

SHORT STORY

Today's Soup

by Ines Rodrigues

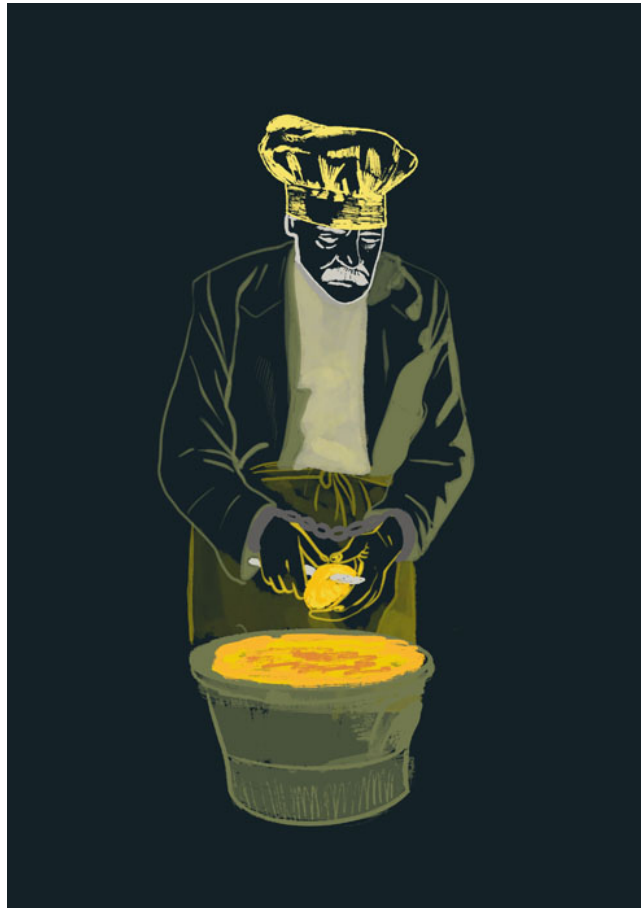


Illustration "Chef in the Shadows" by Bianca Cosar

“...I realized that our dislikes are as deeply ingrained as our better passions...”

(John Cheever)

Sarah’s Place restaurant became famous when the gossip started. A man’s finger had fallen into the onion soup. Before it was just a hole-in-the wall in São Paulo’s *Santa Cecilia*, with good food and a bunch of loyal customers and not even a sign above the door. The finger episode was never confirmed, but that’s what people had for at least three years after the rumor started. And by then, everyone had heard about that place on a noisy and dusty downtown corner. It was open until the wee hours when all the sins of the night were washed down in chicken stock and vegetables.

The man who supposedly had lost part of his hand was Juan Avrile, an illegal immigrant from Bolivia. He worked the night shift stirring pounds of onions and fresh peas in a gigantic pot in the back kitchen. The place was a fixture in our bohemian life, serving a different type of soup every night. They were all worth the trip to that not-so-decent area.

The legend started with a robbery on a Friday night: Juan reacted and the thieves cut his index finger with a machete. In a romp of anger and cruelty, they also sliced it into small pieces so Juan couldn’t even try to have it reattached. They left right after on the blood trail, taking no money. The police never found them. As Juan was illegal, Sarah, the restaurant owner, took care of him, drove him to a good hospital and sent him back to Santa Cruz de la Sierra with generous cash compensation. But that night the restaurant was so crowded, and the confusion was so deep, Juan’s assistant didn’t realize one or two pieces of finger had fallen into the soup and served it to everybody. When the rumor started, it was too late to cover it up.

“I have nothing to say. I threw all the soup in the sink. I would never serve human flesh to my customers.”

That was Sarah’s statement to the press. Her blonde, short hair — tied with a blue bandana — and her bare face with no make-up was on all the TV news. She never spoke too much about it. What “confirmed” the story for a lot of gossip seekers is the fact that Juan disappeared after the incident. But people can’t resist a juicy story. And the legend of the soup with the taste of a Bolivian hand began.

“Every day when I pass by the movie theater and turn the corner on my way to work, I think the Health Department will be here and the doors will be sealed,” said Carole, the waitress that shared the fear of sudden unemployment with me. I worked at Sarah’s as a waitress. It was not the best area in town and my parents couldn’t dream of what I was doing in the wee

hours after college. But Sarah asked no questions before hiring me and I was saving every penny I could to leave my smelly college dorm and rent my own apartment. Tips were not bad. Not because the rich and famous populated the place. Tips came out of pure camaraderie. We fed old punks who forgot to change their spiky hair after we reached the new millennium, and now they were all grey, covered in gel. Their old tattoos changed shape because of the wrinkles in their arms, necks and faces. After two or three in the morning, when most of the night owls had their late dinners and went home a little drunk, the drag queens from the Massimo Club showed up for a night cap. They were loud and colorful, all deep cleavages, sky-high red heels and glitter. They made Sarah's plain beige walls a little brighter, and even the black and white photos of old São Paulo, hanging above the tables, looked updated as a background for so much flamboyance. That was my favorite hour at work.

Sarah's soup was honest and cheap. Crowds were large during the night before partygoers headed home on weekdays. On Fridays and Saturdays, I carried bowls and bowls of hot soup until the sun was bright outside and the bakeries opened their doors with the irresistible smell of fresh bread. The hungry and the drunk then migrated to other shores, and it was our time to go home. Sometimes Carole and I would join special customers on their trip to the nearby bakery. And it was not unusual for us to end up in bed with the cute ones. That's how I met Tom. I fell for him on the first night when he took me to his apartment, undressed me, made me feel like a queen, and then played guitar for me while we watched the sunrise behind the skyscrapers in the West side of the city.

"I'll write a song for you, and it will be huge," he said when he kissed me goodbye at ten in the morning. His voice was deep and hoarse. Later I found out he owned a motorcycle shop: the music was just a hobby.

I had no expectations after that night, but Tom kept coming back to the bar. He was tall and steady like a tree. His hair was very short, his beard always undone. I loved his rough looks and the way he wore his black plain T-shirts with jeans and motorcycle boots. I started to wait for him every night and when he didn't show up, I got grumpy. Carole started to notice it.

"Is Prince Charming coming tonight? I saw a white carriage parked outside, so he'll probably be here soon."

"Shut up, Carole! You're jealous."

"Me? No way! He's not my type. There's something fishy about him. I don't know what it is."

“What are you talking about, Carole?”

“You are the only one who doesn’t notice. He looks back at the kitchen all the time. He takes a long time when he goes to the bathroom, and he always tries to chat with Sarah. She doesn’t give him a chance, of course.”

We were both standing at the bar, waiting for the barman to fill our trays before we took them to the customers sitting outside. It was a bright spring night and Sarah had set tables on the sidewalk, despite the beggars who always showed up asking for change.

“You’re really falling for him, aren’t you?”

“No! I’m not. He’s just a good fuck. That’s all.”

“*That’s* the type of love that stays forever,” she said, loud as usual, sliding her tray from the bar and walking towards the door.

I was embarrassed to take Tom to my college dorm, almost the size of the restaurant’s bathroom. Or worse, introduce him to a roommate who didn’t believe in personal hygiene and who thought underwear was a form of repression. Tom was a few years older than me, and his apartment was always tidy. He lived alone, and I loved the idea of walking around naked in the apartment. I felt pretty and sexy as I never felt before. I was too skinny, too small, too plain. I didn’t think someone like him would be attracted to a literature college student like me, who had no curves and no idea what she would do in two years when she would be supposed to graduate. Tom was wild in bed, but quiet in life. His motorcycle shop was only a few blocks from his apartment. He didn’t speak too much, but was always interested in what I did. He loved the restaurant.

“Sarah makes the best soup in town and it’s so cheap. How does she do that? I know how much these businesses cost.”

“How could I know? I just serve the tables. I have no idea. Besides, I’m no accountant.”

“She must save money in a way. I can tell the soup ingredients are good, she doesn’t buy cheap food.”

“Oh, definitely not. Her ingredients are always fresh.”

“So, how many people work in the kitchen? Who’s the chef?”

“I don’t know exactly. I rarely go back there. You know, cooks work in different turns.”

I was terrified to let escape that Sarah’s kitchen was a refuge of illegal immigrants from Bolivia, Venezuela, even from Haiti. She hired everyone temporarily to help them. And help herself, of course. They were the only people who would work for what she offered to pay

and say nothing about insurance, taxes, and all that.

He told me he would love to own a place like Sarah's one day. In my craziest dreams, I saw the two of us happily married somewhere, owning the place together. Meanwhile I was more and more addicted to his big hands, his mouth traveling down my belly, his heavy body on the top of mine.

Lucy Lux and Beth Boom Boom, my two drag queen best friends who came every Thursday, started to notice my infatuation with Tom, the lightness of my steps around the restaurant when he was around, and my new distracted attitude to the rest of the world. After observing him a couple of times, they cornered me one night.

"Danielle, we are worried about you. There's something strange about this guy. He's too perfect, too composed. And don't even tell me he comes because of you."

"Oh no, the two of you as well? Why can't he come here only because of me? Am I that bad?"

They looked at each other. Beth Boom Boom raised her long silver glittery eyebrows.

"Honey, we have a problem here. She's in love."

"I'm not. He's just pastime. Why don't you let me get laid in peace?"

"He's weird."

"He says he wants to open a restaurant."

"If he loves the atmosphere so much, why doesn't he talk to people?"

"He's just a quiet type. Stop that!"

"She's hopeless," said Lucy Lux.

On Friday nights, the place was crowded with professors and some movie people who always came after the midnight session at the August Movie Club. They smelled like a mixture of too many cigarettes and fried garlic, and some always tried to make passes on us. There were journalists, just out of the newsroom after finishing the closure of the morning newspaper, and lovers in search of a last meal before bedtime. Late one night, I saw Betty Boom Boom and Lucy Lux talking to Tom, sitting at his table with no ceremony. They talked for a long time. Later, in his apartment, I asked him what they were talking about.

"They are very nice, but I don't remember," he said, while pulling me closer, ending the conversation.

All the area's beggars and homeless stopped by almost every night. Sarah never refused to feed anyone. Franco was the hungriest of them all, always with a suitcase he found in the garbage and a raincoat as dirty as the sidewalk. He thought he looked exactly like Franco Nero in "*Querelle*" (he did not), and that's where he took his nickname from. We never knew his real name. He suddenly stopped coming by a few weeks after the hand incident. Sarah kept his plate on a corner of the bar for a long time until she finally gave up waiting. When she threw the cheap white bowl and the spoon in the garbage it felt like a funeral. No one had an appetite to eat dinner that night.

The fauna of customers was nothing compared to the restaurant staff: Carole was chubby and unashamed of her curves. She wore skirts so short, I joked that they were made from her lovers' ties. She wore tight tank tops and half of her Botticellian breasts were always exploding out of the fabric. Unlike me, she had no school to go to. Her job at the soup place was her life and her flesh on display was her talent. I loved her for being outspoken and non-apologetic.

Dalila, the manager, couldn't stand farther away from what her name suggests. Instead of the voluptuous woman who handles a dangerous and powerful pair of scissors, our version of Samson's disgrace was a disgrace herself: obese, angry and bored. Her cheeks looked like pizza dough from yesterday, drooping dramatically on both sides of her face. She never smiled or was kind to anyone. When somebody asked her a question, she groaned and gave them a frozen look, without moving her head. Her face never showed emotion.

Most customers avoided talking to her and she didn't care.

"She's weird, but Sarah can't run this place without her," Carole used to say.

"Why not?"

"She needs somebody tough to handle the cashier and all the people who try to run without paying."

"I don't think this is the only reason. I think Sarah and Dalila are a couple."

Tom's apartment wasn't big: two bedrooms, the living room, and a small kitchen. He had a balcony, only the essential pieces of furniture, and lots of empty spaces, making the place feel much larger than it was. I felt more and more at home there, and he didn't seem to be bothered that after a couple of months we were a step away from moving in. I always

complained he didn't have a coffee machine and we had to use old fashioned paper filters. He didn't seem bothered, until the day I brought him an espresso machine as a gift.

"What is this all about? I don't need a coffee machine."

"It's just a gift. I like it."

"So, take it to your place. You don't live here, do you understand? I don't need anything. If I need it, I buy it myself."

I left the box on the kitchen counter, stormed out, and walked for forty-five minutes sobbing, all the way to my apartment. But then, what did I expect? I knew it was only a pastime. I knew. I knew. I knew. I thought it might be something different, but I knew it wasn't.

Tom didn't show up at the restaurant for a few days. One Saturday, Darth Vader, one of Sarah's *protégés* who lived in a shelter down the road, showed up very worried. His loud and difficult breathing were even more obvious. I was putting away the dishes and heard their conversation.

"Sarah, I think you are in trouble."

He paused, closed his eyes. Deep, raspy breath.

"How many people do you have working in the kitchen this week?"

"In all the shifts I think about eight, plus Manuel's children, who are sleeping in the back. They don't have anywhere to go. They want to go back to Paraguay, but they need money for the bus. I'm helping them. It's just for a few days."

"Sarah, don't be greedy. Why don't you hire people legally, the normal way?"

"Don't be silly. There are so many wrong things in this country, why will they bother with my little kitchen of the destitute? They'll deport these people who are here peeling my onions in peace, to starve or be murdered in their own countries? Come on, Vader, I'm small fish."

"They use the small fish as bait. I'm telling you, let them go."

"Vader, you've been drinking too much."

"You're too stubborn."

The kitchen was in turmoil that night. The weather got colder, and a few extra illegals showed up searching for jobs or soup. Bené, who washed the dishes and cleaned the floors,

got upset with one of them and a fight broke out. Dalila had to intervene until the situation calmed down. The illegals were sent to a shelter after a phone call and a few bowls of soup.

Later that night I saw Tom again. My shift was almost at the end when he arrived. After midnight, the temperature had dropped outside and a thick fog was quickly forming, covering the top of the skyscrapers. When he opened the door, it seemed that he was emerging from a cloud.

I tried to stay cool, pretending I hadn't seen him. He just sat at a corner table, under an old picture of the *Chá* viaduct, and waited for me to bring him the menu.

I asked Carole to serve his table, but she was too busy to even listen to me. I approached him and casually placed the menu on the table.

“Hi, how are you? Let me know when you are ready to order.”

“We need to talk.”

“I'm busy now.”

“I'll wait.”

He had his soup, his wine, his coffee. The last customers left close to 3 am and he was still sitting at the same place. The fog outside now covered everything. It was hard even to see the cars passing by. We didn't say too much when we stepped out and I took the lead walking down the road. That was the opposite direction to his apartment. I was silently making my point, hoping he would protest and insist we go to the other side. We were silent for a few minutes.

“Dani, I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

“For being rude on the day you brought me the gift.”

“No worries.”

“I just didn't want you to think we were that serious. Buying a coffee machine sounded like you were moving in.”

“Don't worry. I wasn't. I think what we had was nice, but it ran its course. It's better we don't see each other anymore.”

I wanted him to protest, to say he loved me and wanted me back. I was playing the game in a way I thought it could be more efficient than to confess that I missed him a lot. But he didn't play the game. Instead, he left me in front of my building, apologized again, hugged me like

a brother, and disappeared in the mist, in the same fashion he showed up earlier.

The next evening, when I got to Sarah's restaurant with puffy eyes, red nose, and no make-up (why bother?), the doors were closed. I walked around towards the back of the kitchen and saw the drama: Sarah was crying, Dalila was trying to cut a deal with one of the policemen, while all the cooks, cleaners, and washers were handcuffed. It had been a big operation to uncover the secret of Sarah's kitchen, and they also found other restaurants and bars in the area that kept illegal immigrant workers.

Carole was furious and didn't even notice that I've been crying all day. "I don't understand what's the big deal. So many other places in this city have help from people like Manuel, Bené, Juan Jerónimo. That damn story about the finger. That's what started this shit. Now *I'm* in trouble! I just got myself a new fridge and I'm paying it in installments. What am I going to do without a job?"

On a day like that, the best was to ignore Carole. I felt for Sarah and for the guys, all good people. I left and saw Dark Vader in the front, trying to peek on what was going on in the back with the police.

"Someone from the police was here all the time, posing as a customer. "

"How do you know it, Vader?"

"This block is mine, Dani. I know everything. This place is my room and board. But I bet no one wants to arrest the illegals in the fancy neighborhood up the hill. Bastards."

"But Vader, maybe Dalila will cut a deal and we'll stay in business. Everyone does it," I said.

"Those pigs. They will ask for so much money. Sarah and Dalila don't have it."

I was a little dizzy, short of breath. Sweat started dripping down my neck and it was not even that hot. I was disoriented like when I was mugged at avenida Paulista a few months before. Just one thought hit my head. Everyone was right. Betty Boom Boom, Lucy Lux, Carole, they all saw what I didn't about Tom. Bastard. I walked a few steps, but before I reached the pedestrian crossing, I saw Tom on the corner, leaning on his motorcycle, his customary plain T-shirt covered by a blue sweater. He took off his sunglasses as he saw me, in slow motion, revealing his face inch by inch, as people do in the movies. I wanted to scream that he was a liar, a traitor, so everyone could hear. Before I opened my mouth he started walking towards me. Our eyes locked and my angry words died right there.

"Dani, I know you hate me now, but I need to come clean. I am a detective, I work for the police. The motorcycle shop was a cover up. Well, I couldn't tell you of course and, well..."

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for Vader, for your friends who lost their jobs. But what she was doing was not right, it was —”

A cold wave ran through my body and hit my stomach and my throat. My screams came full blast.

“You are a monster, a liar! I hate you, I could kill you right now. Do you understand? Right now!! Go away, liar, cop son of a bitch! You ruined all my friends' lives.”

I pushed him and started walking in the opposite direction. He followed me and pedestrians started to turn their heads to look at the scene.

“Can I talk to you for a minute? Can you stop?”

I didn't stop and he kept following me. I was trying to walk faster while I blurted out all my anger.

“You used me. You were using me to have an excuse to come to the restaurant. You have no heart, no respect. Go away!”

“Why do you think I'm here if you were part of a plan?”

“Maybe you are guilty, but that might be too much for you.”

“I was doing my job, but I didn't plan it. I didn't plan to be with you.”

“But you enjoyed it, right? Some more lies, some nice fuck on the side...”

“I was waiting for you there because I didn't know what else to do. Danielle, stop walking!”

We came to a busy crossing and the pedestrian sign was red. I had to stop anyway but didn't look him in the eye. I was not sweating or shaking anymore, but I was still furious. He took a deep breath, his voice was now softer. He was so close I could smell his cedar cologne again.

“I'm sure Sarah will reopen. I can find people to help her reorganize the business the right way. I'll do it for you.”

The pedestrian light changed to green, then to red again. We heard the familiar noise of cars, people talking, axé music coming from the bar on the corner, a stone breaker, an ambulance, a shirtless man selling ice cream down the road. We were the fabric of our crazy city, where you could find anything, anytime. Even an honest bowl of late night soup.