

# ANNIE'S S.O.U.P. KITCHEN

A NOVEL BY LAWRENCE R. SMITH



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## CHAPTER ONE

### WATERSHED

Hawks rise from the scorched canyons of east Orange County, vector toward the Pacific's mantle of shattered glass. Red-tails spinning overhead in wild lopsided circles, fix their eyes not on mice, small birds, rats, or squirrels but on piles of gravel and asphalt, big-bladed plows, pavement grinders, trenchers, and earthmovers, all at rest below in the yard of the Lemon City DPW. Not much to catch the eye here, except a blond-bearded man in full green apron standing on the ramp that fronts a trailer turned cook shack. A slow freight trundles along one edge of the enclosure: broken pavement skirted by high chain link and barbed wire. Consecrated to Annie O'Rourke's legendary Soup Kitchen, humanity's last chance for healing, birds seldom plunder here. The alpha hawk sizes up the aproned man. Seeing he is larger than a rabbit, more than a winged predator could seize and carry off, the messenger dances toward an open blue window and the horizon that provides its hazy sill.

Every Friday in that temple of Annie's devotions Grady Roberts, the man in the green apron, performs the ritual of preparing dishes. But at this moment he's standing on the ramp, a temporary escape. The Kitchen's chatter and unspoken tension charge him with such frantic energy, his body threatens to break free and run away from him. Clear of the stove's dizzying heat, he leans into the small morning breeze. A few more deep breaths and he is ready once more to go inside and make barbecued chicken or chicken cacciatore, mashed potatoes, meatballs or Italian sausage, carrots and cauliflower with cheese sauce, ratatouille, pasta sauced with tomatoes and whatever protein can be safely recovered from the freezers and food bin. He is ready to survey the stash of reject produce pulled from the shelves of grocery stores, now stacked on the floor and countertops of Annie's Soup Kitchen. Bags of spinach and collard greens with yellowed leaves, cauliflower with black spots, tomatoes torn or barely holding

under the skin, bruised and wrinkled zucchini, battered peppers, and everything else, from corn to fennel buns, that someone thought unfit to sell or eat. “First, procure the best ingredients”: a maxim attributed to Apicius. But what happens when you can’t? If food as devastated as this can be redeemed, cooked, and offered up to men, women, and children, then there will be a great healing.

Healing was the dream that lured the entire crew back week after week to perform those changes: energized vegetable narration, the free fall into edibility of pure goodwill. Of course, denials of the Kitchen’s transformational power occurred—like the washout MBA who ignited sleeping bag, beard, and hair with a crack pipe, incinerated himself in his hideaway under a bridge on the Santa Ana city line. Yet there were remarkably few casualties, until the Shadow Plague became widely recognized.

And you can bet more than spaghetti was being conjured there. Things happened at Annie’s Soup Kitchen that eluded the sharpest eye or even the most flexible fiction. Objects would come into being, then dissolve, without raising even casual interest. Leakage between dimensions occurred at every moment but was seldom perceived, except by the Magnificent Seven. In Annie’s special landscape of broken pavement and ravaged souls, there were places where ordinary folks could simply disappear. There were corners of space and jointures of light and steel you could photograph one day and never see again.

Annie’s eyes were sharp from the moment of her birth. In peat country, she had been conditioned by childhood encounters with the good people—those small creatures who either made an apprentice of you or turned your brains inside out. Leaving that world when she and her sister fled Ulster for New York after the Easter Rebellion, she carried great power in her heart. Since her father was killed in the fighting and her family was on the English blacklist, she always claimed to come from Tyrone of the Bushes, unwilling to admit she’d been raised in a suburb of Belfast. Maybe the claim was God’s own truth. Conceived in the land of stark changes, she might have been simultaneously delivered in each town and county, stretching the translucent pane of her transmigrating spirit over

every newborn creature in the land. Ninety-five years later, after a long career as a nurse, the old trickster managed to create the world from scratch each day. She dreamed it into the animals, minerals, and vegetables that would stumble into her Kitchen's permanently temporary location in the warehouse district of Lemon City. To calculate such complex variables would require the skill of Navajo Bill, a retired Rockwell engineer who'd once worked on the Apollo project and now chauffeured Annie. He slouched through daily chores at the Kitchen: washing dishes, mopping the floor, thanking other volunteers for letting him be of service. However, since we are still triangulating vectors, that particular crossfiction will have to wait.

The ancient nurse pushed through the trailer's north door, threw hands over head, and trudged to the table where volunteers took their customary lunch break, sampling food they were about to serve. "I am honest to my God, but I can't understand what these men expect of me! You know I told them they could have one T-shirt and one pair of undershorts, the purple things that were given us by the people at the clothes store. But a man out there, big with the red face, he put on three T-shirts, each over the top of another. And when I caught him at it, I pulled them off, all three, and the one that was his own to boot. I would have pulled his drawers down and given him a good spank if I were a day younger than I am. But the truth of it is I'm old, looking like the last rose of summer and standing alone. The scripture tells us to feed the hungry and clothe the poor, and I ask no questions of them, as you know, but I can't . . ."

Annie sat down hard at the formica table pushed to the wall at one end of the cook shack. Beset with palsy, her yellow-gray hair permed into a helmet-shaped halo, everything about her vibrated. She swept a knuckle across her brow and glowered at one face after another, taking note of who was there for the first time that morning. The volunteers were terrified by her fits of temper. She'd recently had some near-death episodes—once being admitted to an emergency room with a pulse of thirty-five. Since her congestive heart failure was inoperable, everyone was sure one of her tirades would carry her off. But most often these fits led only to exhaustion and a

hypoglycemic attack, as happened on this occasion. She seldom ate breakfast; a granddaughter had convinced her she needed to weight watch and lower her cholesterol. Just one or two encounters with the men, or the volunteers, and she had drained the last of her blood sugar. You could tell she had fallen into one of her spells by the turns her language would take.

“Did I point a finger and drive the demons out? Because the refrigeration, you see, the space around the food in the freezer. It’s too much in there. We’ll have to look into it—for the Kingdom of God has come to us right here and now, in this place and time. No, no, my dear, it’s Friday and I couldn’t eat flesh on Friday. Couldn’t do it at all, though I can’t eat fish for the life of me, either.”

Grady rushed forward with a plate of mashed potatoes and creamed vegetables hot from the stove. He knew she was on the verge of passing out when her face began to twitch and her eyes turned glassy. “Annie, please eat some of this. You need it. Don’t worry about the men. We’ll take care of all that for you. Wanda is out there locking up the clothes bin right now. Everything’s fine. Here’s a fork for you. Please eat now.”

Sally, a middle-aged high school girl with a taste for Martha Stewart good things, pushed a piece of her homemade apple pie before Annie. Betty sat down beside the Kitchen saint and tentatively lifted a forkful of potatoes to the shaking woman’s lips. But Annie’s ancient irises snapped into focus and her eyes went suddenly clear as she scrutinized the Friday lieutenant. “And what are you setting to do with me? No hand but mine has put food in my mouth since my dear mother first brought me to mass back in Tyrone of the Bushes. God bless the good woman’s soul. And will you give me that fork!”

The volunteers laughed as Betty jumped up, moved to safety four paces from the table. Annie ate several bites of the potato, a taste of creamed cauliflower and carrots, then laid eyes on the apple pie. After she exclaimed on their excellence, the relieved volunteers got ready to transfer the dishes they’d prepared for the multitudes to the serving tables outside.

“Grady, you’re a wonderful man to cook all of this food for us, an angel of mercy. My God, we’re so thankful to have you here.” Annie

dropped her fork and bowed her head. Realizing she had begun, against all custom, to eat without first saying grace, she mumbled one quietly to herself, took a deep breath, straightened her back, and readdressed the mashed potatoes. After a few bites more she dropped the fork again, put both hands on the table, and tried to struggle up. "Is it time for me to pray yet? Is it almost one o'clock now?"

Betty and Marlene moved toward the table but maintained a safe distance. As always, Betty appointed herself spokesperson.

When Annie wasn't around, Betty Blankenship battered the sweet music of the Friday crew with her hollering about the leaking sink, dirty bins, irresponsible volunteers on other days of the week, and the moral and genetic failures of the poor who were being served. She'd lean down by one of the sinks, go to one knee with a melodramatic sigh, and curse the semifunctional garbage disposal. She'd sniff at a bowl of pasta salad from the back of a refrigerator shelf, curl her upper lip, and deliver her usual pronouncement: "It's good enough for *them*." Out of the corner of her eye she'd catch Grady's grimace and be pleased she'd irritated the one person who posed a challenge to her authority. After he'd dumped the contents of the bowl into a trash can, she'd call to him from the other side of the trailer, making sure he knew she'd caught him in the act. "And don't you make that food too spicy, Grady. You know they're all alcoholics with bad stomachs. They just can't take it." The Friday lieutenant would rush back and forth, flatten her A's and roll her R's in the full belief that directing one day of the Kitchen's activities would somehow make her as saintly and Irish as Annie. But these routines were never undertaken in the presence of the master.

"Oh, Annie dear, you're in no condition to go out there in the hot sun and pray. Sister Claire can do it for you. She'll do a fine job." Betty clapped her hands together to gesture piety.

"She will, Annie. Why don't you let her do it and just rest yourself?" Marlene, whose smiling face was as shy as her voice, looked over her shoulder for a seconding opinion from the nun. Both Sister Claire and Grady, with no taste for futile argumentation, had already turned their eyes elsewhere. Furthermore, Sister Claire was

not up to the task. Whenever she listened to Annie deliver her usual premensal prayer at one o'clock, she would always exclaim, "Good gracious, it's a regular High Mass. She's got everything covered, including all the souls in purgatory!"

Annie, still struggling to get up, cried out for assistance. "For the love of mercy, would someone come over here and help me? If I can't pray with the men, then what good am I? If I can't do this little thing, then it's surely time for the Lord to take me home."

And, as she did every day she wasn't bedridden, Annie prayed.

"We're all ready now?" The great-hearted nurse gripped the railing that divided the cook shack ramp from the elevated area where an L of four long tables had been set up. From her mount, Saint Annie looked over the line of men, women, and children. To the slothful and irreverent she shouted orders to stand, remove hats, and be humble before the Lord. She drew in a long breath, crossed herself with broad gestures. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which are Thy bounty we are about to receive through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen. Eternal rest grant to the souls in purgatory. May the eternal light shine upon them, may they rest in peace. Amen. I ask God in His mercy to bless each one of you, to help you, to guide you, and grant with God's help you'll soon be able to take care of yourselves."

Over fifty men, women, and children bowed their heads before the palpable power of Annie's prayer, except for a couple of smirkers who peeked up through their eyebrows, and another unbeliever who watched the car of a latecomer pass through the gate. But Annie wasn't finished yet.

"Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, we place our trust in You. We thank You, Father, for this day and the food that You're giving to us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless each one of you. And we're having a great dinner."

The volunteers had been rushing out trays and pots of hot food to the tables, setting them down on a scroungy assortment of oven mitts and pot holders. They tilted their heads in deference to Annie's prayer, but the banging and chatter inside the kitchen went on at full volume, in denial of the sacred.



Annie scrutinized the front of the line. “Women, Children, and workers first. We need our workers now. Last time you all left and didn’t clean trays or bathrooms. I won’t have it. I want the workers up in the front of the line.”

The men looked contemplatively toward the horizon, or shuffled, nudging one another and chuckling. Perry stepped forward and volunteered. “I’ll scrub the bathrooms, Annie.”

“My God, you’re a good man. And what about the rest of you? If you won’t come forward, I’ll lock the lot of you in here till the work is done.”

Several more men stepped forward, offering to sweep and wash, and the rest breathed easy, until the man—an enormous configuration of pregnant darkness with dreadlocked prominences leaping from his skull—made his way up the stairs to the head of Annie’s chow line, carrying his future strapped across his back in an over-stuffed knapsack. The volunteers called him the General, because he wore five-star clusters on the lapels of his military tunic. As he proceeded toward the spread of food, silent Walkman earphones muffling the clatter around him, looseleaf Koran held up under his nose, his snort and drone, snort and drone was a chant that served as protection from the contamination that surrounded him day and night.

“HmMMM. Bad smells, white boy smells. Praise Allah that He protects me by taking the worms from my food before it touches my tongue. His hand lets only the purest of creation enter my mouth.”

As he took another step toward the food tables, the General’s knee-high rubber boots, filled with sudsy water, sloshed and spilled over on the man behind him in line. Laughter from the others, curses from the victim, who hoped the General was too spaced out to hear him and retaliate.

Still droning, a sound like an extended belch. “HmMMM. Agh! HmMMM. Agh! That white boy Pastaman, serving up his jive white boy spaghetti. Better not get his fingers in it again, or I’ll bite him good. Arf! The boy looks to me like Captain Sharples—even with his skinny-assed pathetic beard, I still recognize the cocksucker. It don’t fool me. I’ll give *him* some marching orders now. HmMMM.

Agh. Hmmmm. Like back at Itaewon, when old Cap'n Sharps got a mickey in the strip bar. Magic marker on his rosy-assed cheeks and lips. I let him know what black on your face means. Redneck sonofabitch."

"Hey, Pastaman, you ever been in the army?"

Grady, having caught most of the careening monologue, looked up, tried to decide how honest to be. "No."

"That's too bad, because I was. Tell me where you live. Maybe I'll show up and the two of us can play war. How would you like that?"

"Well, Grady, it seems the General has taken a liking to you." Stationed a couple of positions away, Sweet Pea giggled. She had waitressed twenty-six years at the Disneyland Hotel. In sleeveless blouse and jeans, her flirtatious laughter—receding gums and drooping eyelids notwithstanding—was always on automatic pilot. Even after raising nine children and a handful of grandchildren, she knew how to stay naughty. "You're not going to believe this, but they made us buy our own serving trays. I can't tell you how many I lost putting them on top of the car so I could get out my keys, then forgetting and driving away. Hope this doesn't offend anybody, but Walt Disney was the cheapest old booger who ever lived." After all those years of loyal service, one day she shook her blonde ringlets, dumped a full pot of decaf on the rug, and retired on \$59 a month. Sweet Pea now played the stock market, chattered as she peeled and gouged the stuff she retrieved from the produce refuse boxes. She was one of four volunteers devoted to fruit and vegetable repair. And on the serving line, she dished leftover soup and salads from an upscale caterer who needed a tax deduction.

Grady was hoping the General would move down the food line and forget about him. Sweet Pea's joking remark was the last thing he needed. Dropping his eyes and stirring his spaghetti, he planned a path of flight if the General's overtures turned into a full confrontation. But the huge warrior was not going to make it easy. "Yowsa! Yowsa!" Looking up in surprise, then turning away from the General's sardonic smile, the cook put three large scoops of spaghetti and meat sauce on the warrior's styrofoam plate. The sound of crashing pans in the kitchen made the volunteer jump.

As the General moved to the next station in the serving line, manned by Ethel Springfield, he became less intimidating. After she fearlessly dished mashed potatoes and creamed vegetables onto his plate, he turned intimate and conversational. “Did you know I invented my own kind of martial arts? It makes all the women movie stars in Hollywood look at me. I’m ready for this opportunity; it makes me feel well accepted.” The General bowed his head with a shy smile as he reached for his plate and moved down to Sweet Pea’s station. The retired waitress dealt the caterer’s castoff rice and pasta salads with a heavy hand. Most of the Soup Kitchen veterans passed them by, having gotten sick on them at one time or another, but the General took everything he was offered.

“How ya doing today, General?” Sweet Pea handed him a styrofoam bowl of Manhattan clam chowder. “You’re looking good.”

He moved to the next station, where Wanda, the volunteer who made sandwiches for takeaway bag dinners, served a variety of sweets. She eyed the huge mound of food on his tray. “Do you want dessert? Do you have room on there?”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Cake or fruit cocktail?”

“Yes.”

Wanda rolled her eyes, pursed her mouth, put a piece of cake and a cup of fruit cocktail on the General’s tray. He grabbed a sack dinner from a box, sloshed down the ramp to a picnic table covered with bread, rolls, and margarine, loaded up, returned to his place under the large canopy that arched over picnic tables designated for eating. Chanting, leaking suds, he fell back into his continuous *alta voce* meditation, a careening interior monologue he shared with everyone and from which he never took a break.



An angel of the Lord came to Annie in a dream one night, gave her instructions on how to build the ark and tabernacle, the vehicle of the third covenant of our salvation.

“He is going to test the people mightily with a terrible plague, because they have filled the earth with violence, greed, and venality.

So make yourself a commensal ark to save the righteous, and those lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. Let there be fifteen picnic tables and thirty matching benches. Let the planks for the tables and benches be cut from Douglas fir and let them be joined together by skilled craftsmen, stained the color of dried blood. Raise upright frames of steel to hold a canopy of woven plastic thread. This tabernacle will be thirty cubits long, thirty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high at the peak. Let there be a white windscreen of woven plastic thread attached to the south side of the tabernacle. See that you make all of these things according to the pattern He has set before you.”

Annie was eager to ask more about her mission, but the angel quickly metamorphosed into a bedroom dresser. The next day the chosen nurse set out to fulfill her divine instructions.



Under the canopy, sitting on a wooden picnic bench, performing, talking to everyone and no one, the General continued. “That’s Angelique—you know, the one with the big boobies? She said she admired my style. You know, ‘*J’aime ton style,*’ and all that. It’s what she said. And I don’t have to tell you what that means. But then I said, ‘Baby, my contract won’t carry me more than one thousand a week. Yeah, I just send in the vouchers and they redeem them. I know that’s not enough for you, Baby. And they got a lifetime limit of forty million on me.’ She understood because she’s a Republican. You know, the Lincoln kind. Like ‘Yowsa! Yowsa!’ I know I got big hair and a stovepipe hat, but I ain’t gonna die for no white man. You dig? I know Denzel too. In the service, together there at Khe Sanh. Didn’t know which way to duck. Hands over ears, mouth open, bag full of Thai stick. It was sizzling rice everywhere you looked. And me a trained killer. But don’t ask me to kill no Arabs now. They’re my brothers and Allah protects the righteous. And don’t call me no Hare Krishna neither. Don’t even have to move my hands to blow your raggedy white asses down the street.”

A few minutes earlier, after the General had seated himself beside Roderigo at table two, loosing his torrent of circular speech, the

Mexican thug assumed one of his two facial expressions: stunned confusion. His other was surliness, although sometimes he'd blend the two to achieve various nuances. But this time, as a forkful of spaghetti made a long pause halfway to his open mouth, the mask of the surly hoodlum had virtually disappeared. When the spell broke, he dropped fork to plate, swung his legs over the bench, grabbed his food tray, and bailed out, scurrying to table six.

As he sat down across from Jimmy Griffin, also known as Dracula since the four incisors between his two prominent canine teeth were missing, the refugee complained. "That motherfucker gone. Busted out his brains. Don't want no soap all over my food. *Cabrón*, big motherfucking *cabrón*. *Zafado!*"

Dracula leaned over, whispering a confidence. "Yeah, I know, but I think he's got some money. I don't know how he got it, but it's there in that field pack."

Roderigo threw back his shoulders, shook his curly silver mane, thrust forth the matching chest hair, revealed by a half-buttoned sport shirt, and yelled—at this moment 100 percent surly. "If he got money, he don't come around here, asshole!"

Fixing his eyes nervously on the back of the General's camouflage T-shirt, as the giant rocked, rolled, and chanted, Dracula was preparing to spring off the bench and run. "Just take it easy, man. Keep it down. I'm just telling you what I heard, man."

The nameless young woman seated at table seven, who had appeared at Annie's for the first time that day, let her eyes fix on Roderigo, raised one shoulder as if to free herself from an unwanted grasp. Her violent argument with a number of demonic presences resumed. "Oh yeah, sure you wanted me to call you then. But I was gone and you'd only blame me anyhow. That's right! Just leave me alone or I'll do it. Then they'll have to kill the Jews all over again." She began to laugh, then whimper, taking another spoonful of clam chowder. Library Lady sat next to her, protectively watching the young woman's tormented face. The other end of the table was packed with day laborers, their Spanish jabs and jokes leaving them little opportunity to notice the young woman wrestle her pack of furies.

Sitting on the edge of picnic table ten, one foot on a bench, tray balanced on his knee, Phil Tabangbang laughed largely at Madalene's habitual sarcasm, made sure his big teeth and long black hair caught the sunshine. But he was watching the new arrival, the demon-tormented girl, wondering what force other than bad parents could have left such a young person so totally bewildered. Madalene, whose working girl days were long over, whose only companion now was a yipping lap dog, its leash tied to the bench by her side, must have noticed his lack of attention. She slipped in an oblique comment about the size of Asian cocks. But since Phil could look and listen at the same time, he dropped his loaded tray on the table, pulled back his fist, and almost swept Madalene off her seat. The dog was shrieking, and everyone but the General and the possessed girl turned to watch the fight develop. However, Phil knew how easily assault charges stuck to a husky guy with a record like his, so he walked to his bicycle, pulled it away from the fence, mounted up, and rode out the gate.

Skulford Elephant sat next to John DeLorean at table fourteen. Both had watched the incident and were amused that Madalene waited until Phil was out of earshot, then unleashed a torrent of insults regarding his race, masculinity, and the fecal composition of various bodily parts. Skulford grabbed the edge of the picnic table and elevated his chin. "The earth's seven chakras need protection from defilement. Madalene has piddled on all the chakras, but most especially the first."

DeLorean laughed and shook his head, tugged at an earlobe. "Yeah, but you know more about that stuff than I do, Skulford. I just follow baseball. Can you imagine what the Dodgers would do if they could clean up the General and put him into the outfield? Yeah, have him bat cleanup! You can't tell me he wouldn't be a real slugger."

Skulford was not listening. He hummed as he fine-penned details into a new homemade baseball card. His fingertips could feel the stock tremble as it prepared to enter the world of his stacked deck. Earlier that morning, he'd tested Grady Roberts with some of these extraordinary creations.

“Guess. Go on, just tell me who it is.”

The volunteer in the green apron leaned elbows on the railing, nudged glasses down, peeked over them as the card maker waved one of his works through the air. The little man who called himself Skulford Elephant possessed a pulsing energy that refused to let his misfingered hand choose a place in space and linger there. After vainly trying to follow the hand-held picture’s eccentric path, Grady demanded that Skulford hold it still, then glanced away. Since the year of his sickness the cook had been unable to watch an object in rapid vibration without feeling nerves revolt, threaten to catapult him right out of his skin. “OK, what’s the trick? That’s Elvis, of course, but I’m sure you’re going to say it’s someone else.”

Skulford used his proper hand to sweep back dark greasy hair, giggled, then held up another picture. It wasn’t that he disliked Grady. In fact, he liked him very much. This was about trying to tease the teacher through the open door in the California air of a summering Friday. Grady had traveled a good deal but never through doors like this. He studied the quizmaster’s eyes, not the card, so he never noticed how light wrapped around Skulford’s morphing hand. As he gripped the railing to steady himself, the disoriented cook ran through a mental shopping list of drugs, wondered which combination had determined the itinerant’s behavior. It was always hard at Annie’s Soup Kitchen to distinguish substance abuse from garden variety schizophrenia. Often the two just blended together. Pathological or not, Skulford always seemed to be enjoying a joke no one else could get, and that hint of unshared knowledge irritated Grady.

He leaned forward and made an identification. “Chuck Berry.” Hero of those drag-racing, rock ‘n’ roll days, the old duck walker was as easy a call as Elvis.

“That’s right. How about this one?” Skulford shuddered, bounced his good hand through air with an image of the alpha Beatle in the full regalia of the Fab Four’s Maharishi Mahesh Yogi period. Grady nailed it. Lennon had been the idol of his antiwar activist days in the late sixties. But these identifications were so effortless, he wondered momentarily if Mr. Elephant were testing reactions, using this visual trivia quiz to put together a psychological profile.

“OK, then, how about this?” Skulford’s special hand looped his version of an Edward Curtis portrait through the sunlight. It looked familiar, as all Curtis photogravures do, but Grady could not find this particular warrior’s name in his mnemonic file.

“Sorry, don’t know that one.”

“Perry Como.”

The card maker’s eyes surged from squinting to fullness, a blossoming burst of light—then shrank, growing dark and restless, searching for an escape route. He had to be looking for something other than the door in the air, because that had just closed. “No, no. Just kidding. It’s White Cloud. And you know something? He could fly.”

The General, still at his exclusive table, continued to make dinner conversation with the air. “Those agents keep calling me about my underwater martial arts. They offer me parts in action pictures and stuff. *Prelude to a Kiss*. There are probably two or three dozen movie stars asking me out now. That magazine says there’s no place in Hollywood for Black men, but look at me. They’re going to need two or three nuclear submarines just to try and figure out my moves. Paperback rights and subsidiaries. And that short-sheeted bed full of frogs! Drop and give me fifty more flying fucks, white boy. You know, the business end of all this is starting to get me down. I need a weekend out at my place in Palm Springs.”

The chanting warrior reascended the ramp to the serving tables, asking for more food to be heaped on a plate he’d hardly touched. “HmMMM. Hah! HmMMM. Hah! Spaghetti, mashed potatoes. Don’t want no more of that salad.” As he returned to his spot at table two, the eaters all cut the General plenty of slack. They might complain in whispers about his chanting or gripe to Annie when he wasn’t around, but they discreetly peeled off and shifted to other tables if he moved too close.

Annie stood above, holding the railing, exhorting the men to pitch in and clean up when they’d finished eating, take care of the service areas and bathrooms. She noticed a commotion at the tables surrounding the General’s private one as he threw out his elbows, rocked back and forth on the bench, ate and chanted. Annie watched in fascination, muttered, “Lord, he’s bothering the men again.”



Taking courage from her leader's survey of the eating area, Betty decided to descend to the lower level and exert some authority of her own. She lurked by one of the plastic-lined fifty-five-gallon drums that served as trash cans. A young Mexican dumped his styrofoam plate and bowl into the can, clean except for the infamous rice and pasta salads, which had been given without his asking. He turned to walk away.

"Wait one minute! Where do you think you're going?" The man jumped back, shocked out of the quiet contemplation of his life as a day laborer. This woman's tone didn't match her smiling face and grandmotherly hair. "Dumping all that good food today. I bet that would make somebody a pretty good meal back where you come from."

The young man first tried to construct a retort in English but unable to do so, muttered several variations of "old witch" in Spanish. As he attempted again to walk away, Betty took another step, stayed at his side, and yelled. "Learn English! Come back here and look at me! Speak English! This is America!"

Pastaman, as Grady was known to the men, looked down on this scene from behind the serving tables atop the ramp, where he was scraping the last remnants of spaghetti and vegetables into a pan reserved for latecomers. Betty's bigotry made him so angry he'd go dizzy. He contemplated running down to the eating area and haranguing her about the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the legal protection of Spanish as a legitimate language in the United States. But he kept silent. He had the same reaction when she'd shout out, on the serving line, that no potatoes should be wasted on Mexicans, since they only knew how to eat rice and beans. He wanted to remind her that it was the Incas who first cultivated potatoes, that she and the Irish ancestors owed their potatoes to the very people she was reviling.

Although seldom aggressive enough to defend them, Grady Roberts had a lot of ideas, notwithstanding occasional bouts of pseudodementia since his year of sickness. He was particularly proud of protein socialism, a concept hard to promote in an Orange County dominated by troglodyte conservatives. However, in spite of

their suspicions concerning his politics, the other volunteers deferred to him, and nothing went into the cook pots or came out of them without his approval. Against all his protestations, Annie and the others called Grady “the gourmet chef.” Having moonlighted as a restaurant cook many years before—caught in the financial crunch of a divorce—he knew the difference between cook and chef. But why argue with people who were just trying to be kind? Grady fancied himself a subversive positioned at a strategic point along the food chain. He was the worm in the apple, with dreams of transforming the entire world from just under that polished skin, all without tipping off the authorities.

After Betty’s affront, Grady just grumbled to himself. He justified his usual reticence as good manners, but a deep fear of personal conflict was a more honest explanation. When Betty rushed into the cook shack and began to shout about men dumping out good food, it suddenly came to him. In all the years he’d worked at Annie’s Soup Kitchen, Grady had never seen the woman eat a bite of any of those salads. Annie required all the volunteers to sit down and eat a little of everything before serving it to the men. She said it was union rules and that she wanted everyone to enjoy their meal. But it also kept people from getting careless about what they offered the folks who’d landed on the streets, or who had to make a choice between buying food or paying the rent. During this ritual, Betty always made excuses about not being hungry, or being on a diet, as she nibbled at a piece of raw carrot. Pastaman looked over the crowd—black, brown, and beige as well as white. It occurred to him that if Betty knew a single word of Spanish, or a word of any language other than English, she might begin to hear what the world thought of her.

Under the shelter of Annie’s tabernacle, the General continued to eat and chant, providing good evidence that the veil of schizophrenia had given the man a precise understanding of the nature of metaphor. When the threads of creation gather together, and they do so on a regular basis, they look a lot like the coiled hair dripping with soap suds above his ferocious eyes. Earlier that morning some men complained because the General had installed himself in one of the laundry tubs where they washed food trays. He

was completely clothed and taking a bath. Since Annie was busy in the clothes bin, there was a debate inside the cook shack as to what should be done. Ethel suggested calling the authorities, but everyone else knew Annie would never agree to that. She had memories of the Black and Tans, the British police in the Ireland of her childhood. They were the reason she had become an American in the first place. Police were of a “certain ilk,” she’d say. And though polite when uniformed officers from the station down the street would arrive in her domain to search for a certain man, she’d mutter “The nerve of it!” when they climbed into their patrol car and drove out the gate.

Annie recognized the gates of metaphor too, and the reach of her vision traveled fast into the tunnel of primal connections. She knew the wet hair of the universe was hot-wired into the Mind of God, the electromagnetic nexus of all spirit and flesh. She knew every journey and every passing leads to the same place and time, which is always and everywhere at once. Annie would say, “May you be in heaven an hour before the devil knows you’re dead,” understanding that the hour before and the hour after are always happening. Her Irish sayings were pure metaphor. They simultaneously evoked and celebrated the knowledge that all watersheds on earth, all the gatherings of liquid and energy throughout the universe, come from the same drop. Annie’s hands were often covered with rivulets of liquid darkness, but they possessed the power to deliver us from shadows gathering within, to allow plenary divinity to burn through.

A numbness at the back of the head pulls neck tendons into stiffness, misdirection. Neural corridors search for a message. They can hear the sound of darkness coming, the sound of the Shadow Plague gathering catastrophic cumulus that will pass over us all and leave nothing untouched. There are memories of pain and survival, of trips through the watershed of multiple betrayals, a story or hologram entitled *The Other Side*.

Sister Claire was in the trailer loading old loaves of bread into dark green garbage bags. She was preparing to drag them to her car and back to the convent, where the sisters distributed Annie’s surplus bread among Latino janitors, kitchen workers, and groundskeepers. Lugging this stuff was part of her service, her penance.

Maybe that push for self-denial came from guilt: her father died the night she was born. She told Grady her older sister was so angry she wouldn't speak to her until she was sixteen years old. Or maybe it was something she'd done as a Navy nurse during World War II. Grady had seen a picture of her in uniform; there was no doubt she had been gorgeous, but he couldn't understand why a woman this good had anything to do penance for. To give up chocolate, her only vice? When she cut the men's hair on her makeshift barber's chair outside the cook shack, listened to their stories, maybe she took on their sins as she gathered up the pungent trimmings.

Annie edged up to the left-leaning nun, a liberation theologian, as she flipped a plastic bag of white bread to look for mold. There was a constellation of blue spots on the underside, so it went into the trash can.

"Can I talk English to you, Sister dear?"

Claire looked up from her bread and nodded. "Sure, but why are we whispering?"

"It's about the men. I'm worried about them. They need to have more work to do. Could we grow vegetables, do you think, in that place between the trailer and the railroad tracks? Peas and carrots and squash and tomatoes. I'm sure we could find someone to donate the tools and seeds. It would give the men something to do, don't you see?"

Sister Claire leaned over the sink and glanced out the window at the small plot of hardpan, separated from the railroad gravel bed by chain link and barbed wire. Annie put her hand on the nun's shoulder, lifted herself on tiptoe in an effort to see the proposed garden. "Do you think we can do it, Sister dear?"

The only evidence of life in that plot was a scruffy volunteer fan palm, the kind you sometimes see pushing up through a crack in the concrete of a street divider. It was two or three feet tall, fronds fringed with brown, stubbornly hanging on. Sister Claire turned to Annie, who was vibrating with expectancy and the neurological wear and tear of ninety-five years of activist compassion. It was hard to be a skeptic, looking into such a face.

“Annie, it isn’t a question of whether we could do something out there or not but whether we want to put our energy into a project like that.”

As Annie turned away and bit her lower lip, the nun caught her by the shoulder and smiled. “But I think we should look into the possibilities, don’t you? Maybe the gardener at the mother house could come out and take a look at it.”

Grady overheard the conversation between Annie and Sister Claire. Never having taken a good look at the space behind the trailer, it was hard for him to visualize the project. He slipped out to the food bin and pulled a large container of oregano from the spice shelf. Exiting the bin, he paused and scrutinized the hardpan. It seemed impenetrable. Then he looked at the fan palm. It vibrated slightly, gave off a burst of light that made him turn his eyes away. When Grady looked back, light dripped from the stringy fronds and onto the ground. Switching the oregano to his left hand, he returned to the cook shack.

Sister Claire had loaded up her bread, donuts, and bagels and was out in the lot trying to crank her old Ford. The car was not cooperating. Hearing her trouble, the men began to gather around her, more to sympathize than to help. Whiskey Ed, the electronics wizard and car healer, pushed through. He lifted the hood, called out instructions to Sister Claire. His frizzed wreath of white hair looked as if he’d already grabbed the battery cables by mistake. As the nun responded to instructions, grinding the starter engine one more time, a terrible screeching sent hands over ears throughout Annie’s domain. But it was not Sister Claire’s engine. It was the railroad track cleaning car, lumbering by, grinding metal against metal until sparks flew and teeth ground against one another for relief. Since the City Council of Lemon City didn’t approve of Annie’s Soup Kitchen, even in its distant exile to the warehouse district, there were rumors that the frequent rail-cleaning runs during serving time were an attempt to close her down. Or at least to make sure no one who worked or ate there was comfortable. If that were true, the folks on the city council underestimated Annie. When she’d previously fed the homeless in a public park, for almost ten years, she’d received

death threats by mail and telephone, and even those didn't slow her down. After the grinder finally passed by, Annie took up her position on the ramp again, shouting to the men that they hadn't properly cleaned up. Then came the familiar threat: she'd close the gate and lock everyone in if they didn't satisfy her. The men scattered, retrieving their belongings and leaving quickly, in case Annie were in an ornery enough mood to convert parable into action.

Whiskey Ed alternately fiddled with the engine and peeked around the hood at a frustrated Sister Claire. When the flooded engine took, sending up a cloud of blue-gray smoke, Ed slammed down the hood, waved her on, and the bread angel made a large circular turn past a bulldozer, two ditchers, a steamroller, piles of gravel and tar, before heading out the gate past the retreating homeless, their kits in tow. She drove past dilapidated warehouses, the offices of the DPW, the police station, into the heat and smog of Lemon City's summer afternoon.

Long after the eating and cleaning were finished, after Annie's faithful had dispersed down the street on foot, by bicycle and car, a long-bearded stranger strode quickly toward her gate. A lone red-tailed hawk circled in the air above.









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