

Stephen L. DeFelice, M.D.

Antipasto

Mario began, “And now, *i miei amici*, I have prepared for you one of the most tasty and beautiful dishes that you will ever find in New York City or anywhere else in this great country of ours. It is a *contadino* dish, a dish for peasants that is also fit for kings. The ingredients are simple but they are good. Too often we cook according to good recipes but the final product *puzza*. It stinks, because the ingredients aren’t fresh or of the best quality. It is made with peppers, olive oil and garlic—nothing else. What makes it different it is the way I make it.

“Yesterday afternoon I cut green peppers into slices, not too thick and not too thin. I don’t use red or yellow peppers for this dish. You certainly can use them, if you want to, but the ‘hit’ on the palate is not the same. To me the green peppers are better. And don’t forget: Don’t take the skin off the pepper, like these ignorant modern chefs do. It’s plain *merda di toro*. Signora Genella—that, in Italian, means bullshit. The skin gives the pepper a physical quality that goes well with the bread, which I’ll talk about in a minute.

“I put the peppers in the pan with garlic and oil, and I cooked them together under a medium flame for about half an hour. Then I put them in a flat dish, so that the oil covered them all. You can put them in a bowl, but I wouldn’t recommend it. I sat them on the kitchen counter, where they cooled off at room temperature. Before I closed the restaurant that night, I put the peppers in the refrigerator. It

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was the 'ice box' in the old neighborhood, do you gentlemen remember? When I came back this morning, I took them out of the refrigerator and put them back on the kitchen counter, where they returned to room temperature, and where they have marinated until now. I guarantee that they are now *perfetto*, and damn tasty.

“But you need good bread to complete the taste. What I mean by good bread is good Italian or French bread, with a firm crust. You dip the bread in the juices, put the bread and the peppers in your mouth at the same time, and then chew slowly. The more you chew, the more flavors will come to your palate.

“This dish does not necessarily need a drink to go along with it, but I like a gulp of a lively, heavy red wine after I swallow. *Capito?* In this way, you will get the full flavor and satisfaction of the two together. Good, old-fashioned Chianti is good enough. Chiantis, in case you didn't know, are much better than they used to be. *Grazie a Dio!*”

I carefully observed Mario's delivery, and what can I say except to say that everyone was salivating!

As Mario walked away, Genella, with a burst of enthusiasm, said, “Okay, now let's talk about sex. This is my specialty.”

There followed a brief moment of surprised silence followed by cautious laughter from all the boys.

Mo refused to surrender to Genella's request. He continued, “Even when I was a kid, I didn't like kids. What used to bother the shit out of me was when I heard in sermons in church about what Jesus said about kids. Do you guys remember? Jesus said something

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like, ‘If you don’t become like one of these little kids, you can’t enter the kingdom of heaven.’ When I was young and first heard this, it sounded truly beautiful to me; innocent children, you know. Who doesn’t initially react in a good way to the message? Then I got a little older, and began to take notice of the real world of children. I suddenly woke up! It’s all bullshit, this child worship! I was brainwashed! I noticed that kids only think of themselves, and when they don’t get the things they want, they go ape shit. They don’t give a damn about you or anyone else. They’re the most selfish group of all.

“Getting back to the point, the New Testament was written at least half a century after the death of Christ. Though it says that Jesus said something like you must become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, I don’t believe he said it. My theory is that someone must have gotten it wrong by word of mouth, which was the way much of history was recorded in those days. Jesus probably said something like, ‘You truly can enter the kingdom of heaven as long as you don’t really behave like children.’ You know guys, heaven ain’t for selfish people who make life miserable for others.”

“Hey, Mo,” Genella abruptly interrupted, “You certainly are anti-kids tonight. What the hell happened in your childhood?” Everyone liked that zinger and everyone laughed, even Mo. Genella had gotten a humdinger in there.

Genella continued, “I know what you are talking about, but the picture is more complicated than that. I believe the kids today have it much, much tougher than we had it. I know we didn’t have the

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money. Except for maybe once or twice a week to buy a soda or an ice cream cone, we never went out to eat at restaurants; and yes, these kids are spoiled rotten. They have a thousand toys that they don't appreciate when we had only a couple that we really loved. But that ain't the point. They didn't ask to be brought up that way, and I think they are confused regarding what's real and what's not real. They ain't so dumb, you know."

Almost unnoticed, Mario arrived at the table with a third round of martinis and took the empty glasses away.

"*Tutto va bene?*" he asked.

I replied, "*Si.*" I decided we would wait a while for the pasta and main course. The conversation was going too well. By the way, we never had martinis after we began to eat. It was always wine. Tonight was the exception, but once more, no one objected.

"Sure, they ain't what they used to be," continued Genella. "But their moms and dads are almost always tense and tired. Working and commuting both ways to work five days a week is a killer, Mo."

The Pig then jumped in and said, "Hey, Mo, Genella is right. And do you know who's to blame?"

Mo hesitated to answer simply because he hadn't the slightest idea what the Pig was thinking. But according to the rules of the annual gatherings, he was obligated to respond to a question. He paused and then said, "Who?"

"Miserabile!" the Pig retorted. Now everyone at the table, including the Pig, knew that Miserabile was not personally responsible for the modern problems of children and their parents.