

The Devil's Orchestra

By Jerry Guarino

After trying to finesse God for years, Tony finally realized he had been playing in The Devil's Orchestra. The worst part was that he was about to drag his family down with him. Shopping for groceries was now a painful reminder of how much he had lost, but he still spent most of his food money on his daughter.

Unlike his father, who kept him and his mother in poverty by gambling, Tony measured his decisions carefully, knowing his family depended on him for so much. "That will be \$38.45 sir." Tony wiped his face and saw that he had \$40 left in his wallet as a flush of anxiety ran through him. He tried to hide his concern and handed the cashier the twenty-dollar bills. Walking past the lottery machine, he resisted the temptation of wasting a dollar.

"Is that you Tony?" said his wife greeting him in the kitchen. "Yes dear. There were good prices on fruit, so I got extra. Where's Kelly?" Kelly runs in and hugs her Dad. "There's my princess" as Tony hugs her back and puts on a smile. "How about a snack?" Kelly looked at the bag. "Did you get bananas and grapes?" Her father took out items one at a time. "Hmm, we have lettuce... broccoli... tomatoes... carrots." Kelly stood on her toes trying to peek inside the bag, her smile fading. "...peas...cauliflower...string beans." Kelly was pouting now, as her father pulled out the food. "and... oops, here are three bananas and two kinds of grapes!" The ten-year old girl gave a hop and grabbed her favorite foods. "Thanks Daddy," and sat down at the kitchen table. "OK, I'm off to work," said Tony as he kissed them goodbye.

Tony's mind wandered as he drove to the restaurant. His second job helped him keep up with expenses and some food to bring home. He thought if he could just hold on, God would provide some relief. When times were good, he felt blessed; now that his family was struggling, he thought God had turned away from him. "I will do anything..." he prayed to himself, "anything to keep his family healthy." Once there was money in the bank, but medical expenses for Kelly drained that quickly after he lost his insurance coverage. At least he had two jobs and his wife's salary as a bookkeeper. Even though they lived frugally, monthly expenses outpaced income, making each month a challenge to juggle bills. A comfortable life had been replaced by daily anxiety and stress. There must be a reason.

Sixty-hour weeks were putting a strain on Tony; at 56 he was tired when he came home and had less energy to relax with the family. Tony and his wife saw less of each other too, because of their schedules and child-care. It seemed as though he was slowly draining a gas tank, each week being tougher than the last.

He arrived at work and took his place in the kitchen; Tony's cooking skills kept him employed at two restaurants, though both were 30 hours weekly. He wasn't alone. Multiple part time jobs were common in the economy, allowing employers to avoid paying benefits. Walking out to get his apron, he bumped into Maria, a single mom waitress in her 40s. "Sorry Maria, I wasn't looking." Maria smiled and helped Tony with his apron. "No worries hon... We're all busy here." Tony couldn't help watch Maria as she left. Maria didn't usually flirt with him so this came as a surprise. Tony imagined spending time with her, but quickly snapped out of it, chastising himself for the thought. His wife was devoted and loving, although they had both been too tired and stressed for intimacy lately. As Tony prepared for the dinner rush, he caught Maria in passing watching him. He let out a small smile.

Friday nights were very busy with constant orders rushing in and out of the kitchen, not letting up until 10pm. Waiters and cooks only had time for quick bathroom and snack breaks and by closing only the cleanup crew were left. Everyone else left for the night and returned home except for the younger staff that still had energy to go to bars, clubs or a late movie. Tony couldn't remember those days before he was married when you could get by on less money and responsibility. Was he a better person then? Why was life so easy then? Or did it only seem that way? Experience and wisdom should make life easier as you got older, but then there's a turning point where things go downhill, like a bell curve. He realized his best times were behind him.

When he got home, his wife and Kelly were asleep. He dropped into his chair to watch some TV, eat a snack and have a glass of wine. He wouldn't drink at work but a glass of Chianti before bed helped him sleep. He would have to be up early to get to his other restaurant, again missing time with family. Except for church on Sunday afternoon, there were few times when they were all together on the weekend. During the week, his wife worked during the day and Tony worked early morning and nights, leaving them passing by each other.

Tony checked the mail. Several bills were overdue, the worst a notice from the hospital for Kelly's treatments; he could bring the tip money he was saving to them on Monday, explaining that he will keep making small payments. "I didn't hear you come in," said his wife. "Are you coming to bed?" Tony replied with a nod meaning he would be right there. He was thankful for such a good wife, stoically standing by the family and not complaining.

4:30am comes quickly now. Tony takes a shower, kisses his sleeping wife and daughter and heads to his daytime restaurant; he turns on the grills and makes breakfast for himself. By 7am there would be a line waiting for the pancakes and scrambles he makes. He couldn't afford to take his family to this place

but there were plenty of people who could and do every day. At least he can bring something home for them to reheat, although the boss kept an eye on how much food he took. His family deserved it. God will provide.

By 2:30 it was time to leave; he made a large scramble and three pancakes to take home. He glanced out to see if the boss noticed. No one was around. He would only have about an hour before he had to go to his other job and wanted to spend that time with family. "Tony, wait up a minute," said the boss. "You know I understand you're bringing that home, but I'm going to have to start charging you something. Food isn't free, you know." Tony felt a flush of panic. He immediately thought of losing this job. "How much," he asked. The boss worked it out in his head. "Well, you have two scrambles at \$10.95 each and three pancakes at \$8.95. Let's call it \$12.00." Tony knew the real cost of food wasn't even half that. Twelve dollars wasn't much to the crowd that ate here every day, but it was significant to Tony. This weekend meal was a treat for his family and they looked forward to it. "OK" and he handed over a ten and two ones from his tip money. "And I expect you to show me when you take food next time, instead of sneaking out." Tony was really embarrassed now. "Won't happen again boss," putting on a contrite smile. Tony got in his car and drove home, still worried about how to choose between the money and the food he brought home.

Kelly and mom were sitting in the living room watching a kid's show. When Kelly heard her Dad come in, she rushed to the door. "Did you bring pancakes?" Tony smiled, "Don't I always?" knowing now that his decision had been made for him. His wife kissed him on the cheek, rubbed his back and put her head on his shoulder. "You always take care of us." Tony sat down and closed his eyes, taking a short nap while Kelly and mom shared the pancakes. Sleep wasn't restful now. He worried about the day job, finances and Kelly's health. He grimaced and shrugged in his sleep, then feeling someone pulling his arm. "Time to go to work dear," said his wife and he got up and left.

Saturday nights were the busiest here, twice the crowd during the week and more than Fridays or Sundays. This restaurant was so different than the daytime one. People dressed up, the meals were expensive and the dining room had large tables and intimate booths where candles flickered. In the morning, he saw young couples holding hands over pancakes. Here he saw older couples beginning the dance of romance. When was the last time he and his wife had such a treat? Love is for those with no cares or those with money. His life fell outside that circle of happiness, people with means and young lovers, living at home without the stresses that life may bring.

Miguel, his partner in cooking, was preparing sauces for the entrees. "Hey Tony, how's it going?"

Tony liked Miguel. He was in his twenties, had plans for getting married and endless energy. Tony wondered if working side by side, the boss would compare them. But Tony was an excellent cook and Miguel complemented his work by getting the sauces and side dishes ready just in time to Tony's entrees so that food could be delivered quickly to patrons. "I'm good Miguel. How's that pretty fiancée of yours?" Miguel's face lit up. "Oh, you know Tony, I'm marrying an angel. After work tonight we're going dancing and even though the guys will be watching her, she's going home with me." Tony nodded. "Keep treating her right and she always will. When's the big day again?" Miguel stirred the three sauces on the stove. "Valentine's Day! It was Andrea's idea. Romantic, but it could be cold." Tony wondered where they could be going on their honeymoon. Miguel offered before he could ask "but Miami should be beautiful then, lots of warm ocean water, good food I don't have to cook and great clubs." Tony patted him on the arm. "Blessings to both of you and a long, happy life."

At least his boss here didn't mind him taking food home. Whatever meats had been around a while were fair for him to make a meal because they received fresh shipments every week, dated in the large refrigerator. His boss made a point of telling customers that they only used fresh ingredients. "Tony, you going to make magic for those people tonight?" said his boss, dressed in his blue suit, white shirt and red tie. "Absolutely, boss, Miguel and I are the magic makers." The boss relaxed. "Great, that's what keeps them coming back. You know we're thinking about expanding the dining room to next door. If we do, we'll need you for more hours. Is that good?" For the first time in days, Tony felt hope. "I'd love that boss. I can work every night if you need me." Tony felt a wave of energy as he continued to prepare the meat entrees for cooking. "And you'll have to do that sooner while Miguel is on the beach in South Florida next month." Miguel smiled. "Let's hope he makes time for the beach," said Tony. They all shared a laugh.

Once it got busy, Tony and Miguel concentrated on cooking, leaving little time for talk about Miguel's honeymoon or much else. They served over 150 people a night here and time went by quickly. The other cooks and kitchen staff looked up to them as they would a head chef in a fine European restaurant, even though this Italian-American bistro was much less pretentious and Tony and Miguel never thought of themselves as better than the others.

Most of the waiters and waitresses here were young, supplementing another job or still in college. Tony knew their time here was temporary and their future was bright. "Wouldn't it be great to start over?" he thought, although he wouldn't trade his wife and daughter for anything. Tony remembered the injustices he had suffered. He would have stayed away from the people who hurt him, politicking for no other reason that he wasn't a college graduate or because of his age. But it wasn't his to judge; everyone

has ups and downs. Each person will have to account for his or her actions on Earth. We are only here a short time. Eternity belongs to those who are faithful.

Respect. That's what Tony liked about this restaurant. And if he increased his hours, then he knew he would get health insurance. More money, Kelly's medical expenses and finally, some security! Maybe he would even be able to drop his morning job, especially now that his boss was squeezing him for taking meals home. "I could spend the mornings with my wife, make breakfast for Kelly and take her to school." Tony's sense of hope made him excited and relaxed at the same time.

Tony walked back to the refrigerator to get meat for the first orders. It would take some time to prepare them for cooking, trimming and shaping the cuts and rubbing them with his blend of spices and marinades. Maria was there looking upset. "What's wrong Maria?" Maria turned toward him. "Oh, just a flat tire that I got on the way over. It will be too late to take care of it after work. I'll have to come back during the day on Sunday." Tony knew this meant she would have to take buses home late at night. "Would you like a ride home? It's on my way." Maria seemed relieved. "Oh, that would be great, thanks" and she touched his arm in appreciation. "No problem."

Tony was trimming the fat off the meats to make them just right for cooking. He couldn't help wonder if Maria was looking for more than a ride, remembering the glances she gave him the other night. Suddenly he was imagining dropping her off and Maria reaching over to give him a not so innocent kiss. "Ouch" ...he let out as he cut his left thumb. "Serves me right for not paying attention" he thought, justice for thinking this imaginary infidelity.

After he cleaned up, Tony went back to preparing the cuts. He loved his wife. "Why would I even think of cheating on her?" he asked himself. "This is natural, all men think this way. I'm not going to do anything. That would be the real sin." But would it? Tony believed that it was a sin just to have these thoughts, so he felt guilty. "Do these thoughts come from me or from some evil source?" Tony believed in evil, in Satan and in Hell. "This must be him trying to bring me down." His life wasn't stressful enough; now he is being tempted to do something he knew was wrong. "But was it? How could just thinking about something be wrong? No one would know. No one would get hurt."

This was a question he wrestled with all his life. "Is it our thinking or actions that guide our destiny?" He could not identify any great transgressions he had committed; yet his life had gone from comfortable to this fragile state he and his family now endured. Kelly's medical problems certainly weren't her fault; she was an angel. His wife's suffering wasn't her fault; she did the best she could. No, it was when he lost his health insurance, because that company moved out of town, sending the jobs to some other country,

which was to blame. Not that Tony thought those people were to blame; they would make a fraction of what they were paying Americans but that would be a blessing for them. "No, the evil is somewhere else, someone set this in motion."

The food was put away, the kitchen was clean and it was time to go home. Maria waited for Tony outside with her hands in her pockets to stay warm. Tony opened the door for her and they left the restaurant. "I really appreciate this Tony. This is no time to be outside waiting for buses." Tony glanced at Maria. "I told you, it's on my way home, no trouble at all." Tony remembered his earlier transgression and had decided that thinking about it wouldn't hurt anybody. "Well, it's more than my ex would do for me. He only cares about himself." Tony pulled up to Maria's apartment building and waited for her to get out. "Here you go, have a good night." Maria squeezed his hand and looked at Tony. "Thanks. I have to pay the babysitter and make sure mine is asleep." Tony wanted to lean over and kiss her. He thought Maria wanted the same thing. He waited, Maria still holding his hand. It seemed like minutes had gone by when it had only been seconds. Maria's eyes glanced downward. "OK, thanks again" and she left slowly and went inside her apartment. Tony could feel his body quivering. No harm done. Time to get home.

Everyone was asleep as usual when he came in. He cleaned up and got into bed. That night he dreamed about what he had secretly hoped would happen with Maria. He woke suddenly at 3am, upset that it had only been a dream. He hoped the dream would continue but it was replaced with a nightmare about losing his job at the restaurant. The next time he woke up, he was glad it was just a dream. It was 4:30am and time to get to his breakfast job.

All that day, Tony thought about Maria and the opportunity that might have been. He wished he had acted on his impulses. What a relief it would be to feel passion again and to be wanted, not just needed. "No, my wife wants me too. It's our life that has ruined our passion, not her, not me." Tony finished the shift, made his scrambles and pancakes and gave his boss the \$12. This time the boss didn't give him a dirty look.

Sunday nights were slower at the restaurant, especially in January. The post-holiday crowd was always lighter, people spending some time at home or away to some warm vacation spot. Tony patted Miguel on the back. "Hey, young man, how are you today?" Miguel looked upset. "Not sure. I think Andrea may be cheating on me. I was looking at the cell phone bill and saw some calls to her old boyfriend." Tony listened. "It may be nothing. She loves you. Is there any other reason you are worrying?" Miguel paused, and then said "No, just the calls." Tony tried to reassure him. "It's better that you ask her about this. You'll make yourself crazy if you don't and there's probably an explanation for it." Miguel nodded and agreed. He

would ask her tonight after work.

Tony worried about Miguel's situation and that it might be just a harmless misinterpretation of the facts. There could be an innocent explanation, or so he hoped. Miguel and Andrea seemed so perfect together. Tony silently prayed for them, believing that might help.

The night continued to go slowly and the boss told Tony and some others to leave early. When Tony got to his car, he saw Maria. "So you got your tire fixed?" Maria nodded. "Yes, luckily it could be patched, so I didn't need a new one." Tony felt himself quivering again and tried to steady his voice. "Yeah, those new tires sure run up a bill." Maria walked up to Tony and whispered in his ear. Tony could feel his heart pounding. "Really, what about your son?" Maria touched Tony on the shoulder. "He's at my mother's tonight" and she gave him a smile. "You remember where I live?" she said. Tony could barely get the words out "Yes, I'll follow you." The four-mile trip seemed to take forever. Tony's heart was pounding and he thought to himself. "What am I doing? This is wrong. I should just go home." But Tony didn't go home.

Walking toward the building, he saw Maria waiting for him. She took his hand and they went up to the second floor apartment. After they got in, Maria took off her coat and put her arms around Tony's neck, kissing him and leaving no doubt about her intentions. Tony was both excited and worried at the same time. What if his wife found out? But how could she? He wasn't expected home for hours and she always retired early with Kelly. With this expectation, he took full advantage of Maria, unbuttoning her blouse while she did the same with his shirt.

Tony drove home energized and excited but filled with guilt. "What have I done?" But knowing that his wife wouldn't find out, he decided that this was going to be the first night of many with Maria. "This is good for me," he thought. "No one gets hurt. It's no different than thinking about it." But Tony was having trouble convincing him of that last point.

The breakfast restaurant was closed on Mondays, so Tony had breakfast with the family before Kelly had to leave for school and his wife go to work. "What did you guys do last night?" he asked. Kelly jumped in "We made play-doh houses and put people in them." His wife added "Yes, we made a little family like ours; we even had them sitting at the table eating breakfast together." For some reason this renewed Tony's guilt so he asked, "Great, what did your family have to eat?" "Pancakes of course Daddy!" said Kelly. "How was your night dear?" said his wife. Tony wondered if his wife knew he got off early. Realizing there was no upside in looking guilty, he put on his best false smile and said "No, same as usual, dinner for the fortunate few." Then Tony dropped his wife off at work and Kelly at school.

Monday he was off from both jobs, but he spent the day wishing he were going in to see Maria again.

"Should I call her?" he wondered, not knowing the appropriate first post-affair task. "If I call her, she might think I'm too eager. But if I don't call her, she might think I don't care. Don't care? Do I care? In what way do I care? I'm not going to leave my wife for her, but I don't want to stop seeing her. Wait, I'm not sure if she feels the same about me. What if that was just a one-time thing for her? What if she just wanted to see how it felt? Maybe she is feeling guilty too. But why? She's single, nothing to feel guilty about. Unless, she thinks my wife will find out. That would hurt everyone." Tony was realizing that this was becoming more complicated than he thought it would. But he couldn't wait until Tuesday night.

Tony decided not to call Maria. He didn't want to leave an answer on her machine that her son might hear. And he didn't know what to say. He got to the restaurant early, waiting outside for Maria. He had some flowers in his car. "Flowers? What am I doing now?" Maria pulled up beside him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Tony got the flowers and gave them to her. "These are lovely, thank you so much. Do you mind if I put them in my car?" Tony thought that would be best. "That would be fine," he said. "I wanted to call but didn't know if it was the right thing to do." Maria leaned up to him and whispered "I think it would be better if you didn't." Now Tony was confused again. "Was this the end of it? Did his failure to call end it?" Before he could go on, Maria continued, "We need to keep this our secret, ok?" and kissed him again. Tony wanted to take her right there, but knew someone might see them. He held back all his instincts and asked her if he could see her tonight. Maria gave a little pout and said "sorry love, my son is at home but he's going to be out tomorrow at a friend's house." It was clear that Maria wanted Tony as much as he wanted her, but she had the sense to do this in a way that no one found out. Tony was relieved, having imagined that Maria might tell his wife for some reason if things went south between them. "She's very careful. No one will know. No one will get hurt. I wouldn't want my wife to get hurt," thought Tony. Then they went into the restaurant using separate entrances.

"Women can control their passions more easily than men," Tony thought. He couldn't stand the thought of waiting another day, but Maria seemed perfectly at ease with it. Tony muddled through the night, his mind racing with thoughts he shouldn't have while holding sharp knives. He remembered his thumb incident the other day. "Look at her" he thought, seeing her taking orders and calmly talking with customers, "no different than any other night."

Miguel came in a little late, which surprised and worried Tony. Miguel was never late, though this was only 20 minutes. "Miguel, how are things?" he said. Miguel gave a sad look and said. "I took your advice Tony. I sat down with Andrea and asked her about the calls. She started to cry." Tony felt a sinking feeling that his friend's engagement was coming to an end. "But then she told me that the old boyfriend

had asked her if he could hold a bachelor party for me...hard to believe, eh?" Tony wished that were the case. Tony prayed that was the case. Only time would tell. Tony decided he had helped enough.

Over the next month, Tony and Maria continued to see each other after work whenever Maria could arrange for her son to be out. Tony hoped this is how it would continue. No expectations, no one gets hurt. Maria felt the same way. "Tony, do your wife and daughter ever go away for the night?" Tony realized this was a golden opportunity. They could be together all night, not rushing out after an hour to cover his infidelity. He began thinking about how he might arrange for his wife and Kelly to be out of town. "Seeing relatives? Surprise mother and daughter trip to Disneyland? Think Tony, there has to be a way." Then he remembered. Kelly was due at the hospital in the city for cancer tests. It would be an overnight trip and mom always stayed with her. "My God, is this what it has come to? My daughter in the hospital with cancer and my using that as an excuse to be with Maria?" Yes, that would work. No one would know. No one would get hurt.

It worked better than expected. Maria arranged for her son to spend the weekend with a friend and even paid for a hotel room for her and Tony. When Tony heard the plan, he realized that his affair had now crossed over into the romantic domain. "What if Maria wanted more than a physical relationship?" But Maria was way ahead of Tony. Not only did she want more, but she had already bonded with him. Kelly and mom's trip to the hospital was on a Sunday after church and they wouldn't be back until late Monday. Sunday at work, Tony and Maria couldn't help giving each other glances. Both knew what the night had in store, all night and the next day too! After work, they took both cars to the hotel (Maria always the careful one), she checked in and set up the room with champagne, dessert and rose petals on the bed. A trip to Victoria Secret was not wasted on Maria, or Tony. He showed up at the room with two-dozen roses and a small silver bracelet in a gift box.

When she opened the door, Tony thought he would explode with passion. They made love, drank champagne, ate rich chocolates and made love some more. Maria seemed more like a woman in her 20s and Tony did his best to keep up. The adrenalin rush was helping. He forgot completely about his wife and daughter in the hospital. This was the relief he had been praying for; God had answered his prayers, just in a different way than he expected. Maria snuggled up close to Tony and whispered in his ear. "I love you!" Tony thought time (and his heart) had just stopped. "What do I say? There is only one right thing to do now and I'm not sure I can do it." He gave her a long, soulful kiss and said, "I love you too."

Tony and Maria decided it would be safe to use the hotel Jacuzzi. It was late and it was open to guests. They were all alone and holding each other, kissing and reiterating those words that Tony feared so

much but were hard to resist once Maria had said them. Tony knew he wouldn't have to work in the morning so they stayed up all night, with just catnaps as breaks. Maria seemed very content with the relationship, even though her words implied wanting more. He had to know. But that could wait until tomorrow. No sense ruining the best night he had in the last ten years.

Around 4:00am they both fell asleep, but Maria had set the alarm for 7:30am, with breakfast ordered from room service. Tony was still asleep when it arrived. She quietly set it up in front of the bed, and then woke him up by snuggling close. Maria didn't want breakfast just yet. Realizing this, Tony took her again, Maria being equally passionate. When they finally got around to breakfast, Tony asked, "What time do we have to check out?" Maria told him she arranged for a late checkout, 1pm, while smiling devilishly. They spent that time in bed enjoying every minute. Tony decided to put off his question about her 'I love you'.

Tony had promised his wife he would call to find out about Kelly. He reached her at the hospital. His wife was crying. "Kelly's cancer is returning. She is in surgery now and could be here another week for treatment. I'm staying with her." Tony's heart stopped again, not in joy and passion, but in devastation for his darling little girl. He promised his wife he would make the trip to the hospital immediately and hung up.

Pulling himself together, tears in his eyes, he went to Maria. Maria thought Tony was in love with her and this was going to be a passionate plea to be with her. Tony took her in his arms and whispered, "I have some errands I promised my wife I would take care of before she gets back. Maybe we can get together later tonight?" Maria was excited about extending their time together. "I'll have my son stay with my mom in case you can come over," and she gave Tony a warm hug goodbye.

When Tony arrived at the hospital, Kelly was in the recovery room so he had to wait to see her. He went to the chapel, got down on his knees and prayed. "God, I don't know why this is happening to Kelly. You know she is a sweet and innocent girl. But if you save her, I'll do anything. If this is because of what I have done, I'll stop. Nothing matters except the life of that little girl. Please God, save her life."

Later in the hospital room, Tony and his wife sat with Kelly holding her hands trying to keep her from crying. "It's OK daddy, the doctor said I'm strong." Tony did everything he could to hold it together. "You are strong Kelly and I know you're going to be all right." The doctor came in, took Tony aside and gave him the news. "We think we got it out. Kelly is going to be all right." Tony's smile told his wife that it was good news and Kelly sensing the same, smiled up at her dad and the doctor.

Tony continued his affair with Maria, neither one expecting more than they had started. He kept this secret for the next five years. No one knew. No one got hurt.

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