

## **There Is Hope, Mr. Marco**

**By Chiara MacGillivray**

Clink, clink. “Forty three, forty-four.” Clink. “Forty-five . . . and forty-six. Three dollars and forty six cents.” My mother, Maria Carpelli sighed as she replaced the lid of the tip jar. She sank down slowly onto the rickety wooden chair. The distinct smells of garlic and yeast wafted out of the small building onto the street, yet they turned no noses from passers-by toward the run-down restaurant. I recognized this expression on my mother. After my father’s death her face had not shown much variance in mood. Her eyes were sunken, her blouse wrinkled, and her graying hairs wanted no part of the black clip at the back of her neck. She clasped her hands in her lap, blankly gazing at the statue of St. Joseph in the corner of the kitchen. In simple terms, things were not looking good. Prior to my father’s passing, the restaurant wasn’t doing too much better, but his jovial smile and positive attitude kept my mother and me in good spirits. Somehow, he always found a way to put food on our table and on the tables of the few regular customers.

Though I might have a biased opinion, no other food establishment in Foyertown could even come close to comparing to our Antony’s. Yet to call our place pleasant-looking would be a sin against the eighth commandment. The whitewashed siding was faded and scratched, the roof greatly in need of repairs, the front stoop had crumbled years ago and the battered green door did not quite close. Dingy lace curtains hung in the windows, sharply contrasting with the cheap floral tablecloths. I turned and hung up my black apron on the hook next to the broom closet. Gazing at the dark rough cloth, my mind flashed back to the weariness of last week. We buried my father in St. Peter’s after a Mass that dragged on with little enthusiasm or mention of the great man my father was. The elderly priest preached on hope. “We do not dwell on the fear of Hell, but must set our eyes on the pure bliss of heaven. No matter what happens on this earth God stands besides us. It is said, ‘Even though I walk through the dark valley, I fear no evil, for you are at my side, with your rod and your staff that give me courage.’ By all means do not mistake me for a monk—the only reason that I can recite these words is because my mother has repeated them to me each day since. She insists that we place our trust in God and beg the intercession of the saints to help us keep our restaurant alive. My Sunday suit is now stained from my mother’s tears and from kneeling in the soft dirt of the graveyard.

I toss a stone into the lake behind the crumbling building. I grab four more stones and heave them similarly into the water. Five stones—like the five days our money should last us.

The next afternoon I hustled back from school and jogged up to the street towards the familiar place. “Antony’s” was painted in even black lettering on a sign that stood outside the door. I tapped the sign as I walked inside, whistling to let my mother know that I had arrived. I immediately set about preparing the tables and assisting in the kitchen, knowing full well that only two out of our fifteen tables would end up being used tonight.

As the evening grew later, an unfamiliar customer entered the restaurant. My mother plastered a cheery smile on her tired face, doing her best to make the newcomer feel at home. I watched from the kitchen entry way. This man, who boasted a brown coat and a worn black hat, did not seem to be behaving like the normal customer. In fact, he had taken his hat off and held it in his hands, gazing at my mother in a pleading way. I was shocked to discover that he was begging for a piece of pizza.

Indignant, I tossed down the dish towel I had been using to wipe off the countertops. Stepping quickly into the dining area, I paused when I noticed my mother patting him on the arm. She turned toward me and motioned for me to get him some food. I returned her demand with a woeful glance.

“She must know that charity is the last thing that we can afford in days like these!” I thought to myself. Yet I grabbed a couple slices of pizza and a few biscotti and watched as my mother bestowed the gift to the man. He expressed his deepest gratitude before exiting the restaurant. About ten minutes later, I glanced out the window to find him huddled over on the front stoop, eagerly devouring the superb food. The flavor of the fresh basil and mozzarella perfectly complimented the savory tomato sauce and the rich crust. I watched him with a slight bit of anger, for he just sat there enjoying my mother’s delicious food without the slightest bit of payment. “Oh well,” I muttered, “I hope he really needed it.”

The next day I was beside myself to find him standing in our restaurant again, imploring my mother for some food. This time she hesitated, but her loving soul could not resist the earnest pleas of the strange man. A little more than annoyed, I handed the guy both his plate of food and an angry stare. He nodded at me and slowly said, “Thank you, young sir.”

“Marco. His name is Marco.” My mother corrects him.

“Thank you, Mr. Marco and Mrs. Carpelli,” he said respectfully, “I am much indebted to you both. And I have never tasted anything better than this food.”

I shrugged my shoulders as I returned to the dishes. My mother sighs and looked in the direction of the front door. “He just sits there and eats,” she observed. “I wonder if he has anything to eat at home, or if he even has a home, for that matter.”

Noticing her stress about the situation, I gave her a quick hug and told her that it would be okay. Masking my own concerns about giving our food away, I did my best to comfort and reassure her.

When the same hour came by the next day, I prayed that the gruff face would not peek through our front door. Yet there he was. Setting down my apron, I called to my mother, “It’s him again.” She brushed a wisp of hair back and smoothed her skirt, once again plastering on her “work smile.” The situation occurred just as it had the last two days, except he made sure to use our names frequently in his pleading. I knew my mother would not refuse him, even if she should, so I prepared the pizza and cookies before she even got to patting him on the shoulder. As we stood together watching him eat, I noticed the wrinkles of worry looking deeper on her face. I lamented to myself, “If only Papa was here, he would surely show us what to do.”

“Marco, Marco, hurry!” My mother shouted to me out the kitchen door as I approached the restaurant after another exhausting day of school. Deeply concerned, I sprinted to where she stood among the pots and pans.

“It is a miracle, look!” She cried. I peered around the countertop to see eight unfamiliar faces in the burgundy booths. In the midst of them all stood the beggar man.

“Margherita pizza—best thing I have ever had.” I heard the man boast. Smiling, I turned to my mom, who blushed and whirled back to her cooking. Grabbing my pen and paper, I hustled to take their orders.

“I’ll have one Margherita and a root beer.” Declared a freckled-faced gentleman.

“If its not too much trouble, I would love the pepperoni,” called another. Beaming, I handed the slip of paper to my mother. The restaurant had an aura to it that had been missing since my father’s passing. The men talked and laughed and cheered, filling the restaurant with the sounds of companionship and conversation. Most importantly, they raved about the food. I detected a genuine grin enveloping my mother’s simple features as she basked in the jovial atmosphere. Later, as we swept the hardwood floors, I asked her if the man had begged for his food again.

“No,” she replied. “He paid. Along with every other man in our place tonight. Marco, for the first time in months, we have some significant money in our jar!”

The next day the number of customers doubled. Again the atmosphere brought my mother to high spirits, as the fellows all complimented her enthusiastically on a fabulous meal. For the second night in a row, Antony’s made a profit. This time, I noticed each man greeting our beggar friend as they entered

the place. I meant to speak to him, but he must have slipped out before I had the chance.

I couldn't believe our good fortune, for in the space of one week, our restaurant had reached full capacity. Not only did we have enough money to keep the restaurant open, but my mother had opened a savings account. We rose each morning to go to the church before I left for school. We would spend a couple minutes in gratitude and thanksgiving for our recent good fortune in front of the Eucharist. I often wondered why did we have such sudden success. Maybe eating in broken down bungalows was the new trend, or the people were attracted to the smell of burnt crust and had to investigate. Yet most of me figured it had something to do with the beggar man. I resolved to speak to him the next night.

Yet I never got the chance. I couldn't find him, or he wasn't there. The busyness of our restaurant distracted me from his absence.

A whole month passed before I put much thought to the matter. Completely mystified by the strange beggar man and our success as of late, I decided to ask some of the louder patrons of our place. Sliding two large pizzas onto a table, the four oversized men grunted and groaned in appreciation.

"Kind sirs," I began, "I believe some of you may have the acquaintance of a man whom I call my beggar friend." As I described the mystery man's stature and appearance, the eyes of my customers grew wide.

"Beggar man? If that is true then we have no idea of him who you speak." Puzzled, my eyes darted from the grey-haired speaker to the other men at the table. They all confirmed this declaration, nodding and shaking their heads in agreement. A chuckle or two erupted, and I flushed, much embarrassed.

"Excuse our manners," another chimed in. "The man whom you described, if I am correct, is the furthest opposite of poor. He is Mr. Draynsburg, the millionaire." My mouth dropped open in disbelief.

"Come to think of it, that's why I started coming here in the first place. I saw Drayns walking in here and I knew the food had to be good," declared a scruff, firmly muscled fellow.

"Uh . . . where . . . do you think . . . would he mind if I paid him a visit to thank him, and where could I find him?" I stuttered, having no idea what to do with this newfound information.

"Oh, you can't," chuckled the first speaker. "He left town for good to go be with his nephew. The man had a startling change of heart 'bout a couple years ago. Decided to spend more time giving than just alone in his mansion. Funny thing, he used to be such a grumpy old miser after the death of his mistress. I know I'll miss him. He had become a fine, enjoyable, funny man."

“Thank you,” I stammered, stumbling on the uneven floor as I jogged back to the kitchen. In one breath I relayed this newfound information to my mother. She did not seem to flinch from her pizza-making as I spoke, merely glancing toward the St. Joseph statue as I gasped for air after the completion of the story.

“God is good,” she shrugged. I wondered at the way she didn’t even seem to react. Her shoulders stooped over the counter, hair and apron strings tied back the same as every other day that I could remember. Then she laughed.

Turning toward me, her eyes sparkling and a smile growing, she called me, “Let me show you something.” She shuffled to the back of the kitchen and pulled out a wad of cash. “I found this yesterday under that front step where our beggarman used to sit. I knew there was something more to him.”

My eyes grew wide. I sighed peacefully, knowing the significance of the money in the cookie tin safe. We would be safe, and secure. My mother stretched out her arms and pulled me tightly toward her, stroking my hair, “There is always hope, Marco.”