

The prompt was to create a story using 3 words: flat tire, button, sliced tomato

ROACH COACH

By James Collins

Twelve people lined up, outside the office building, on the sidewalk, reaching to the curb. It was nine o'clock in the morning midway between breakfast and lunch but the correct time for a morning snack known as coffee break. The luncheon truck was a large, silvered bodied, mobile store mounted on the back of a pickup. It carried coffee, Danish, numerous types of sandwiches, water and sodas. The coach carried everything needed for coffee break or for lunch and people good-naturedly referred to it as the roach coach.

Luigi, a goodhearted immigrant Italian, bought the business 15 years earlier and religiously followed his daily route, stopping at every major office building or construction activity in a one square mile area. Today was a very lucky day for Luigi but he did not know it nor did anyone else.

Secretaries, office workers, security clerks and other administrative types lined up in an orderly fashion awaiting their turn at the counter. As soon as he parked the truck, Luigi hopped out, waved to everyone and lifted up the side of the truck so it acted like an awning over the people closest to the counter. Luigi knew all of his regular customers by name, and greeted each of them as they arrived. He chatted about the weather, their families, their jobs and whatever else he knew of their life. Everyone loved Luigi.

Every now and then Luigi ran into a new customer who had less than a pleasant personality. Today was such a day. The teenager wanted an Italian sandwich with very specific ingredients. Luigi combined the bread, the cheese, the meat, the onions and the garlic. The only ingredient missing was a sliced tomato. Luigi explained that he would not get the tomatoes until his next stop because the produce man had an accident that morning. The customer was not happy and was acted irrationally. Luigi finally agreed to take a dollar off the cost of the sandwich just to get the man out of his hair.

The fifth person in line was known to the police as 'Out of luck Mary', not because she was a criminal, but because she was a 70-year-old homeless woman who had mental problems. She was always on the streets except at night when she went to the homeless shelter. Her constant companion was a shopping cart from the local grocery chain that contained all of her possessions. To most people, the contents would be junk and garbage, but to Mary, it was all she had. Mary made a little money collecting cans and bottles and turned them in for the deposit. She showed up on Luigi's line every morning and insisted on paying for her cheese sandwich. She proudly deposited all she had each day and Luigi

honored whatever she paid to maintain her dignity. Last night someone robbed Mary. They took all her money, which was less than two dollars. Mary still had to eat, but she still had her dignity. She ordered her cheese sandwich and Luigi packaged it with two additional sandwiches, and two bottles of water. He placed the package on the counter. Mary took it and paid for it with a button. It was all she had. Luigi took the button and counted out two dollars in change, which Mary took. She smiled, gave a little bow, took her shopping cart and shuffled down the street.

The man with a pistol in his pocket, immediately behind Mary, was Shifty Smith, a small, thin, violent, stickup man who was hooked on drugs. He normally held up convenience stores, but today he was very edgy and figured the roach coach was an easy mark and he might shoot someone today because he was annoyed. When he watched Luigi take a button in payment and return it with hard cash, he felt there was no chance of getting any money from this operation. The guy running the truck was a dummy and probably had little or no money in the till. Shifty took his hand off the pistol, turned around and walked down the street looking for a 7-11.

God waved off The Angel of Death for a third time in Luigi's life. Luigi never knew about any of these blessings. God decided that this little man was one of the good and just ones. Each time, death was scheduled, the good in this man shone through. God decided to extend Luigi's life once again, but he was not to know of it. Many do not know the rule of this little spiritual game, but once a major event is deferred, God decides it must be counterbalanced by some negative event. God ruled that for this saving of Luigi's life he would demand a payment. Luigi would have to encounter a flat tire.

THE END