

Pie or Die

By Jerry Guarino

Tony was sautéing onion, peppers and mushrooms slowly while considering how his life had changed. What was once important now seemed trivial. He wondered why he thought chasing money would make him happy. What have I done that matters? Tony's transformation to a better life had begun.

"Tony, what are you cooking?" said his wife Angela. "A little veal with sauce and vegetables dear" he replied. "With penne?" Tony stirred the red sauce into the pan. "No, linguine" he said, "I'm hungry." Cooking is meaningful. Creating food seems a noble and honest activity. To watch Tony cook, you might not realize he had made a small fortune in the business world climbing over numerous competitors and colleagues on his way to the top. But his competitive nature had nearly ruined his health with the long hours, rich foods, alcohol, business trip affairs and liaisons so connected to his career.

Tony didn't give thoughts to making money anymore. He didn't worry about dressing to impress, preferring casual jogging pants and cotton sweaters. There was nothing he had to do or even wanted to do. He was depressed. Tony was only 48. With a wife twelve years his junior and the children heading off to college, he was suddenly a man without a purpose.

Even though Tony was bored with his new life, he was relieved to leave behind the stress, corruption, sexual scandals and financial improprieties. He now had a chance to start over. "Angela, what do you think I should do?" Angela paused a moment. "Have you thought about taking cooking lessons, gourmet cooking with one of those fancy schools?" Tony smiled. "How about in Italy or France, after the kids start college this fall?" "Your choice, but I would prefer France dear" Angela said. "Something to think about. I'll check it out."

After lunch, Tony wandered down to town, a seaside upper class haven for those with money and visitors curious about those with money. There were also the disaffected youth. Those lost boys and girls too old to be in school and too young to care. Most young people were self-absorbed with their looks, dating and partying. Whether they were working or in school, their world was confined to the present. They spent a majority of their time on smart phones in their virtual reality. Personal communications has been replaced by texting, emails and videos.

A small shop on the boardwalk was vacant with a For Lease sign. He checked the neighboring stores. T-shirts, beach clothing, coffee franchises and frozen yogurt shops. The nearest pizza was 30 yards in either

direction. Doesn't seem like much, but this spot was right near the entrance to the beach from the parking lot, generating quite a bit of walking traffic. So Tony decided to open a pizza shop and get some of these disaffected youth to work in it, even run it.

Soon there was a line of 16 to 21 year olds waiting for work. I know you're thinking he named the store Tony's, but he thought Pie or Die had a more youthful appeal. Instead of Sinatra and Pavarotti, the music inside reflected this new generation of the kids who worked there.

It was a diverse group of employees, working class kids without work. He hired someone to teach them how to make pizza, run deliveries and manage cash with customers. He hired younger kids to hand out coupons to people on the beach and place them on car windshields. Most importantly, he let the kids run the business, offering advice when needed. Within a month, Pie or Die was doing steady business from noon until midnight and just before the summer season. Timing couldn't be better.

Because Tony gave his staff a lot of freedom, they worked hard. Weeks went by without any incidents. Rapid growth led to some turnover. There wasn't time to do background checks on applicants. Students on summer break looking to work part-time meant more employees working fewer hours.

Unknown to Tony, some of these temporary workers were skimming money. A few were using drugs in the back and several were making out when they were supposed to be delivering pies. His successful new business was evolving into a microcosm of his old life. Even in a small pizza shop on the beach, corruption and scandal had taken hold.

Stopping in before closing to check on inventory, Tony watched as the night crew cleaned up. Jenny, a waitress, made a final count and handed Tony the money. "Here you go Tony. \$575.00 for the last few hours." "Thanks Jenny, hey you better get home." Jenny put up her apron. "It's not a long walk." Tony showed concern. "Walking at this time of night. No, you better let me give you a ride." Jenny smiled and nodded, following Tony to his car. Jenny gave him directions down the beach road to a clearing, over a mile away. "Pull over here, by that palm tree." Tony noticed the bungalows common to the area, usually shared by students. "OK, here you go," he said. Jenny smiled, took his hand and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Really, what about your roommates?" Jenny whispered again "they're in L.A. for a concert, won't be home until real late." Tony joined Jenny inside, the sound of waves coming from the beach and a smell of Jasmine incense inside. After an hour Tony left, Jenny happily concluding her night as she had planned. Tony felt alive and happy again, planning on continuing this affair.

Back in the store, there was a new rumor. "Did you hear about Jenny," said one of the girls. "Her dad is buying her a BMW for her 17th birthday." "Really" said one of the guys, "she sure looks a lot older than

that.”

Arriving home, Tony’s wife Angela greeted him at the door. “So you finally found a hobby!” and gave Tony a warm, passionate kiss. “Yes dear” and they went up to the bedroom.

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