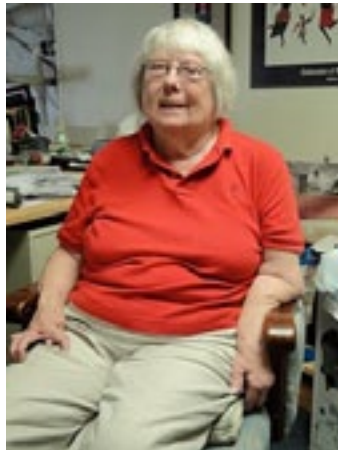


# Attila, the Nun

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA | JUNE 2010

“Begging changed my life,” said Sister Liguori. “Notice I didn’t say ‘fund-raising.’ No, I said begging.”



Earlier this summer, we sat together in her second floor office overlooking the dining hall of Jubilee Soup Kitchen in downtown Pittsburgh. Liguori was telling me the improbable story of how, over three decades ago, she’d struggled to create this haven for the hungry and homeless. In her late sixties, she suffers from

rheumatoid arthritis and it’s difficult to hoist herself upstairs each day. Once settled, she deploys a crude, but effective public address system. If she wants something, or someone, she starts shouting.

After I’d been thus summoned into her presence a few minutes earlier, I spotted a photo-shopped Xerox page framed on a wall above her head. This colorful image hinted at the startling hypothesis that Sister Liguori was a cross-hybridization of Leona Helmsley, the Manhattan hotelier who was famous for her imperious demeanor, and Mother Teresa, humble champion of the downtrodden.

“I’d go into an office building, ride the elevator up to the top floor and work my way down. In each lobby, I would introduce myself to the receptionist, and ask if I could speak to the company’s president,” Liguori continued, chuckling at her youthful brazenness. “This was the late 1970’s; I was still wearing a habit. Pittsburgh is a Catholic town, and was even more so then. No one could say ‘no’ to me. I would simply tell the man—at that point, all the chief executives were men—I wanted him to write me a check, so I could build a soup kitchen in Pittsburgh’s Hill

District. I found I was good at begging. I got to the point that I could beg anything off of anyone.”



Jubilee Soup Kitchen opened on November 12, 1979. There were fifteen people at the first lunch. Today, there’s a lunchtime crowd of about 150, as well as a child daycare center, job placement office, primary healthcare, and a prison ministry.

The bare bones of her story given, Liguori now demanded, “Tell me what you’re doing here.”

I explained that I had driven from New York City to Pittsburgh to see my niece, Amy, who’d just completed the first year of her doctoral program at Duquesne University. When traveling in Iran not too long ago, I’d learned about a culinary custom called a *nazr*, whereby people promise God they’ll cook food for the poor and hungry if their prayer requests came true. Intrigued by this powerful tradition, I decided to create a *nazr* for my niece. Specifically, after every year she completed of her Ph.D. program, I would come to Pittsburgh, and cook a meal for the needy. Hoping to do this at Jubilee Soup Kitchen, I planned to buy all the food, prepare, and serve it, to the lunchtime crowd two days hence.

“Does that sound O.K.?” I asked.

Liguori looked at me for several long moments, without replying. Clearly, she was trying to figure out if she trusted me or not. Then, she hollered out, “BUTCH!” with a lusty growl from one side of her mouth, like a carnival barker.

“Yes’m,” a man’s voice answered from below.

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“Get up here, and bring Sean, too!” Sister yelled. For a frail-looking woman, she has shocking lung power.

There was double time clumping on the stairs, and two black men arrived, out of breath. Clearly, a summons from on high is not to be taken lightly. I jumped up out of my seat to greet them, which both seemed to amuse and irritate Ligouri. “Sit down, sit down,” she said to me, impatiently. “Butch, you stand. Sean, you sit on the floor.” The men immediately did just as they were told. Butch was strong and stout. I guessed he was 45. Sean, probably no more than 30, was tall, lanky, and missing a front tooth.

“Tell ‘em what you want,” Sister said.

Self-conscious about repeating my story yet again, I shortened the narrative too much for Sister Ligouri’s taste.

“Tell ‘em where else you’ve been.”

As I mentioned cooking in India and Iran, Mexico and Kyoto, Sister smiled in a proprietary way (“*See boys? I caught us a live one!*”), and Sean’s eyes widened, like I was describing that long-ago summer I’d spent flipping burgers on Mars. Butch, on the other hand, was stone-faced. I could have unscrewed my head off my shoulders, and he wouldn’t have raised an eyebrow.

“What ya gonna’ make?” he asked.

A fair question, and one for which I should have had a ready answer. But I’d stupidly thought I’d figure this out tomorrow, after I saw what was typically prepared at Jubilee. “Oh, something vegetarian, I guess. Maybe a vegetable curry? Some lentils. Rice. A fruit salad. A green salad. Maybe an apple cobbler?”

“These people like meat,” Sister Ligouri said, matter-of-factly.

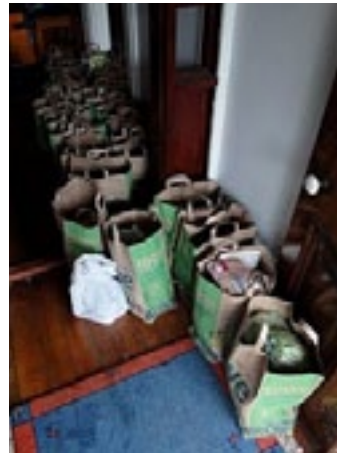
“Chicken curry?”

“Fine. And all the rest of it. It sounds fine. I can’t wait to try your cobbler.”

I turned to Butch. “Do you have a rule of thumb, maybe, to help me gauge how much food to prepare?”

“Naw,” he said. “They ain’t no rules. We just make a lot. If they is too much, we can serve it the next day. That ain’t no problem. It’s when they’s not enough. Then, they’s a problem.” Butch told me to come by tomorrow, at 9:30 a.m. They would wait to start cooking until I arrived. Lunch was served at 11:00 a.m., sharp.

I was about to ask, “an hour and a half to cook for 150?” but Ligouri was already turned back to her desk, rifling through some papers. I assumed I was dismissed. A few moments later, I was blinking out in the sunlight of a bright June morning. Truthfully, I was a little scared.



That evening, my niece accompanied me to a Whole Foods, in an affluent Pittsburgh suburb called Shadyside. Based on Butch’s helpful advice (“just make a lot”), I drew up a shopping list of what I might buy if I were having a dinner party for 10, and multiplied everything by fifteen.

Easy arithmetic, but what I hadn’t quite reckoned on was how much space this amount of food would take up—15 dozen apples; 75 pounds of boneless chicken breasts; a dozen heads each of Romaine, Napa Cabbage and Red cabbage—nor what a commotion making such a purchase could create. From what I could see most customers were toting about adorable hand baskets, and apparently they subsisted on diets of yogurt and bagel chips. By way of contrast, before Amy and I left the produce section, our two carts were brimming over.

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With each errand I dispatched her on, my niece sweetly asked for confirmation that she'd heard me correctly: "Really, Uncle Steve? You think we need 30 cans of coconut milk?" And, every time, her incredulity sent me into a fresh panic. What was I doing?

**That night, I hardly slept. Staring up at the ceiling, I grew increasingly nervous. How would I ever cook all that food? Had I overdone things? Was I really just showing off?**

Soon, we'd filled three carts, and could have used a fourth. People began to stop us in the aisles. Did we know something they didn't? Was a tornado about to hit Pittsburgh? I made the mistake of answering the first few inquiries honestly. A few minutes later, an elegant black woman laid her hand gently on my forearm. "Excuse me, dear, but did I hear you say you were going to bring all this food to the Jubilee Kitchen?"

"Um. Yes."

"Well, praise the lord. Folks tomorrow are going to have a fine, fine lunch thanks to you. You are an angel. God bless you."

I looked down, feeling deeply ashamed. If one is going to be a benefactor, shouldn't it be done quietly and in private? The lady still had her arm on mine; her eyes were sparkling.

"Actually, I'm not sure I know what I've gotten myself into," I finally replied.

"Don't worry. You will have all the help you need. I'll pray for you."

Shaken by this interchange, and not wanting to risk anything like it happening again, I decided that if anyone else quizzed me, I would lie.

"I've never rung up so large a single transaction before," the girl at the check-out counter said. Her good cheer quickly turned into a jittery case of nerves, however. Would this amount of SKU

numbers make the system crash? Nervously, she summoned a customer service representative from the "Help Desk." And, this woman called up the Store Manager. All three of these employees, not to mention the three, then five, bag packers busily putting all the stuff into paper satchels, were eyeing the cash register nervously, as if it might explode. Not knowing what else to do, I apologized to a couple of twenty-somethings behind me on line. They were done up in Goth-Style, all dressed in black, with multiple facial piercings and arm-length tattoos.

"No problem, dude, but whassup? Is World War III about to start, or some such shit?"

"No. We're having a party."

Only now did I notice that the black woman I'd spoken with before was behind the goth couple in line. Again, she'd overheard my response, and now gave me a complicit smile, as if my evasive reply was further proof of my saintliness.

Once my order was finally tallied, I wanted nothing more than to become invisible. A crowd, though, attracts a crowd. As a half-dozen Whole Foods employees accompanied Amy and me out to my "compact" Hertz Rental Car in the store's vast parking lot, several shoppers stopped in their tracks to stare. By filling the trunk and back seat, we managed to get the nearly 30 bulging bags of groceries stowed away.

That night, I hardly slept. Staring up at the ceiling, I grew increasingly nervous. How would I ever cook all that food? Had I overdone things? Was I really just showing off? I thought again of the woman at Whole Foods. She said she would pray for me. I wished I could pray. Here I was, performing an Iranian custom of bargaining with God, yet I didn't really and truly believe that there was a Someone, capital "S," who would be listening to me, if I did begin to pray.

Eventually, I decide that this Someone is me.

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I began to whisper, reminding myself that regardless of what happened, I was attempting to do a nice thing. “Hunger is the best recipe,” a woman I’d met in Iran had told me. I would do my very best to cook a delicious meal, and simply have to trust that people would eat it. As I finally dozed off, it was with the realization that anyone can cook if they have two things: a sharp knife, and a soft heart.



Upon my arrival at Jubilee the next morning, things immediately went awry. Sister Liguori was also arriving at the same time I did, and while I chatted with her, men poured

out of the kitchen to help unpack my car. In their well-meaning rush, many grocery bags ripped, things spilled onto the street, and were collected up haphazardly. Food was brought inside and put into coolers and walk-ins and storage areas so quickly, it would take me hours of searching to find things later that afternoon.

Today, though, I was not in charge and Butch set me to work making a green salad. I washed radishes and peeled carrots alongside a woman named Fran Patton who, as it turned out, was an old friend of Sister Liguori’s from high school. With her carefully-coiffed hairstyle, stylish clothes, and ample jewelry, Patton didn’t look like someone who spent three mornings a week at Jubilee, but here she was.

“One reason I come is that I miss cooking,” she said. “My husband has cancer of the lower intestine. He can’t stand the smell of food anymore, so I don’t use my kitchen at home.” She gave a grim laugh, and I joined her. Smiling at the horrors of life can sometimes be as sane a response as any.

## RULES

No Guns

No Cursing

No Violence

No Standing Up While Eating

These words were printed on a large sign hung up at one end of the dining hall. Though I never saw anyone brandishing a gun, I’d see the rest of these rules broken with some regularity in the days ahead, as Jubilee’s clientele is a tough bunch. I smelled liquor on some of the men; others appeared to be high. Quite a few seemed mentally-impaired. One guy jiggled and jerked around, like his skin was on fire; his eyes were open so wide, it looked like he was trying to eject his own eyeballs. Every so often, he would begin screaming, sometimes about President Obama, other times about those goddam “Is-Salamis,” by which I guessed he meant followers of Islam. He did not like Is-Salamis one bit.

“There was a knife fight here last week, you know.” Patton’s voice was no more agitated then if she’d taken note of the weather. The whole place went crazy, of course, people screaming, tables overturned, and I had a ringside seat. My husband says to me, ‘Fran, what am I gonna do if they pull a knife on you?’ I tell him not to worry. I’m back here behind the counter. No one’s gonna’ mess with me, especially since everyone knows I am Sister’s best friend.”

She turned, and gave me a “get this” look.

“Sister’s got a heart of mush, but you don’t want to cross her,” she said. “All the people here are terrified of her, because they know that she can close up this place anytime she wants, and they’ll go hungry. She doesn’t take any government money, you see. Every cent that comes in here, she raised herself. If Sister wants to cut off the spigot, that’s her choice.”

“Why would she do that?”

“A few weeks ago, someone stole a computer from her office. Well, soon as Sister found out, she makes an announcement. ‘Someone here knows where that computer is,’ she says, ‘and I want it back. And until I get it, there won’t be so much as a cup of coffee served here.’ We were just about to dish up lunch, but Sister had us put it back in the refrigerator. The kitchen was closed for three days, until the computer reappeared.”

# Attila, the Nun

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“Wow. That’s tough love.”

“You have no idea. You know what her nickname is, don’t you? Attila the nun!”

I smiled, but my mirth was cut short by Sister’s voice thundering down from from her office. “Stephen! Get up here!”

“I hope I’m not in trouble,” I said to Patton.

“I hope you’re not either.”

**“So nuns were more in the vanguard on social issues than the priests?” It was this that finally brought her gaze up from her lap. Ligouri’s gaze, over the top of her reading glasses, was blazing with irritation. Was I really asking her such a stupid question?**

After our brief meeting the day before, I’d asked Ligouri if we could speak for few minutes more today. As I arrive in her office, she’s at her desk, flipping through file folders. For most of our chat that followed, she kept her gaze downward, pretending to be still at work, rather than engaging in what she considered a vastly more unpleasant task: talking about herself.

She was born in 1941 and grew up in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, a mining town outside of Pittsburgh. Her father was a self-employed contractor who built houses all around town. She went to Catholic parochial schools until, in her junior year of high school, in 1959, she entered into the care of a convent, The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer. At the time of entering her order, she assumed the name of Sister Liguori, in honor of St. Alphonsus of Liguori, Italy, an 18th century Catholic bishop, theologian and author of over 100 published works. Alphonsus is still hailed today for his ability to respond practically, and non-judgmentally, to people’s everyday problems.

In college, at Duquesne University, Liguori studied education and history, and went on to Carnegie Mellon for a Master’s

Degree in History. For the next fourteen years, she lived in the convent, and taught history in parochial schools. And so things might have remained. But then, in 1972, she was invited to attend a summer session where 23 different nuns from 16 different communities came together to discuss issues of peace and social justice.

“I had done a few things up to this point,” she recalled. “I was opposed to the Vietnam War, and went to demonstrations. I became active in boycotts when Caesar Chavez came to town. But that summer of ’72 was a turning point for me. Here were these women, all ages, from 23 to 75, and we spent six weeks together, hashing out our concerns, and dreaming up things we could do. I made my best friends in the struggle that summer.”

The struggle. I hadn’t heard it phrased this way in quite a while.

These 23 nuns all entered into a commitment together, founding something called the Sisters Council of Pittsburgh. “It was an exciting time,” she said. “We sisters were really at the ramparts.”

“So nuns were more in the vanguard on social issues than the priests?”

It was this that finally brought her gaze up from her lap. Ligouri’s gaze, over the top of her reading glasses, was blazing with irritation. *Was I really asking her such a stupid question?*

“Much more,” she replied, flatly. “The priests were...” She stopped herself.

I imagined Ligouri was about to make a sour joke. If I didn’t move, didn’t breathe, she might complete her thought. But she didn’t. The unfinished sentence lay between us like a loaded gun.

Without a trace of self-pity, Liguori for the first and only time mentioned her physical condition. Her lower arms and hands are withered into awkward angles, making it difficult for her to hold things. (I later would learn that a friend dresses her in the morning.) Ligouri has two artificial knees, and has undergone well over a dozen operations.



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“My health was especially bad back then,” she said. “I couldn’t stand very long at these demonstrations. I knew I’d never be able to go abroad. But this was the 1970’s. You turned on the television and all you heard about was hunger. I wanted to do something locally, here in Pittsburgh, and suddenly I had the idea that I would open a soup kitchen.”

How did she know she could do this? I asked.

“Up to this point, I was still teaching at the St. Bartholomew’s Elementary school, but when I decided to leave, Sister Cornelia Racs, who was the principal of the school, joined me to become Jubilee’s first chef. She had escaped through the Iron Curtain in 1948, through Brenner’s Pass. In comparison to this, opening a soup kitchen seemed a lark.”

Jubilee now has 8,000 people on its mailing list. Liguori sends out twice-yearly update letters on the kitchen’s activities, and she estimates that nearly 60% of the recipients respond with enough donations to meet her annual budget. From the beginning, she decided not to take any government money, preferring the philosophy of people helping other people. (It was, she explained, the “Dorothy Day model.”) Liguori also made a promise to herself that she wouldn’t mix religion with food. “People know when we pray. If they don’t want to be here for that, they don’t have to. I don’t think you should have to take a dive for Jesus,” she said.



Lunch was over, and the kitchen cleaned up by the time I got back downstairs. All the helpers were gone, other than Butch, who could not leave until I did. It was about 1:30 p.m., and I thought the next few hours would be plenty of time to “prep” everything for tomorrow.

I was wrong. It takes a surprisingly long time to peel fifteen dozen apples. Amy and her boyfriend, Roger, agreed to drop what they were doing, and come help. Even so, things went slowly. Butch got out a boom box, and cranked up a CD with some blues from the Mississippi Delta. These were raunchy, downbeat tunes, and I wondered if Liguori would approve. Then again, she doesn’t seem much interested in conspicuous piety—something she learned from her namesake, St. Alphonsus, perhaps.

**Liguori also made a promise to herself that she wouldn’t mix religion with food. “People know when we pray. If they don’t want to be here for that, they don’t have to. I don’t think you should have to take a dive for Jesus,” she said.**

Finally, three huge pans, each four feet long and 28 inches wide, were filled with cut up apples, lemon juice and zest, cranberries, walnuts and topped with a crumbly mixture of flour, sugar, oatmeal and cinnamon. They go into the oven. Butch looks at his watch. It was nearly four, which is when I’d told him I would leave. “I think I need until 6 o’clock,” I beg. “I promise I will be gone by then, Butch.”

“Alrighty then,” he said, in a way that wasn’t totally convincing.

Cobbler in the oven, I set Amy to slicing onions; Roger, peeling garlic. I skinned a large pile of ginger root (a horrible job, really), and then began to cut up all that chicken—75 pounds!—into bite-sized pieces. Soon enough, there’s a blister on my right hand where it presses against the blade of my chef’s knife. The kitchen floor is slick with chicken blood. I slipped as I grabbed a huge soup pot up off the floor, and a sharp pain cut into my back.

“Fucking shit!” I hissed, and rather loudly.

Overhearing me, Butch responded with a low grunt of amusement and pointed to the rules posted on the wall, among them “NO CURSING.” I sense that, for him, my profanity is the best thing I’ve done all day.

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All eight burners on top of the kitchen's Garland range are fired up. Amy has gone back to her office to counsel a patient, but Roger agrees to stay on with me without my

even asking. He's sauteeing onions, garlic, green peppers, and the ginger root. I plead with some guy who is there to fix an electrical outlet to take a break from wiring, and help me. To my surprise, he doesn't question this request, and immediately sets to work opening cans of coconut milk. I'm really flying now and, in my haste, my "times 15" calculations are out the window. I scatter whole jars of curry powder, turmeric, cumin and cinnamon sticks into Roger's fry pans.

"Do you know what you're doing?" he asks.

"Absolutely," I lie, as I dump in can after can of coconut milk.

Stirring the curry, each of us wields a wooden spoon the size of a badminton racket. The cobbler comes out of the oven. They are crispy and, I'm happy to see, browned perfectly. The scent of cinnamon is strong.

"Smells good," Butch calls out.

Nervously, I taste the curry. I can't quite believe it. Even with these absurd ratios, the flavor is delicious—not too sweet or salty, and curry powder isn't the only ingredient you taste, as I'd feared. Garlic and ginger are in there. The cinnamon sticks, a true what-the-hell flourish, have done their magic. It is 6:10.

Full to the brim, the pot's top sheathed in tin foil, Roger and I manage to scuttle the curry along the greasy kitchen floor and into the walk-in refrigerator.

After another nearly sleepless night. I arrive at Jubilee early the next morning, and bang out the fruit salad and cole slaw. Just before 11:00 a.m., Sean thrusts a book into my hand. "Sister wants you to do the invocation. Read whatever you think is best. Then, you'll lead us in the Lord's Prayer."

The Bible felt strangely heavy and my (exhausted) mind was a total blank. I could not think of a single verse, or passage, that I wanted to speak aloud. Oh, dear. My Baptist preacher father is looking down from Heaven, shaking his head in disbelief. All those years of Sunday School, all the religion courses in college and Divinity School! It's scant exaggeration to say my whole life is intimately, inextricably bound up with this book, yet it was nearly a foreign object to me at the moment. John 3:16? No. Definitely not that.

Sister Liguori has struggled up out of her desk chair, and is standing by a window above, peering down at the lunchtime crowd, all waiting to be fed. She'd told me not to mix food with religion. No one should have to take a dive for Jesus. Fine. I was about to put *The Bible* down in front of me, and just speak a few words of welcome of my own. And then, I thought of something.



"Stephen, is there something you want to share with us?" I heard Liguori ask.

I'd found my way to First Corinthians, Chapter 13, and to some words I do believe, and hope I always will.

"Love suffers long, and is kind," I read, aloud. "Love envies not. Love vaunteth not itself. Love is not puffed up. Love does not behave unseemly, seeks not its own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil. Love rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things..."

I skipped down to the chapter's last verse.

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“Now abides faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is...” I looked up, thinking that someone in the crowd might fill in the last word. The room was silent, until a few moments later, Sister Liguori sang out in her referee’s voice, “LOVE!”



Sean and I set about serving the meal. At first it was, if not quite a disaster, certainly not a hit. People were dubious, and asked for surprisingly small

portions, based on what I’d seen consumed of the boiled sausages served the day before.

“I don’t eat fruit,” some said.

“Ain’t it got no mayonnaise?” they said, grimacing at the “Asian” cole slaw, made with an orange raspberry vinaigrette. I greeted these comments with a fake smile, trying not to take this personally, which was difficult since, as a chef, to have one’s cooking rejected is very personal, indeed.

“Where’s the cake at?” a bearded guy demanded.

I looked up at Sister Liguori, still standing at her window above. I thought of her riding elevators, in her habit, not being too embarrassed to ask for what she thought was right.

“Have the apple cobbler,” I replied. “You’ll like it, trust me.”

To another suspicious lady, I cajoled, “the green stuff on top of the curry is cilantro. It’s fresh-tasting, kind of peppery.”

“Those are kiwi in the fruit salad. They taste like strawberries. How do you know you don’t like them? Try some,” I pleaded.

Something happened, oh-so-gradually, as people began to move through the line. The first eaters apparently gave some sort of

thumbs-up sign. I could hear little words of surprise being engaged between diners. Men began gesturing with their forks, pointing to their plates.

**O.K. It was just a lunch, not the end of war, sickness and poverty; not the beginning of a new golden age. Chicken curry can only accomplish so much.**



Whatever the secret communications system that exists in this community which allowed Sister Liguori’s stolen computer to be returned now seemed to crackle with news that there were good eats at the Jubilee Kitchen. More guests began to stream in. People I’d not seen

yesterday, new faces. People came back for seconds, and then thirds. Even the guy with the bulging eyeballs who hated “Is-salamis” was slightly becalmed.

Another gentleman, giggling to himself as he pored over a book with photographs taken in America’s national parks, kept coming back so often, I lost count after his fifth plate of food. As he left the dining room, this man solemnly showed me a picture of Niagara Falls, and shook my hand. He didn’t say a word.

O.K. It was just a lunch, not the end of war, sickness and poverty; not the beginning of a new golden age. Chicken curry can only accomplish so much. Still, as I scooped out the last of the fruit salad, explaining for the umpteenth time that what made it taste so good was its mixture of lemon juice and honey, I felt happy.

A whole lot of people had enjoyed a nice meal, and I’d learned something important: how to beg.