

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Tom Sheehan
Alias the Cook

For the second time this day and for the second day in a row, he looked out the window of the A&P Railroad Lines dining car kitchen in the middle of grass running for endless miles and saw the herd of cattle and the drovers dashing about on horseback, those gallant riders that had drawn him all the way from Italy, half a turn around the world.

Salvatore "Sardi" Benevento, "the best cook on the whole damned railroad," according to the big boss, felt the knot working in his gut. Out there in that mix is where he wanted to be, had wanted it from the day he left Italy with the dream locked up in his heart.

He recalled the exact moment when he sold the horse, the wagon and the small farm on the same day his grandfather died. Once he arrived in Naples, after the funeral and after his beloved grandfather was placed down into the rocky ground, he purchased a ticket to America. A few months later, after an interminable wait, and a mad and dangerous crossing of the ocean among some thieves from his own village, he managed to maintain his inner direction, to keep his dream alive.

Ashore but one week, exploring Boston's North End on foot, he felt like a child away from home. But he glowed in the energy bouncing around him. Like a small piece of Italy that part of Boston came at him in its full swing. In the air were the known aromas of hours' long food preparation, the sense of music from every corner and from every bistro, from open windows and closed doors, and finally the magnificent chatter of its people, dialect atop dialect, a grand mixture of Tuscany tongue and Calabrese and Milanese and Roman as old as the sages. He inhaled all of it, as if hunger worked all the parts of him.

Then, fate itself on the move, in one breath, not marked right then but benchmarked later in the way life piles up with incidents, he heard a voice saying in a dialect near his own from the front of an open restaurant, "*Ho, Luigi, perché una tale pesante, sguardo interrogativo sulla tua faccia? Si guarda sbalordito.*" He had no trouble hearing it as, "Ho, Luigi, why do you have such a heavy, quizzical look on your face? You look dumbfounded."

The speaker was a heavy, well-set man of middle age, mustache-bearing, dark of skin, in a fashionable black suit with simple orange stripes behaving in the fabric like style was its master. The felt hat on his head seemed as new as Benevento knew the suit was, and somewhat costly even in the land of riches. The speaker's hands flew in the air as he talked, approaching an obvious acquaintance at an outside table.

The one he spoke to, Luigi as named, replied, "*Ho bisogno di trovare un grande cuoco italiano, un cuoco supremo, un maestro del gusto, per la ferrovia.*" ("I need to find a great Italian cook, a chef supreme, and a master of taste, for the railroad.")

Young Benevento, having been taught everything his grandfather knew about meats and vegetables in the kitchen, the best seasons of vegetables, the uses of condiments, the difference in minute mixtures, "the

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splash and dash" he might have called it, how soft the fruits could become in the mouth, in the throat, stepped in as quickly as he had sold the horse and wagon and the farm. He burst into Italian, went immediately to English to carry his argument, to show his versatility. "I am he whom you are looking for. This is the moment I have been waiting for. The Good Lord sent me down this street on this day to show how destiny works at His hands." He pointed overhead beseechingly and blessed himself.

"I am the best cook ever to come out of the mountains in Tuscany. I sold my horse and wagon and farm to get here to America, to bring great Italian cooking to the new land of America. I am Salvatore Benevento at your service. Ask the proprietor to loan me his kitchen for an hour. I shall make your mouths water, make you think of home so that you will cry for your mother's kitchen. Blessed be the image that comes upon you now from your childhood." He made the sign of the cross over them as if he was the village padre.

The two older Italian men, marveling at such precocity in the young man, tumbled before his onslaught. He told them how his grandfather had cooked for years for the two of them and for every celebration in their small village. He spelled out some of his own favorite recipes that moved both men to salivation, and to a few more times of their calling out to the proprietor, "another round of vino for us and the young man, Giovanni, if you please." (*"Un altro giro di vino per noi e il giovane, Giovanni, se non vi dispiace."*)

The proprietor, after all the talk and Benevento being hired on the spot for the chef's position on a train leaving the next day for the far western lands of America, finally asked him what he would have cooked if he had been given the run of the restaurant kitchen. The proprietor's eyes were wide with anticipation.

"Ah, I immediately thought of mushroom *trifolati*," Benevento said, "for a late afternoon delicacy for these men of taste, most tasty sautéed mushrooms."

The proprietor looked downcast as he said, "That would have been impossible, young man, as we do not have any mushrooms in the kitchen today." He dropped his shoulders as he looked at the others, his hands flung out flat at the imagined loss.

But they all brightened as the young chef looked overhead at a string of tall elm trees, and said, "That is no problem. The Garden in the Sky above us is filled with amanita colyptraderma the Good Lord has provided us. Look at the parade of those choice mushrooms along the upper branch in that large tree across the street. Do they not look delicious even from here?"

Salvatore Benevento, the very next day, was chef No. 1 in the dining car of an A&P Railroad Lines passenger train heading west out of Boston, Tuscany fare on the move.

Nobody yet in the new land realized his real dream was to be a cowboy.

His number 2 cook, Giovanni Ciampa, said one day, as the train left one stop and started on its way again, "I do not poke my nose in your

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business, Sardi, but I notice you skip out at each stop to buy small things for yourself or perhaps for a lady friend. Can I help with anything? Romance for itinerants like us is a problem from the very beginning."

"Ah, Joe, you I trust to the utmost. I'll ask you right up front to keep my secret always. I have taken this job to become, one day in my dreams, a cowboy. It has driven me since I first heard about them. The stories, the legends, the whole drama of the west as it changes the country feeding it. Yes, the things I buy, the things I keep in my personal bag, are things that I will need as a cowboy. I can't make the change dressed like this." He swept his hands down his cook's attire, the floury sleeves, the apron already having its share of bright juices and liquids, and sweeping stains where he wiped his wrists in a hurry. "Ah, no, never dressed like this. This is not a cowboy." There was disgust in his voice that Giovanni understood.

Seven trips Benevento made back and forth across the great country, across the great river, saw Chicago and St. Louis and burgeoning towns and settlements in Texas and along the Rocky Mountains. It was easy to keep his dream alive for continually he saw from the train windows the herds moving on the wide grasslands or finally corralled for rail movement, and saw the cowboys at every drive's end clearing their dry mouths, cutting the trail dust in their throats, relaxing as if relaxing was a brand new thing for them. He was caught up in the excitement of their world, those simple successes after fraught perils only special men could survive.

In the midst of his eighth trip on the railroad, in an overnight stop in Colorado, he planned to step off the train just after midnight, when the whole world seemed asleep, when deep dreams were at hand.

On his way to the door, silence everywhere like a silken mist, he touched Giovanni on the cheek to waken him.

"Joe," he said in a whisper, and getting Joe's attention. "This is where I get off. This is where I become a cowboy. Wish me luck, my friend. I have written a note to the owners saying that you are the best man for the job now. You know all that I have taught you, all that my grandfather taught me. Speak up when you want to make a point. Trust the taste on your lips. Don't take a back seat for anybody on the train or in the big offices. You are a good chef. I hope to become as good a cowboy, but we'll let time do the talking there. Be well, my friend. *Buona fortuna. Arrivederci.*"

He swung his personal bag over his shoulder, heard the tinny rattle of its contents, and stepped into darkness and a new world. In the morning, from an old man at a livery stable with a crude sign saying "Horses for sale," he bought a horse and a saddle and started to learn how to ride. Benevento was a good learner and handled the horse quickly. Two days later he sought employment from a trail boss whose herd was resting a few miles back on the prairie.

"You look brand new. Is them duds you're wearing that new they look like they wasn't worn anyplace yet? Who'd you work for last? You ever drove herd?"

"Well," Benevento said, "I can ride that horse of mine all day."

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"Who'd you work for afore this?" the trail boss said. "Can you rope, pull out a dogie for chow, run down a runaway and bring it back? You ain't lookin' the type."

"This will be my first job, but I have read everything about cowboys and I know I can do the job. I came all the way from Italy to be a cowboy." The pain and the dream were both in his face.

"Oh, boy," the trail boss said, "I got a dreamer here on my hands." He snorted and thought a bit and said, "The only thing I got right now is a sick cookie who's ailin' and abed in the chuck wagon. If you can heat beans and water and make the coffee, you got a job until he gets better. Then, when that's scored up, we'll see how good you done. You game for that? What's your name?"

"Sardi Benevento, and I can cook anything. I can make your mouth water from half a mile. All I want is a chance to be a cowboy when your cook gets better. You help me and I'll help you."

"That's a deal, Sardi. Follow me." And he led him to his herd at a sit-down a few miles out on the grass.

It took one meal and the whole crew of drovers knew they had a "chef" working the chuck wagon. He plain outdid himself and the sick cook in that first meal, his personal bag of supplies coming up as handy as a can opener. From then on, anytime a drover or ramrod or the trail boss went into town, Benevento made sure they had a list of condiments and vegetables that he'd put on a list for them. Every purchase made his cooking tasks much easier.

The night the top wrangler came back with a half barrel of apples, Benevento promised them apple pie for a late snack. By darkness he had all hands drooling for the dessert. He surprised them at camp by unpacking his reflector oven, a shiny tin contraption, from his personal bag and erecting it in front of the open fire. Flames seemed to leap into its parts.

He went to work at his fold down table at the rear of the wagon. Soon, cinnamon swimming in the air, sugar coming sweet as honey bread, he had his first apple pie in the oven and the aroma raced across the grass. Night riders on the far edges of the herd were afraid they'd be left out, but there was plenty of apple pie for all of them, the fire hot for hours, the oven soaking up the direct heat, night filling up with the absolute sweetness sitting in the air. In addition, as an extra part of his dessert, he prepared a special sauce to top the slabs of apple pie. The night was lustrous.

Two days later the original cook was back on the job and Benevento had his first turn as a drover.

The trail boss, Max Farmer, said, "Sardi, you're one helluva cook. But a promise is a promise, so you get your shot at bein' a cowpoke, not that I think there's any more glory in it than bein' a great cook. I gotta tell you to keep awake on the night rounds. Sing sweet and low, like one of your nice goodies, and don't close your eyes. We got strange goin's on in this territory. There's always somethin' goin' on out here two ways if you was to look twice."

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So Benevento sang lightly, sweetly, a soft tenor; "Sleep little babies, sleep on my side. Sleep, little dogies, sleep as I ride." It came out as, "*Dormi bambino, dormi su un fianco. cani poco sonno, sonno come io giro.*"

He sang sweetly, soft as a nightingale in the shadows, and the small speck of light he spied at a distant point was minute, almost insignificant, like a firefly at work, but he had seen no fireflies yet, and decided to wander over that way.

With his horse tied off on some brush, he slipped into a swale and made his way to where the light had been seen. There came the snicker of a horse and the covered cough of a man on a small hummock. The man, obviously, was watching the herd and any other activity. He coughed again and never heard Benevento sneak up behind him and stick the stiletto he'd carried forever against the other man's throat.

"Say nothing, *Signore*, or you are dead," Benevento said. "Walk with me, walk quietly to your horse. You make one move and I will sink the blade into your throat. You will never make noise again. Never sing. Never say hello or goodbye to any loved one." He nudged the knife point a bit tighter against the throat of the man.

"You understand me?"

"Yes. Don't cut me. I won't do anything."

Benevento led the man to his own horse, unhooked his lasso and tied the man up. Then he walked him to the man's horse and had him climb into the saddle, still tied up. That is the way the night camp guard saw them coming into firelight and called Max Farmer, the trail boss. "Hey, Max, we got company coming in with the Sardi the cook."

Farmer asked the man many questions, and got no answers. He repeated many of the questions, the firelight reflecting on the man's face, and the fear showing in his eyes.

From the edge of the firelight, from the edge of darkness, Benevento, the just replaced cook, walked to the chuck wagon and from his bag retrieved a small honing stone. At the campfire, in view of the captured lookout, whose hands were still bound, Benevento started sharpening his stiletto. The keen knife edge was slowly drawn across the stone, the whisper of the fine abrasion circulating in the air as thin as a bird's wings. Slowly, again and again, he drew the blade and the shiny tip across the stone. He kept thinking about the whir of a hummingbird's wings.

"Perhaps, Boss, you might give me an opportunity to pose some questions to him." He didn't wait for an answer from Farmer, but drew up a sitting box and sat directly in front of the captured lookout.

"You and I have had a discussion, haven't we, *Signore*? We spoke of small things, didn't we, *Signore*? Shall we start again with some more questions?"

The trussed man, in the light of the fire, under the eyes of a dozen men, with Benevento and the stiletto yet making slight but serious sounds in the night like the mystical threat of a hummingbird, came loose at every seam. He told them everything he knew; how many men they had in their rustler's gang, who the leader was, when and how they planned to kill as

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many man as quickly as they could and then to stampede the herd. Later on they would have the forces to regroup the herd and make off with it.

“Well,” Farmer said after he heard the whole story, “maybe we can do a little surprise on our own. We’ll just go over there and shoot up that whole camp of rustlers as fast as we can. Scatter them to the winds and all the hills.” He was not a big man but he had the big word.

That is, until the former cook and cowboy, Sardi Benevento, said, “Why endanger any of our men with that effort, Mr. Farmer. Why don’t we get the herd as close as we can in the night, while they’re all sleeping and stampede the herd right through their hideout? That should soften things up for us. And we’ll do the regrouping.”

“Why, *Signore*,” Farmer said, “you are no longer a cook in this here outfit. You are now lead scout and a full-blown cowboy. But if I was you, I wouldn’t throw away that shiny tin oven of yours.”