

Theodore K Phelps

CANNOLIS

Real Italy was our favorite Friday treat. We went there to unwind and celebrate and just to not cook. It was also like a visit to Italy. That's how well Fausto did it up. We rarely had to wait for a table, being just two of us. And the cannolis, to die for. Die *with*.

But one Friday night, last June it was, something bad happened and, well, it shook the whole thing apart.

That night was busier than usual, maybe high school graduations. Or the nice weather. Still, we got our favorite table by the wall way in the back. Frank—who is why I am telling you this because he was our favorite waiter, and the son of Fausto, and this was the last time we saw him—Frank brought us our usual drinks and took our orders.

I like to watch him. He's got that way, that pace you see on the seasoned waiters who can swing a hip this way or that to dodge an incoming this or that. If I had a boy, I would want him to move like that, to *be* like that. I like him. So I watched him disappear into the kitchen.

Dorrie, the wife, went over to talk to someone from work, and I settled into baseball starting up on the TV over by our table. Maybe half an hour later, I realized: my wine is gone, my bread is gone, my wife is gone. She's still chatting up Carol Somebody. Point is, *there's no sign of Frank*. Some new kid had come 'round checking on me, but how long ago was that? Sure, the place was busy, but no sign of Frank. That's not right.

I glared at Dorrie until she looked over at me. She came back waving her hands at the table, like Where's the pizza?

"I know. I don't know. I don't see Frank. I'll go over and ask."

Fausto was busy taking phone orders but saw me coming, "Hey Jimmy, What's up with your order? Where's Frankie? Whatdya get?"

He left the phone on the counter and went through the swinging doors. I stood there watching games another five minutes, also bothering Heather. She's our old babysitter who works there weekends. Dorrie looks over at me, waving like What's up? I went back and said Now Fausto is disappeared. She said Let's go. I left a twenty for the wine and told Heather on the way out.

As I was turning out of my parking spot, she—Heather—came running out. I figured she had our order, but her hands were waving Stop. I rolled down the window, "Hey, honey."

"Mr. Francesco! Hi. Look, I just wanted you to—Fausto, he wanted me to tell you— um." She looked to the side, the breeze on her hair. She turned to go, then bent in close—I could smell the sweat on her— "It's Frank. He's, um. He fell on the tiles, or something, and um..." She ran back in, clutching her apron to her mouth.

I looked at Dorrie like 'Jesus Christ!' and she just shook her head like "Those boys!" So I drove home. Sound of sirens somewhere.

In the morning, I couldn't find my jacket, figured I left it hanging off the back of my chair over there. I called. A man said they had it but were closed Due to Events. I asked about Frank. He just said, "Give me 30 minutes I will put your jacket out back on the smoking bench."

That jacket is not something you leave out. Even in the good weather. I mean, we got it fresh off the rack in a leather maker's outside Florence last year. Blue lambskin. I went right over, walked around back by the bins and air conditioners. They weren't running. No garlic in the air. It was there, wrapped in plastic and a notepaper taped to it with my name. A guy was standing at the door, smoking. I held the jacket up and said, "I came for this. I'm Jimmy Francesco."

He looked me over. "We spoke on the phone. You know, Heather was going to take it out to you last night, but what with everything going on. She wrapped it up for ya." He gave me an extra look.

I said, "So Frank, he's OK, I guess."

"What about Frank?"

"She told me he fell."

"Who knows." He flipped a long, unfinished cigarette onto the pavement. Ducked back in.

Next Friday I say to Dorrie, Want to get Italian? And we were headed there when she says, Let's do Japanese. Then a week later, it was Let's do Thai, and then American, and like that until I asked her were we now staying away from Fausto's.

Well, I couldn't do that. For Frank.

So, I stopped in alone one Saturday. A rainy lunchtime at the end of July. It was too early for Fausto or the main ones like Frank. There was a new guy. Maybe college. I got calamari, and when he came back to fill my water, I asked for a beer, and when he came back with that, I asked his name. I was playing him. And when he came back to ask about sweets and coffee, I used his name, 'J'-something, like Jared, and asked him casual, like family, "How's Frank doing?"

"Frank?" He twitched. "Before my time."

"So he didn't come back. Jeez. How's Fausto?"

"Yeah, good, I guess. We don't see him much."

"Not at lunchtime, you mean, or not...?" I was trying to keep this going.

"Anything else, sir? Cannolis are just coming out."

"No thanks. Say Hi to Heather for me, will you?"

"We don't have a Heather. Maybe before my time."

I recount all this to Dorrie and ask if she has seen Heather lately. The Franklins are just around the bend and Heather used to tell us she still lived there. Dorrie blames the hedges and the long driveway. "Who can tell who's there? Anyways, the colleges are starting back up soon."

One Friday in late September, a cool evening perfect for my blue lambskin, I said, Let's go back there. Dorrie was OK with that.

It was quiet. Half the tables just cloth with no setups. None of the usual guys. No Grippo, Fausto's uncle. The *Times* did a piece on him flying dough to the ceiling back in Naples for years before he came over. No music. TVs all black. I thought, They're *killing* the place.

But, I wasn't coming here for the ambiance. I wanted to find out what happened three months back. I start feeding the waiter casual inquiries—not like a cop, like neighbors—about Frank and Fausto. He said the same thing, "Before my time." Exactly the phrase. When I asked for Heather, I got a look. He says, "Like I said, before my time. Heather maybe went to California with him, so I heard. I know. How about an espresso?"

“You mean her and *Frank*, right?” I was pushing my luck.

“No. The old man. Out west or something. What’s this to you if I may? Fausto’s *private* business and all. You down from Albany?”

“No, it’s just Dorrie and me were here that night when Frank fell down or whatever. He was our server. Heather, too. We *liked* those kids.”

He stood looking at me.

I pushed forward in my chair and put both hands on the table. “*What the hell happened that night?*” I don’t really look like a guy to pussy around with. I hope.

He nodded. Looked back toward the kitchen. He came over by my side like he was taking an order. “OK, look. Frank—as I understand it, what they tell me—Frank was in a fight out back. Maybe didn’t do so well. Maybe. Who knows? Like I say, Before my time.” Then, a bit louder, “How ‘bout two cannolis? We make ‘em fresh.”

“Yeah. We know. To die for. Perfect. Two. To go.”

“On the House, mister. And I’ll let him know you were asking.”

I wondered which ‘him’ he was thinking of telling. “Thank you very much.” I patted my jacket, “Jimmy Francesco,” and threw my thumb to her, “And Dorothy.”

And that was the end of it. What are you going to do? And anyway—I predicted this to Dorrie—Real Italy was closed by Christmas. Boarded up. For sale. And—this I didn’t see coming—the Franklin’s, Heather’s parents’ place, is up for sale. No holiday lights.

Damned divorces, Dorrie says.

Sometimes a couple of cannolis is all you get for your trouble. But, when they’re done right, like Fausto’s, the skin cracks in your mouth, and then the ooze, so sweet slinking down your throat you’re gonna need a Heimlich if you’re not careful.