

COW No More

Carmella often wished that she could live her life on a cooking show. Nothing ever burned, no one got hurt and the end results were always what they were supposed to be. She giggled out loud as she imagined the cameraman trying to sneak shots of her shapely behind while she whipped up delectable concoctions that the home viewers were frantically trying to emulate.

Instead, she watched her plump dimpled hand brush bubbling meat juices over the golden breasts of two Cornish game hens. Carmella daydreamed as she sprinkled parsley over the glistening birds and slid the roasting pan back into the oven. Lifting the lid from the pot sitting stovetop on a low flame, she dipped her finger into the creamy swirl of potatoes. Her eyes closed as she brought the buttery mashed potato encased finger to her mouth. She ran her tongue over her lips to catch any leftover spud that might be lingering there. With the speed of a master chef, she stirred the simmering gravy, scattered blanched almonds into the bowl of steamed green beans and tossed the salad of spinach and mushrooms with balsamic vinegar and oregano. At least the meal would be perfect.

She walked over to the sliding door leading to the back porch and looked at her reflection in the glass. Her flame of red hair, which was Carmella's best feature, flowed sleekly past her shoulders. Her makeup was applied in such a way that made her cheekbones stand out high and prominent on her face. Her full lips were glossed over with a rosy shade of color. Her face was attractive. Isn't that what they always said, though, about women like Carmella.

"It's really a shame..."

"She has such a pretty face."

"She has a such great personality."

"She is such a terrific dancer."

She turned sideways and sucked in her stomach. The expensive control top pantyhose that she allowed the saleswoman at Nordstroms to talk her into buying, were not doing a good job. By poofing out her blouse she was able to hide the roll of flesh that hung over the tight waistband of the only skirt she

owned that was form fitting. She looked at the clock on the stove as the phone rang. Her date was already twenty-five minutes late.

“Hey, Cath? It’s Joey.”

She could barely hear his voice above the sounds of racing engines in the background.

“Hi, Joey. And the name...”

“You must be wondering where I am. I don’t know where to begin.”

“The beginning is always recommended, but don’t let me interrupt you. And the name is...”

“First, my car wouldn’t start. I think it’s the catalytic converter. And then this truck hit me as I was pulling out of the driveway.”

“Did it fix the catalytic converter?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“And then, this huge guy gets out of his car and comes after me, like... like he wants to beat me up.”

“Didn’t you say a truck hit you?”

“What?”

“Never mind. I know how traumatized you must be right now. Did you at least exchange insurance companies?”

“What?”

“Listen Joey, the name is Carmella and the Cornish games hens are starting to shrivel up, my spinach salad is wilting and the gravy is stuck to the bottom of the pot. The potatoes are still creamy, so if you hurry, we can eat vegetarian.”

“I can’t make it.”

“The wine is uncorked and breathing heavily.”

“Sorry Cath, how ‘bout a raincheck?”

“I made my special chocolate cake with raspberry sauce for dessert. We could just have cake and coffee and relax.”

“Listen I gotta go. Dinner sounds great but I gotta get an accident report and take my car to the shop and... ok?”

“Ok Joey, maybe another night.”

“Sure... see ya ‘round Cath.”

“The name is Carmella,” she said into the dead phone.

Carmella hung up the phone. Whatever gravy that had not stuck to the bottom of the pot, bubbled over into a sticky puddle on the stove. She poured herself a glass of wine and turned off the stove. The chocolate cake, painted with drizzles of raspberry sauce, was perched atop of a stemmed crystal cake dish. A dusting of powdered sugar stood out like falling snowflakes against a black winter sky. She gulped her wine and seized a handful of the moist cake, shoving gobs of chocolate into her mouth; raspberry sauce smeared her lips and stained her white blouse purple. She would hate herself in the morning.

Carmella never considered herself to be a fat person. Like any other woman, she had some body parts that she liked better than other body parts. At 5’10”, she towered over most men. Her attitude was that being a tall woman enabled her to carry more weight on her frame. It wasn’t until one Christmas about nine years ago, when Carmella was twenty-two, that she realized how she appeared to the outside world.

The setting was Grandma’s house, Elizabeth, New Jersey. The year was 1983. The whole family was gathered in the kitchen, seated around a table large enough to accommodate a crowd of forty. Grandma had cooked her traditional seven-course meal that would last all day long. It would start off with antipasto accompanied by hunks of crusty Italian bread with the center so soft you could squeeze it into a ball.

Carmella would spear chunks of provolone cheese and pop them into her mouth, one after the other.

“Mange.” Grandma would call out to her guests. She lived to watch people eat and enjoy her food. She would walk around the table, her head held high, pouring Chianti in wineglasses.

“Eat... ‘tis good food, yeh,” she would exclaim, bending over each child and planting a wet kiss on their warm cheeks.

Rolls of capicola and thick slices of pepperoni would be piled high on top of a bed of romaine lettuce, roasted peppers, black Italian olives and marinated mushrooms. Homemade soup of pastina and fresh

parsley in a thick chicken stock would follow. The appetizer plates and soup bowls would be cleared and dinner plates would be passed out in preparation for the main course. Two steaming bowls of homemade ravioli would be placed at each end of the table. The macaroni melted on your tongue as your mouth filled with the flavor of garlicky ricotta cheese. Everyone would scramble to make room on the overcrowded table for plates of meatballs, golden fried chicken cutlets and egg filled braccioni. A large tossed green salad was passed from Grandpa to Momma, to Aunt Pauline to Cousin Lisa and so on.

And as always on this holiday, there was the rule about gift giving. No presents would be exchanged unless everyone had eaten their share of food and all dishes, glassware, pots, pans and utensils were washed, dried and put away. The men would retreat to the living room to watch the football game behind their closed eyelids. The women would remain in the kitchen to tackle the overwhelming task of dirty dishes. A carefree banter would develop between them until the job was done.

“Aunt Sophie is back in the hospital.”

“Oh no... what’s the matter?”

“They think it’s cancer this time.” A hush would fall over the room.

“Cousin Manny’s brother-in-law is still missing. Going on a year now.”

“Someone at the beauty parlor told me he’s with Jimmy Hoffa.”

“Oh hush about that. Don’t you go spreading such rumors.” The sound of scouring brillo pads and plates being piled one on top of the other replaces the conversation.

“Laverne from ‘round the corner’s going back to Italy. She’s taking the three kids and leaving the husband.” The women chuckle and try to hide their amusement behind wet dishcloths.

“It’s about time. He’s a two-timing, good-for-nothing ratfink. She don’t need him.”

“Such words. I never heard such gossip from a group of hens like this.”

“Grandma, what else is there to talk about?”

“I saw Father Anthony at mass this morning. He says God blessed this family. We have a beautiful family.

This is not gossip, this is truth.” The women shake their heads in agreement.

When the last knife was placed in the cutlery holder, the women removed their aprons and paraded into the living room. The familiar sounds of snoring could be heard above the chatter of the football game commentators and the cheering from the crowd.

“Come on sleepyheads, the coffee’s on and we want to open presents.”

Slowly, the men open their eyes, grunting and wiping spittle from the corners of their mouths. Michael, Carmella’s younger brother by two years, jumped up and went to the Christmas tree. After rummaging through the pile of packages, he pulled out a medium sized box.

“Carmella, I want you to open your present first. I think you’ll really like it,” he said, his lips curling into a mischievous smirk.

“Oh how sweet,” murmured through the room.

“Grandma, the tree looks really nice this year,” Carmella said, ignoring the adoring gazes directed toward Michael. “Did you get new decorations?”

The tree was of the fake variety, its boughs composed of silver aluminum. It was propelled by a motorized Lazy Susan, and as it rotated, a spotlight of multiple colors reflected onto the branches, turning them shades of blue, green, yellow and red.

“I changed the lightbulbs this year,” said Grandma. “Now open your present.”

Carmella turned the box over and slid one finger under the taped flap of Santa wrapping paper and then slid her finger under the opposite flap. She methodically unfolded the edges to reveal the Macy’s box underneath.

“Will you open it already.”

It appeared to be an oversized shirt box. It was nothing out of the ordinary. She removed the lid and unfolded a generous helping of tissue paper.

“Towels?” Carmella laughed in relief as she pulled one out of the box. “Thank you Michael. I could use some new towels.”

“What does COW mean?” someone asked.

“What?”

“COW?”

“Where do you see that?”

“Turn the towel over. Look.”

There was no mistaking it. The letters COW were embroidered as large and bold as possible. Carmella spun around, her cheeks a bright crimson.

“Momma, did you tell him? How did he find out?”

“Find out what? What is all this mumbo jumbo?” asked Grandma.

“Michael asked me if you had a middle name and I told him. There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” said Momma.

“Will somebody tell us what’s going on?”

“My middle name is Olivia. So if you look at my initials, it spells out COW– Carmella Olivia Waldo,” said Carmella. “Momma, how could you tell him? And... why would you ever give me a name like that? Why?”

“I thought it was cute. You were so chubby as a baby... my little cow.”

“Now I’m a big cow. Ok... this was funny. Michael, you should be thankful I have a good sense of humor. But, I will never, ever, ever use these towels.”

Carmella looked up at the clock and was surprised to see that two hours had passed and only the mint garnish was left of the chocolate cake. Tomorrow she would go to the gym, knowing full well that she would have to suffer with red, raw inner thighs for a week. She cleaned up the dishes and threw out the remainder of the meal that was never eaten. Carmella started the dishwasher, turned off the kitchen light and padded down the short hallway to the bathroom. She smiled into the mirror as she worked the cake of soap in her hands and washed her face. She grabbed for the towel hanging on the rack and brought it to her face. She stared at the monogram.

“I will be a cow no more.” She reached for the light switch and on her way out, dropped the towel into the waste bin.