



Episode 16

My Dinner with Buglaroni

It is dinner time at the Buglaroni house.

And it is not a pretty sight.

Grandma has been cooking since breakfast, or at least there has been food on the stove and the smell of tomatoes and onions and garlic wafting through the house since breakfast. Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., or Ham Junior, as he is known at home, has never been able to determine why Grandma cooks as ceaselessly as she does. Is it because she enjoys doing it, or is cooking is something she considers a part of her function as the woman of the household, or is there a more demonic aspect to it, where if she were to ever stop cooking, she would cease to exist? Such a situation might not be impossible, since in Ham Junior's memory she never has stopped cooking, not to sleep, not to have her gall bladder removed two years ago when she spent three days in the hospital, not even during the week she went with the Nighten Township Senior Citizens Brigade to Tallahassee to visit the Senior Citizen Points of Interest in her A.A.R.P. travel guide. The pot boiled even in her absence, as if mocking those who would suggest she was not there to tend it. And through it all, Grandma's cooking always smells the same, even if one night it's pot roast and the next night it's codfish cakes. Ham Junior loves codfish cakes, so Grandma makes them often. Ham Senior is

not quite as partial to them, but who is he to Grandma anyhow? Shut up, eat. That is the dinner mantra at the Buglaroni household.

Shut up, eat.

As a rule, meals chez Buglaroni are eaten in the kitchen. While there is a dining room, it is only used on holidays and state occasions like births and deaths and First Communions. Ham Junior's mother always liked to eat in the dining room, seven days a week, which may explain why Ham Senior prefers to sit in the kitchen. And Grandma doesn't mind one way or the other, as long as everyone eats whatever she decides to put in front of them.

Shut up, eat.

She is dishing up now, standing over the stove, ladling something souplike into big bowls. She is a small woman, but thick, and her aura of solidity makes her seem larger than she is. Her hair is gray, pulled tight and knotted at the back of her head. She smells of Ben Gay, which she is constantly rubbing into her sore legs and arms (her bedroom reeks of the stuff, and there is a point in the house, halfway between the kitchen and Grandma's bedroom, where the high pressure zone of Ben Gay collides with the low pressure zone of endless cooking, a stationary front that threatens to erupt into a bizarre chemical nor'easter at any moment). She is dressed in black -- widow's weeds -- the mourning outfit she has worn a la Queen Victoria since the death of her husband, Ham Senior's father, in 1956.

And there is a story there, too.

Ham Senior's father, Vito Buglaroni, was a minor Cosa Nostra functionary who married his childhood sweetheart, an Irish girl named Bridget O'Connor, when they were both eighteen years old, and Ham Senior was, well, two month's short of arrival. Vito's goal was to excel at his chosen profession, but while he had the looks and attitude of a Mafia goon, he was lacking in -- there's no nice way of putting this -- the intellectual skills. In an industry where a high school equivalency diploma is tantamount to a Rhodes Scholarship, he was looked down upon by his colleagues as, usually, "dumber than a rat's ass." Therefore his advancement ranged from slow to non-existent, although he was kept on the payroll as a reward for his entertainment value... and his pretty little Irish wife. But the marriage

didn't last. Ham Senior was two years old when Bridget Buglaroni ran off to Vegas with Larry "The Laugher" Lucrezia and was never heard from again, except to mail Vito the notice of their divorce. Vito, a devout Catholic, was shattered, and his padrone, Don Angelo Vitelli, in an unexpected show of sympathy, arranged with the local church officials to obtain for Vito, who was now saddled with a toddler and less than brilliant prospects in his Mafia career, an annulment. There was, however, an expected quid pro quo. Vito was now, at least, able to remarry without forfeiting his immortal soul, which he did quickly, to Maria Contaglia, a distant cousin of Don Angelo's from the old country who arrived in New in 1954, was introduced to Vito on a Monday and dancing with him at their wedding on the Saturday of that same week. Maria was slightly older -- ten years -- than Vito, and even then a bit on the stumpy side; not to put too fine a point on it, she was no beauty, but she was dependable. And with little Hamlet to raise, Vito Buglaroni needed a dependable woman.

Who now puts a plate in front of Ham Junior.

"What is it?" he asks over the din of the television. The kitchen television is always on, seemingly twenty-four hours a day, an electronic accompaniment to the ever-boiling pot.

"Pork-a," she answers in her thick accent. Over forty years in America and she still sounds as if she snuck off the boat with the morning haddock.

"We just had pork," Ham Senior says, putting down his newspaper.

"Shut up, eat." She shuffles back to the stove to fill up her own plate.

"Hand me the clicker," H.S. says to H.J.

"I don't have it."

"Then where the hell is it?"

"Shut up, eat," Grandma says again, sitting down.

"I can't watch this crap," H.S. says. "What the hell is it?"

"It's the news," H.J. says. "Mr. Jutmoll says we have to read the news

every day."

"Who's Mr. Jutmoll?"

"My debate coach."

"Debate coach. Great." H.S. starts scarfing down his pork. The fact that he had it recently and doesn't want it again does not impede his progress in devouring it. "Anyhow," he says with his mouth full, "you're not reading the news, you're watching the news."

"I don't have time to read it."

"Yeah. You're so busy." Suddenly H.S. disappears under the table. A second later he reappears with the remote control in his hand. "Damned clicker," he says.

He clicks a few times, until he finds a game. To Ham Senior, the game is the most entertaining thing imaginable. And any game is the game, unless it's a playoff of some sort. Then the game is all he ever talks about. The rest of the year he inputs the game, but keeps his output to himself. Tonight the game is baseball. Not a playoff. He turns up the volume.

"You like-a da-bate," Grandma says to H.J.

Ham Junior shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "It's not easy. They expect me to read some books."

"You read-a, you get-a smart."

"I hate to read. I'm not a reader."

"You don't-a read, you end up like-a him." She points to her stepson. Who ignores her.

As he has for most of his life.

After Maria Contaglia married Vito Buglaroni, her life as a wife was nothing like she expected. She knew that she was lucky to be married at all, having been passed over by every available man at home, but it did not take long

for her to question the intrinsic value of marriage overall. If Vito Buglaroni was as good as it got, then marriage was highly overrated. He was a brutal man, uncommunicative, and dim enough that his paucity of wit was perceptible even through the haze of their lack of a common language; the only words he knew in Italian couldn't be spoken in front of polite society, and the only words she knew in English were their Anglo-Saxon equivalents. The only good thing about Vito was the minuscule amount of time he spent at home. Most of his hours were dawdled away hanging out with his cronies at one of the five or six clubs or restaurants they frequented. He never worked, except for a day or two a month, doing God knows what, but he brought home enough money from those activities to support his new wife and his young son, to whom he paid even less attention than to Maria. They were married for two years when one of Vito's partners arrived at the door to bring her the bad news that he had been shot dead in a botched fur-truck hijacking by rival gang members who had been riding in place of the expected minks and ermines in the vault of the truck. To ameliorate the bad news, Maria was told that she would never want for money, no matter what, and the family always took care of its own, including her and little Hamlet.

And now she was left alone in a strange country with someone else's son, living on the largesse of the Mafia. She immediately put on a black dress, retired to the kitchen, lit the stove, and began the life that is still hers over forty years later.

As Ham Senior grew up, his relationship with his stepmother was never less than strained, and one of the happiest days of his life was when he moved out of the apartment he shared with her in the Bronx to marry Sharon Keeler. In the last minutes of his wedding party, as he was preparing to leave with Sharon for their honeymoon in Bermuda, a man he had not invited to the wedding pulled him aside and told him that Maria was going to be moving in with him and his new bride in a house that had been purchased for them in Nighten Township. The house was a gift, the man told him, from a friend. Before Ham Senior could protest, he saw another man standing in the shadows of the restaurant they had rented for the day's festivities, and he recognized Angelo Vitelli, the Mafia don, now well into his eighties, flanked by a couple of his associates. The legendary padrone -- so his stepmother had not been making up those stories... The old man lifted a hand in greeting, then slowly disappeared like a shadow growing darker in the setting sunlight.

And so Maria had moved in with Sharon and Ham Senior. And two years later marked the birth of Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr.

In those early years, while Grandma Buglaroni cooked -- by now she had become Grandma Buglaroni -- and Sharon developed a career as a graphic designer, Ham Senior dedicated himself to the entrepreneurial life. With a decent college record from the Leidner Business School, he was able to obtain the necessary loans from the bank to start a string of car washes, starting in Nighten Township and branching eventually into Toulouse Lautrec, Bisonette, and other upstate towns and villages. For a few years he prospered.

Until Sharon walked out on him. Because she found out the truth. That it wasn't the banks that had fronted Ham Senior his business startup funds, but the Vitelli family. And there was more to the business than car-washing: there was money laundering and numbers fronting, and that was only the beginning. Like Ham Senior's own mother, she abandoned both her husband and her son. And also, in her case, her mother-in-law. Every year she sent Ham Junior a birthday card with a hundred dollar bill, and a Christmas card with another hundred plus a renewal of his membership in Harry and David's Fruit of the Month Club. That was their only contact.

"I read more than this jackass reads," Ham Senior says, responding to his stepmother's taunt with his mouth full, pointing at his son with his fork.

"You read-a the paper. That's-a it." She turns to her grandson. "You should read-a the paper, Hammy."

"I like, you know, get all the news I need from the television."

"Put-a the news-a back on, Junior," Grandma Buglaroni says.

"I'm watching the game," Ham Senior mutters.

The old lady stands up and takes her grandson's plate. "You need more. You growing-a boy."

"I'm not really, like, hungry, Grandma."

"Eat," she says, putting a second helping in front of him. "Give-a me his plate," she says, indicating Ham Senior.

Ham Junior takes his father's plate and hands it to her, and she piles a second portion on that one too. As she has for over forty years.

"I don't want anymore," the man tells her.

"Shut up, eat," she says one last time.

Grandma Buglaroni has spoken.

Everyone shuts up and eats.

Will Buglaroni get to watch Katie Couric?

Will Dad Buglaroni's team win the pennant?

Will Grandma Buglaroni get a new crabcake recipe?

Will the Italian Anti-defamation League start boycotting "Nostrum"?

Will Ann Coulter's new book sell well to LDers?

You won't find out when we change the subject completely in our next installment: "Oxtail Soup: Myth or Plague?"