

"You weren't pregnant before," Antonio reminded his wife.

Rebecca smiled gently, sat back and began to rock slowly, soothing her husband's tender bruise.

As he watched his flower basket in the sun, a sprinkler of contentment danced in Antonio's eyes. He imagined a baby boy sitting in her lap, mother and child spellbound in each other's gaze. *Antonio junior*, his painted thoughts proclaimed. Rebecca's voice interrupted, asking for the glass of tea he held in his hand. He passed it to her, the ice cubes tumbling happily as she tilted it to her lips. She drank, exhaling an enraptured sigh as she set it to rest on the arm of the rocker.

"You'll not stand there all night gawking," she said. Her rocking resumed as she closed her eyes beneath the warm blanket of the sun. "I'm fine. Go inside and help your grandfather."

Stopping briefly in the doorway, Antonio asked his wife what she might like for dinner.

"Oh, a small pie sounds good, with extra cheese, peppers and green olives. But I'm dining inside. I don't care how hot it gets." She gazed at Antonio, patting her belly as she added, "You know how we both love to watch you work."

Yes, I know, Antonio's smile replied.

Inside the kitchen, Poppa Angelo awaited his grandson.

"When I was a young man," the old man began, "a handful of field mushrooms, a dash of onions, and a healthy coat of mozzarella was all one required to taste

heaven. A golden brown crust you could fold and slide into your mouth." He himself was bubbling, melting into the memory of the first slice he had ever tasted. "This," he said, his voice turning black as he pointed at an overloaded cart, his knotted finger accusing the assorted plastic containers of high treason, "is beyond my comprehension."

"Just giving the customers what they want," Antonio replied with a shrug. "The meat lovers want their pepperoni and sausage, ham and bacon, chicken, hamburger and salami. On Friday, we do a surf and turf special by adding crabmeat, tuna and shrimp."

"No lobster?" Poppa Angelo asked sarcastically.

Antonio chuckled and shook his head. "I don't think the local economy could swallow a thirty-dollar large pizza, even if I threw in extra cheese to keep the clawed sea-urchin from crawling out of the box." He got behind the cart, and with an earthy groan, he pushed it toward the front of the shop. His grandfather followed behind.

"And then there's the health-conscious crowd. Not quite vegetable worship but as close as you can get to the church without actually going inside. They've got to have their daily dose of peppers and onions, spinach, eggplant, olives, asparagus, artichokes, broccoli and corn. I even had one person ask for rhubarb. Fortunately, it was out of season locally so I had a good excuse to refuse. Rhubarb on pizza, can you imagine?"

"As much as I can the rest of this...this...treachery," Poppa Angelo replied. Taut with frustration, his soiled hands fell into his apron, staining it sinfully, absolving the crime. When they reappeared, they held a small, silver canister.

"I won't argue," Antonio said, not noticing the box. He transferred the containers to the counter where his soon-to-arrive customers could pine over their favorites as their meal was prepared right before their eyes. (Like a seasoned stage comedian, Antonio had learned that the setup and delivery was as important as the punch line.) "The public stomach is a fickle organ," he continued as he organized the fleshy reds in a row behind a rainbow of greens, mild toppings to the left, spicy toppings to the right. "Just when you think you've got them pegged, they flip-flop and it's back to the drawing board."

“They are searching,” Poppa Angelo said. “but as blind as mice on a moonless night.” He said it with such confidence that Antonio paused, his occupied gaze tripping on the reflective sparkle in his grandfather’s hands.

“What’s that?” Antonio asked.

“What everyone hungers for,” was all Poppa Angelo told him.



When Antonio opened his eyes that morning, he thought he was in Italy. As if he were awakening in a dream, the bedroom appeared in a crystal haze built of stone pillars tethered by vines of purple grapes and Wisteria. A melodic voice filled the air, deep and fiery, the words unrecognizable except for the name Alessandra—Antonio’s deceased grandmother’s name.

“I hope he doesn’t use up all the hot water,” Rebecca said sleepily as she molded herself against her husband’s back and slid her hands along his middle.

Like butter on a toasted muffin, Antonio melted into his wife’s warm embrace, Poppa Angelo’s song reminding him that he indeed had found his midnight elf. He had no desire to rise, felt no need to hurry to the kitchen below to wrestle with bags of flour or impatient deliverymen eager to complete their rounds. Fishing for Rebecca’s hand, his fingers stitched into hers as his other hand reached behind and skated across her stomach, gently caressing the life inside.

“Don’t wake him up,” Rebecca said. “He’s been tossing and turning all night. He finally fell asleep an hour ago.”

Antonio’s noticed her slip of the tongue, his heart skipping like a little boy to the playground with his first baseball mitt. He said nothing, turning instead to greet his wife. He knew her intuition was never wrong. He was going to have a son.

The couple’s tranquility did not last long. From beneath the cozy cocoon of their bed they heard a tap, tap, tap as if a mouse were in the floorboards with hammer and nails, erecting an extra bedroom for his own growing family, the one Antonio had been attempting to trap—unsuccessfully—since they had bought the restaurant with the second floor apartment three years ago. Silence followed, one second and then two, their suspicious ears scouting, as they lay frozen

beneath a thin wool blanket. Disappointingly, the bothersome beat continued, tap, tap, tap.

“Someone’s at the door,” Antonio sighed. Unknotting himself from Rebecca, he rolled over, swung his feet to the floor and heeled-thumped his way out of the room, telling his wife to stay in bed, that he would be back in a minute. His voice faded down the hallway where he then stumbled on the first few steps leading to the restaurant below, a geyser of muffled obscenities erupting as he grabbed for the railing, nearly pulling it from the wall to catch himself.

Rebecca grimaced and then grinned, thankful for the loud thud that did not follow. Her thoughts then blissfully returned to the pillow.

A few months before, with a wad of five and ten dollar bills that Rebecca had secretly cookied away in a jar, Antonio had replaced the entrance door. The old door, which still read Jocko’s Rib Joint underneath the Antonio’s Pizza Parlor sign taped over it, never would lock right, triggering a determined scowl from Rebecca every time she wrangled with it. The new door was clear glass with bright red lettering and a bell that jingled merrily as soon as Antonio opened it.

Just outside in the awaking dawn, stood a diminutive woman with a purse clutched in her boney, freckled hands. Antonio blinked, rinsing his eyes. He knew the woman—one of his first and best customers—recalling that she had been in alone to get a pizza the night prior. He motioned her to come in.

“Mrs. Quigley,” Antonio said. It was an observation as much as it was a question. His mind thumbed through conclusions, reaching the end of the stack without answer. Then, noticing how her normally barrette-imprisoned, gray hair frolicked in the breeze spirited by the closing door, Antonio grew concerned. His thoughts turned to the old woman’s husband. Mr. Quigley was in poor health, accompanying his wife to the restaurant only on what he called his *good days*. “Is everything all right?” Antonio asked. “Is Mr. Quigley ok?”

“Oh, heaven’s yes, dear boy,” Mrs. Quigley replied. She reached out and laid her hand on his forearm, giving it a gentle squeeze as her bright eyes twinkled. “He’s home sleeping like a baby.”

Antonio nodded with relief.

"He'll probably sleep until noon," she continued. "God knows he should, kept me up half the night after eating that pie of yours."

Puzzled, but then troubled by the anticipated meaning, Antonio traced his memory for the toppings sprinkled on her order. On the rare occasion, some of the spicier items could turn even the most dogged stomachs. Had Mr. Quigley been betrayed by a mutinous mushroom? Antonio instinctively slipped into damage control mode.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Quigley. I'll go a little lighter on the hot peppers next time. And I've been trying a new sausage from a local guy over on Hanover Street. That may have tripped your husband's heartburn." Antonio's palms began to sweat, his pulse jumping like Mexican beans. He could smell the smoke of a wild fire, the manicured landscape of his reputation burning out of control. No, Antonio suddenly realized, that smell was corn meal burning. Poppa Angelo must have already turned on the ovens. *Why would he do that?* He steadied himself as he attempted to salve the situation. "I would suggest he lay off spicy foods for a while. How about I put together a nice antipasto for you two tonight and have my wife drop it by, on the house, of course."

"That's so nice of you to offer, but I don't think you understand," Mrs. Quigley said. "Harold loved the pizza, thought it was the best one he had ever tasted."

Antonio was completely baffled, his next words flowing out like molasses, "So, you came by...at 7AM...to tell me...how good it was?"

Shyly, Mrs. Quigley nodded. She then tilted her head and tossed him a tight-lipped smile. Like a schoolgirl inviting a boy to the dance, she then asked if she could get another one.

"You came to order a pizza?" Antonio asked. Suddenly aware of his appearance, he hurriedly attempted to fold down the corners of his bed-head.

"Just a teensy one, for breakfast," she replied.

"Well, I...I don't think the ovens are hot yet, it might take a while to cook."

"Oh, that's not a problem, dear. I need to go to Macy's anyway, stop in the women's department and pick up a few lady things." She winked just as a coy smile snaked across her face, wiggling in a way Antonio wished he hadn't seen.

She's serious, Antonio realized as he gazed at the frisky senior. A part of him wondered if at any moment she might grab his hand and drag him back into the storage room, tearing at the shorts and tee shirt he suddenly realized were inappropriate for customer service. "I don't think Macys opens until ten, Mrs. Quigley."

"No bother, I'm sure they'll answer if I knock politely." And then she was out the door, reminding Antonio to make her pizza exactly the way it had been prepared the night before. "Exactly!"

Antonio didn't notice Poppa Angelo standing behind him until he spoke.

"I had a feeling she would be in this morning," Poppa Angelo said.

"Is that why you turned the ovens on so early?" Antonio asked.

Poppa Angelo did not reply. Instead, he threw his hand up onto his grandson's shoulder and directed him back into the kitchen just as Antonio was noticing the other cars pulling into his parking lot.



It was mid-morning before the ant parade marched out the door with steaming boxes and blissful smiles. Exhaling in relief, Antonio suddenly remembered his abandoned wife. Poppa Angelo stood beside him, humming a happy tune.

"I'm glad *someone* enjoyed that," Antonio said. He took a towel off the counter and wiped his hands before racking it over his shoulder. Then, after another deep sigh, he turned toward his grandfather, the blotches of flour that covered his face casting a ghostly expression. "Maybe now's a good time to clue me in about your little tin of sardines. Just so I have something to explain to my curious wife when I go upstairs three hours late."

"Anchovies, actually," Poppa Angelo replied. He yanked Antonio's towel from its perch and began sweeping the counter, pooling the errant pebbles of cheese that had missed their mark. "I'm getting sloppy in my old age." He snorted. He continued cleaning, silent and content, appearing confident his grandson would steer the conversation where he needed it to go.

“Anchovies,” Antonio said. He meant it as a question, but it came out sounding like surrender, an admission that in one night, his grandfather had accomplished what Antonio had been attempting to do for three years. He wasn’t jealous or angry, not that he would admit to anyway. Still, he was a bit put-off by his grandfather’s not-so-transparent strutting, a copulatory rooster having just delivered the eggs. Antonio repeated the question, only this time acting incurious.

“I found them in the rain forests of Brazil,” Poppa Angelo replied. He scooped up the amassed pile of cheese with his hands and dropped it into the square tub anchored into a crisply carved hole in the counter. He then brushed the crumbs from his hands. “Very rare and hard to come by. Local legend claims that wherever they swim, ordinary rock turns into gold. I had to defeat the mightiest warrior of the Kayapo tribe to get them.” Finished with his cleanup and apparently his explanation, he returned the towel to his grandson’s shoulder, patted him on the back and disappeared into the kitchen. His fading words cautioned Antonio how little time they had to prepare for lunch.

“But we’re not open for lunch,” Antonio said guardedly. Realizing that he would be today, he shook his head and trailed after his grandfather’s powdery footprints, thinking he had better get a broom and clean up the slippery, flour-glazed floor before his pregnant wife came down.



“It sounds like some sort of alchemy, like a potion that gives eternal youth,” Rebecca said. She set a turkey sandwich in front of her husband and finger-combed his damp, matted hair. He looked exhausted; his limp body slumped in the chair like an under-stuffed teddy bear.

“It does, doesn’t it,” Antonio replied. He looked at the sandwich. He was ravenously hungry, but his arms were so tired from pulling the endless procession of pizzas from the oven—boxing and cutting them at breakneck speeds—he didn’t think he could lift it. “Could you cut that?” he asked Rebecca. He was sure he could manage half a sandwich. What had his grandfather started?

Rebecca retrieved a knife from the drawer and sliced her husband’s lunch into quarters. “Does he put them on every pizza?” she asked.

“Every one,” Antonio replied, nodding with mystified disbelief. “He thinks I don’t see; assumes I’m too busy working the ovens and the cash register to notice him sneaking the slimy little buggers in under the cheese.”

“Did you tell him to stop?”

“Well, not in so many words,” Antonio replied. His eyes stuttered sheepishly, before hiding behind a mouthful of Kaiser roll.

“Antonio Joseph Morreti!”

Antonio continued to chew as his wife’s hand return to his head, her angry fingernails straightening the part in his hair like a petulant wire brush. He knew he should have said something to Poppa Angelo—reminded him whose restaurant it was—but each time the words surged towards his lips, they were swallowed by his grandfather’s musical smile.

“You *do* want him to stop, don’t you?” Rebecca asked.

Antonio’s hesitation answered for him.

“It’s not right putting things into someone’s food without telling them. What if someone suffered an allergic reaction? What if someone died? We don’t know what’s in those anchovies or where Poppa Angelo really got them.”

“You mean you don’t believe the story about the rain forest? His wrestling the tribal warrior?”

Rebecca grabbed Antonio by the hair and tilted his head upward. Her raised eyebrow said it all.

“No ones complaining,” Antonio said, grimacing under his wife’s disapproval. “Although, that’s surprising considering the odor they give off. They’re pretty fishy.”

Rebecca released her grip. “That doesn’t excuse it.”

“I suppose not,” Antonio replied. He retreated once again into his sandwich, the echo of the singing cash register returning to his ear. Warily, he watched his wife as he chewed, her eyes squinting in deep thought, her lips pursing as if

preparing to chew on him some more. He swallowed hastily to clear his vocal cords while he still had a voice in the matter. "He's an old man. How about we let him enjoy it while he still can?" *And us the money he's attracting. While it lasts.*

Rebecca remained quiet for a long moment. "Well," she said finally, "he couldn't have too much of it. He arrived with nothing but a knapsack. At the rate you two are going down there, he should run out soon."

"I don't know. I've been keeping an eye on him *and* the anchovies. He must have used hundreds of them so far. He's not shy about spreading them on. But the canister is still nearly full. It's only about an inch deep and not much bigger than a matchbox. It doesn't make any sense. It should have been empty after the breakfast rush we had and long before that lunch mob we just finished serving."

"Then he's got to have more stashed away in his knapsack."

"That's the thing, Rebecca. That little tin of tiny fish hasn't left my sight since mid-morning. It's been right up front with all the other toppings and I'm positive Poppa Angelo hasn't touched it. He's not swapping it out with a fresh container. I would have seen him. It never goes empty, Rebecca. I been watching all day and I'm telling you, I don't think that little tin will ever run out."



He was sweating profusely—always sweating—and rushing to make the sandwich Mrs. Ordorf had ordered along with a large, ham and black olive pizza that was now parked on the counter next to the cash register, steam lifting from the open box like a overheated car radiator. *Cut me and close me*, it screamed. Tuning the cries out, Antonio jammed three meatballs into the mouth of the surprised submarine roll, spooned a helping of crimson sauce across the top before dusting it with parmesan cheese. He popped it into the microwave and pressed the timer, the sudden hum of its motor releasing the ripe air trapped within his lungs.

"I wish you would let *me* do that," Rebecca said. Observing from her rocker in the doorway to the kitchen, she looked like a child on her way to the seashore with a beach ball nestled in her lap, hidden beneath the petals of her flowered blouse.

“When our son is born, you both can help,” Antonio said. He quick-stepped to the counter, cut Mrs. Ordorf’s pizza in four rapid strokes, and pushed down the lid. Another overcooked breath escaped.

Watching him intently, Rebecca considered poking her husband about the gender of their first child—throwing another ball in the air—but clearly, he was juggling enough right now. “Where’s Jeremy?” she asked instead, curious about the whereabouts of their newly hired, currently-on-college-break help.

“He quit,” Antonio grunted. “Called this morning and said he decided to hitchhike around the country before school started up again.”

“You let him eat a Poppa Angelo special?” Rebecca asked. There was no anger in her voice, only a tinge of regret.

Antonio nodded as he skipped back to the microwave, his anxious eyes searching for a knife to halve the sandwich. “Where’s that knife I just had?”

“It’s in your hand, dear,” Rebecca said. She couldn’t help but grin, happy she had found a way to help after all.

With the sandwich cut and packaged, Antonio brought it to the cash register and set it atop the pizza box, calling out to Mrs. Ordorf that her order was ready.

There was a moment of suspended time, Mrs. Ordorf gazing out the window, Antonio inviting her to join him at the counter, and then he was noticing the width of her shoulders and the boyish hips oddly quiet as she turned and sauntered toward him. He watched the woman—Ordorf, she had said over the phone when he had taken her order—step up to the counter and set down her handbag.

She was saying something, her unevenly painted lips moving slowly as her hand jammed its way into the glimmering gold purse like a plump terrier in a tight gopher hole. But Antonio wasn’t listening. He was transfixed on her Picasso-esk makeup and the grey hairline not very cleverly hidden beneath a blond wig.

“Don’t worry, I know I’ve got some money in here somewhere,” she repeated in a throaty drawl wrapped in a flirtatious smile.

“No problem,” Antonio mumbled. She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place the face. He was sure she had been in his shop before, but when? As he watched her struggle to extract her hand, her Adam’s apple bobbing up and down in a wave of nervous excitement, he ever-so-gently shifted a half-step away from the counter and dropped his eyes into the cash drawer. He was running short of nickels.

“There it is,” Mrs. Ordorf exhaled. She handed the suddenly sheepish shop owner a crumpled twenty-dollar bill and told him to keep the change. She then plopped her purse on top of the pizza box next to her bagged sandwich, turned and hobbled out on five-inch heels like a pink truck with one flat tire.

Noticing his grandson’s mystified gaze, Poppa Angelo asked about the peculiar patron.

Raising his brow, Antonio replied, “If I’m not mistaken, that was our mayor, Bruce Ordorf.”



Antonio felt like a coward, *and* a thief. Still, his snooping eyes probed deeper and deeper into his grandfather’s knapsack, his trembling hands furiously emptying the leather satchel like a groundhog digging a burrow. There had to be more, his restless mind assured him, buried at the bottom. He clawed deeper, spraying the bed with discarded items. Then, a sudden silence made him pause. *You are going to get caught*, he thought as the vision of an angry old man wrapped in towel filmed over his eyes. *Put it all back and get out of here!* Scanning the litter atop the bed, he stumbled to recall what to put back first. He had pulled it all out in such a panic—the ancient electric razor, the sleeveless white t-shirts, the assorted tubes of ointment—he had no idea how to return it all in the right order. As he spied the bathroom door from the corner of his eye, he stomach ready to turn with the twist of the doorknob, the singing echoed once again. Poppa Angelo had taken a deep breath before unleashing into a swelling chorus.

Antonio’s hand made one more dive. Nothing. He turned the bag upside down and shook it. Still, nothing.

“Ok, old man,” Antonio whispered. “Where have you stashed your little cache of magic?”

The telltale squeak and shudder of the water pipes shutting down alerted Antonio that his time was up. Quickly, he refilled the knapsack as best he could, returned it to the chair next to the bed and quietly slipped out the door. Walking down the hallway to his bedroom, he cursed himself for not looking under the bed.

“Well?” Rebecca asked her husband. “Did you find it?”

Antonio shut the door behind him and shook his head. He walked to the edge of the bed and sat down, his elbows propped on his knees, his face a portrait of bewilderment resting in the easel of his hands. “I think he knows we’re looking for it,” he said.

“Did you look in the bathroom?”

“He was in the bathroom, Rebecca. Showering. That’s why I snuck in there in the first place, remember?”

“That’s right,” Rebecca replied, half-grinning. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had my coffee yet. Maybe he took it in with him?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, we have to find it and put a stop to this. Before he disappears again.”

“He said he would stay until the baby was born.”

“Which could be any day now,” Rebecca reminded him. She was standing by his side now, rubbing her ballooned stomach and tilting her head encouragingly. Antonio sighed and pressed an ear to his unborn son.

“What’s that?” he said as if the boy were talking to him. “We shouldn’t be rummaging through Great Grandpa’s things without asking?” He then looked up at his wife, a troubled soul kneeling at the confessional.

“Don’t give me that guilty look,” Rebecca said as she playfully pushed Antonio away. She walked to the bedroom window and stood, gazing out at the bright morning sunrise. “We’ve asked him for weeks to explain what those anchovies are doing to people but all he does is grin and start humming that song of his. Now, he’s got the whole town turned upside down and camped outside our

door waiting for us to open and you..." she paused to fling a disapproving scowl over her shoulder, "pulling pizza's from the oven all day and night until your arms are ready to fall off. He's going to drive you into the ground and then where will the baby and I be?"

"I'm fine," Antonio said, rising up. He went to his wife and wrapped his arms around her, reassuring her that things would settle down soon. "He's old, he'll tire long before I do." He squeezed her tightly, reminding her with a roguish whisper how strong he was.

Soothed, Rebecca let her head fall back into her husband's chest and quietly closed her eyes like a raindrop soaking into the soil.

"Oh, and while you were in there fumbling," she said calmly. "My water broke."



It was late, past eleven now, but Antonio wasn't going anywhere. He sat in a stiff, hospitality chair looking very much the weary soldier, sticky and exhausted but unmistakably happy. Within arms reach, his wife lay tucked tightly under her favorite afghan, a surprise Rebecca's mother and father delivered to the hospital twenty minutes after she produced Antonio Jr. Her eyes were closed but she was awake, ebbing from the arrival of the second man in her life.

"He's so beautiful," she said quietly, peeking at her husband through sleepy eyes. "He's got his father's eyes."

"And his mother's smile," Antonio added.

"He hasn't smile yet," she snorted. "He's only an hour old."

"He smiled at me," Antonio insisted. He took her hand and squeezed it softly. "He's been smiling from the moment he saw his mother."

Rebecca sighed. "I want him back."

"The nurse will bring him back soon. He needed a break from his relatives. Did you see your father? If he said goo-goo one more time I swear, I would have punched him. And your mother, checking his diaper every two minutes. Was she looking for buried treasure?"

“Oh, leave them alone and let them enjoy it. He is their first grandchild. They’re supposed to dote.”

“Dote doesn’t begin to describe...”

In a sudden whoosh of air, the door to Rebecca’s room swung open. A small cart emerged, guided by a short, stocky nurse laundered in blue scrubs. There was a glass compartment on top and inside, barely visible beneath a swaddle of white linen, a pudgy little face painted with two blue dots busily explored the world rushing past.

“We’re back,” the nurse trumpeted. Gently, she lifted him out and offered him up in display.

“He looks like a burrito overstuffed with cheese,” Antonio said as he stood and accepted his son from the nurse.

“He does not,” Rebecca retorted before breaking into a laugh that had her reaching for her stomach and grimacing in jovial pain.

Cradling his son, Antonio confessed to how much Mommy and Daddy had missed him. He tickled the boy’s chin, turning toward Rebecca so that she could see the tiny smile he was imagining.

“We would have been here ten minutes ago,” the nurse said, keeping her attention on the baby, “but we got ambushed down the hall by your Great-Grandpa, didn’t we little Tonio.”

“Poppa Angelo? He’s here?” Antonio asked. He went to the door, still open by the mechanical arm attached at the top, and gazed down the hallway. A tall, white-coated statue stood studying an overflowing clipboard while an orderly zig-zagged an empty gurney around him. A nurse walked briskly toward Antonio, her shoes squeaking in musical rhythm, before disappearing into the shadow of a doorway. An elderly woman sat listlessly in a wheelchair. Antonio shifted his son to his other arm and peered further into the unfamiliar.

“I don’t see him,” Antonio said. He gave the door a poke with his behind and let it close as he walked over to Rebecca. He then slid Antonio Jr. into her waiting arms before turning back to the nurse. “Did he say anything?”

“Just the usual baby talk,” the nurse replied. “He was quite smitten with him, I must say. I knew you were waiting for us and I didn’t think I was ever going to break free. I suggested he come along with me, but he said no, he had to go.”

“Did he say where?” Antonio asked.

“No. He just smiled and headed for the elevators, humming a song the whole way. He’s *your* grandfather, I take it?”

Antonio nodded. He knew his midnight elf would not return.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” the nurse said, suddenly excited. She reached into cart and pulled out a small box wrapped in shiny red paper. She handed it to Antonio. “He said it was for his great grandson.”

Antonio took the present, saw there was no card or label of any kind and lifted it to his nose. He sampled it with a quick series of sniffs and then slowly turned a wary gaze toward his wife. Without a word, he approached his wife’s bedside, the gravity of fatherhood magnetizing his feet to the floor, and handed his young son his very first gift, knowing one day the boy would ask him to explain something he could not explain.