

Sides Sicilians in the Basement by Joe Simonelli

Hans, Wendi, Ted, Heidi, Joey, Armando

HANS. No competition.

WENDI. All we sell is grilled cheese and hot chocolate! My Uncle Siegfried left us that money to start a good solid business and now it's all pissed away.

HANS. Your Uncle Siegfried, your Uncle Siegfried, that's all I ever hear!

WENDI. He was a great man. A wealthy man. Why couldn't you follow his example?

HANS. He was a clock maker in Germany and we already have enough cuckoos around here! Maybe if you were a better cook...?

WENDI. What? A better cook? Mr. Halpern loves my grilled cheese! Maybe if you had a menu that made any sense...

HEIDI. Mom, dad, would you stop arguing in front of the customer!

HANS. Heidi is right. This bickering is getting us nowhere.

WENDI. This isn't bickering. It's fighting. You want bickering, we'll play Monopoly later.

HEIDI. Enough you two.

TED. I think I'll take my check now.

WENDI. *(to Ted)*

Stay where you are, we'll take a customer poll.

(she goes to get the dinner menu as Heidi makes out his check)

HEIDI. *(writing the check)*

Let's see, that was one grilled cheese and three cups of hot chocolate, right.

TED. Correct.

WENDI. *(as Heidi hands him the check)*

Here Mr. Halpern. Look at these dinner specials my husband picked out. Swiss omelete, sauerbraten and cabbage, baked Swiss liver and onions, I mean, would you order any of this?

TED. The Alps Avocado salad looks okay.

HANS. Alright, we all get the picture. I'm trying to stay true to the nature of Swiss cuisine that's all. What do you want me to serve, pizza?

HEIDI. Could we?

HANS. No we couldn't. This is America, the melting pot. Land of diversity and mixed cultures. And New York, where the culinary tastes of many different regions are evident.

WENDI. And while we're waiting for everyone to learn to appreciate the culinary expertise of the Swiss people, how are we going to pay this month's rent? Joey Tarazzi isn't going to wait forever you know.

TED. *(to Heidi)* Who's Joey Tarazzi?

HEIDI. Our skinflint slum landlord.

TED. Oh.

WENDI. *(to Ted)*

You see once upon a time this used to be a very successful Italian Restaurant. But the more successful it got, the more Tarazzi raised the rent every year when it came up for renewal. That skinflint never gave them more than just a one year lease. After a year or so they asked for a five year lease because they had proven themselves. But Tarazzi refused and the owners figured they could be successful anywhere and moved out West. I think California, although it could be Arizona.

HEIDI. Or maybe they just moved back to Italy!

HANS. Here she goes again.

HEIDI. Oh, could you imagine, a nice little restaurant overlooking the Mediterranean? How romantic. Me sitting there enjoying the view! Some nice young, handsome Italian waiter taking my order. Maybe we exchange a knowing glance during dinner and later on he agrees to show me the sights. He's really a talented artist who's just waiting tables until his creative genius is discovered. Our eyes meet over a glass of Merlot. One thing leads to another and... Imagine, me, little Heidi Segrum from Brooklyn, living in an Italian Chalet.

HANS. Okay, no more Batchlorette for you young lady. Back to reality.

WENDI. Reality being that Joey Tarazzi can't wait to get us out of here so she can turn over the place and the rent can be raised again.

TED. What do you mean?

WENDI. After the previous tenants moved out of this place it sat empty for two years. We negotiated a sweet ten year lease because Tarazzi was desperate for some income. Ever since she has been trying to break the lease. She shows up at all hours of the day and night unannounced looking for any tiny little infraction she can find. We figure she must have gotten wind of that new movie theater opening up the street. We're the only restaurant on the block. Probably figures on re- negotiating a better lease with another restaurant.

TED. Makes sense I guess. But won't the new theater also help your establishment?

HANS. Sure it will. If we can stay in business till it opens.

TED. When is it scheduled to open?

WENDI. About three months.

HANS. The only other business around here is the Brooklyn Sentinel building around the block. The last surviving newspaper in Brooklyn.

TED. Yes, I'm familiar with it. Lived in Brooklyn my whole life.

(Joey Tarazzi enters)

HEIDI. Speak of the devil.

TED. Who is it?

HEIDI. The Landlord,
(to Joey in a mocking tone)
Joey Tarrazi,

JOEY. That's right, who wants to know?

TED. I don't get it.

JOEY. Get what, a decent meal at this place? Don't worry, nobody does.

TED. That wasn't what I was referring to.

JOEY. Oh, the name, the Joey part, it's short for...

TED. Don't tell me, Josephine right?

JOEY. No, actually it's Alicia.

TED. Now I really don't get it.

JOEY. When I was a kid I had this stuffed baby kangaroo. They call baby Kangaroos Joeys. I carried that doll around so much my family just started referring to me as baby and Joey. Finally they dropped the baby and just started calling me Joey. Now you get it?

TED. No, but I'm sure a good psychiatrist would. Well, I must be going.
(he exits)

JOEY. So how's business? Or the lack of it.

HANS. We're doing just fine Joey, and the rent isn't due for another two weeks so to what do we owe the pleasure of *this* visit? Stop in for lunch? Or maybe you want to look at the leaking faucet in the kitchen and schedule a repair?

JOEY. Hardly. Just wanted to check up on things. See if everything is going okay. See if all restaurant regulations and ordinances are being followed.

HEIDI. Why, did you suddenly get a job with the Board of Health?

JOEY. I just want to know that my tenants are running a clean shop, that's all. No pun intended of course.

HANS. You're a real sweetheart Joey. But don't you have a house to foreclose on around the block or something? I can't imagine you just have time to hang around and do nothing?

JOEY. Of course I do, I'm a landlord.

HANS. Well as you can see, we're pretty busy around here.

JOEY. Oh sure you are!

HEIDI. *(Heidi starts to laugh)*
Yeah, I'd ask you to help with the dirty dishes if we had any.

HANS. Keep it up Heidi, and the only Italian Chalet you'll be near will be in Disney World. And you'll be waiting tables there!

JOEY. At least she'll have customers. You see, that's what I mean. The kid's absolutely right. Why don't you just cut your losses and move on. This restaurant is a flop! Why don't you go back to your old occupation. What was your old occupation anyway?

WENDI. He was a saxophone player in a strip club in Greenwich Village.

HEIDI. Yeah, that's where he met you mom.

TED. That's where I remember you from! See you tomorrow!

(He exits)

WENDI. I was working my way through college.

JOEY. Well, they're always looking for Limo drivers around town.

HANS. And what about the ten year lease we signed?

JOEY. Forget about the lease! What's a ten year lease among friends? I'll tear it up. We part amicably. I'll even refund the last two weeks rent to help you out on your next venture. What do you say?

WENDI. Two whole weeks? You're all heart.

JOEY. I'm offering you a lifeboat on a sinking ship.

HANS. Forget it. We're not giving up! We'll fight on, never give up the battle. We're Segrums, from Switzerland!

HEIDI. Fight on? I thought Switzerland was neutral?

WENDI. (*frustrated*)

Our *ancestors* were from Switzerland Hans. Actually mine were from Germany. You're second generation American and I'm third. Maybe we should think about Joey's offer.

HANS. Never.

JOEY. I think you should listen to lap dance Lucy there because when the next rent comes due I'm not going to be as nice as I am now. I expect my rent on time. And you know what happens if you miss two payments in a row...

HANS. Don't worry, you'll get your pound of flesh. ..I'll be downstairs taking inventory. Call me when the dinner rush starts.

(*he exits to basement*)

JOEY. The dinner rush isn't going to start until every other restaurant in Brooklyn closes.

HEIDI. Thanks for rubbing it in. Do you think you could look at the faucet while you're here harassing us?

JOEY. No. I just had my nails done. Listen. I know what you think of me. Cold hearted, greedy landlord only looking out for herself.

WENDI. That's pretty close, yeah.

JOEY. I made you a good offer. If you don't take it well, it's not my fault. It's a tough economy out there. I'd hate to see you three living on the street.

(she exits)

HEIDI. Maybe we could move in with some of your relatives in Switzerland.
(As she looks through newspaper Mr. Halpern left)

WENDI. Look, this looney restaurant was your father's idea. This is his dream! But with only Mr. Halpern as a customer we aren't going to last another week. We've got to do something. And fast.

HEIDI. *(referring to newspaper)*
Here's what you need. A good review from Theodore Halperninni, food critic for The Sentinel.

WENDI. What's he gonna review, the amount of marshmallows in the hot chocolate? The consistency of the grilled cheese? What we need is a menu that is going to bring people in. We need to create a word of mouth customer base. You know people come in, have a fabulous dinner and then go home and tell all their friends.*(picks up menu)* And this isn't going to cut it.

(The sound of a saxophone playing a striptease {a song similar to Night train} can be heard from the basement)

WENDI. There he goes again. Every time he gets stressed out he starts playing that saxophone. I'll close the door downstairs, we wouldn't want any customers thinking we have pole dancers in the basement.

HEIDI. What customers mom? *(looks at menu and shakes her head)*

ARMANDO. *(He speaks with an Italian accent, looks up to heaven and blesses himself)*
We are a herea! We are finally a herea! ...
(walks up to Wendi)
You musta be a cousin Isabella.....
(he starts kissing her hand)
Buona sera! Buona sera!

WENDI. I'm afraid you're mistaken young man. My name is Wendi.

ARMANDO. A Wendi? What kinda name is that for an Italian?

(Wendi shoots Heidi a look and exits to basement as shouting in Italian is heard from offstage)

Scusi una secundo.

(he goes to front door and calls out)

Papa, Aspetta, I'm a talkin to da senora. Eh gobish? Ah good. Una minutoe, una minto, paya the cab driva!

(He returns to Heidi as Wendi re- enters from basement)

Scusi, senora, my papa.

HEIDI. *(picks up a menu and hands it to Armando)*

May I help you sir? Would you like to place an order for take out?

WENDI. I don't think he's here for lunch honey.

ARMANDO. Manjarre' no, no, no...I no here to eata, I herea to lavorro, to a worka.

HEIDI. Are you from Italy?

ARMANDO. Si. I'ma froma Sicilia. Sicily.

HEIDI. Really, how exciting! What's your name?

ARMANDO. Me nome', Armando.

HEIDI. OOOhh, how continental! How European...how... how....*(a sigh)romantic!*

WENDI. Oh boy, I better call your father.

(she goes to basement door)

ARMANDO. Such a beauty I have never seen..a facia bella! Pleasa tell me your nota my cousin Isabella...

WENDI. *(screaming from off)*

Hans, get up here!

HEIDI. No, my name is Heidi.

ARMANDO. Heidi? Thatsa pretty name, Are you Italiano? I'ma confused.

HEIDI. Me, oh no. I'm just an American.

ARMANDO. Americana beauty...

(he kisses her hand as Hans enters)

HANS. What's all the commotion?

WENDI. *(as she pulls Heidi away)*

Calm down there Romeo.

(more shouting in Italian from papa off stage)

Scusi one second.

(goes to door)

PAPA. *(from off)*
Armando, que causa?

ARMANDO. *(to off)*
Uno minuto papa...I'ma talkin to the people, aspetta, , have a gelato, watcha the luggage..
(back in restaurant)

HANS. Watcha the luggage!?

WENDI. This doesn't sound good.

HEIDI. Sounds great to me.

ARMANDO. I apologiza. My papa, he's a very tired afta the longa trip to get herea. Wella, now we are a heara, so... where is everybody?

HANS. Everybody's right here.

ARMANDO. *(to Hans)*
Are you Italiano?

HANS. No I'm Swiss!

ARMANDO. Ah, Swiss, now we are getin a closa, right over the Alps.

WENDI. We're not Swiss, we're American.

ARMANDO. Americano, now I'ma confused again.

WENDI. Not as confused as we are.

ARMANDO. This is a restaurant, si?

WENDI. Si.

ARMANDO. *(Shows Hans a paper)*
This is a the righta adressa, Si? Crowna Heights, Brookaleen, New Yorcka?

HANS. *(Looks at paper)*
Yeah, this is the right adressa...I mean address.

ARMANDO. Me no cabisha, where are all the italiano's?

HEIDI. Rome?

ARMANDO. Thisa restaurant, itsa da right adressa, this is not the ‘Casa Valencia?’

HANS. Casa Valencia? Oh no, no. Now I understand... You’re looking for the previous owners... They’re gone. They moved out over two years ago. We just took over this place. It’s a Swiss restaurant now!

ARMANDO. Swissa Restauranta? (*He starts to laugh*) You gotta be kiddin. I never evena heard of a Swissa restauranta.

HEIDI. Join the club.

ARMANDO. Not even ina Switzerland.

WENDI. What did I tell you Hans?

HANS. All right everybody knock it off. Look, I’m sorry... what did you say your name was?

HEIDI. (*beaming*) Armando!

ARMANDO. Si , Armando. Armando Valenza, froma Sicilia. You seea my cousins, they coma here froma Sicilia about eight years ago. They starta this restaurant in America. They write to my Aunta Rosa that if anyone wants a joba, then come to Brookaleen to starta workin. So me and my Papa, how do usaya, my padrino, grandpa always want to see America, so we are heara to go to worka!

HANS. I’m very sorry but your cousins are no longer here. They moved out West somewhere. Maybe California?

ARMANDO. California? Hollywooda? Ah, theyra all potsa out there... Crazy a movie stars!

HANS. Yeah well, it’s a living I guess. In any event they didn’t leave a forwarding address with us so unless you have any other cousins in Brooklyn...

ARMANDO. You kiddin, Ima italiano. I gotta plenty of cousins. Buta they are alla back in Sicily.

HANS. Then I’m afraid you’re out of luck Armando.

ARMANDO. Manega realo. Now what am I a gonna do? Me and my papa, we spenta all our money to getta hear. We got nothing left. We got nowhere to astaya...

WENDI. Can’t you wire for money from back home? You know from your cousins?

ARMANDO. They're nota that kinda cousins. (*Optional, he pulls out and opens a switchblade*) You donta wanta borrow money froma them, believe me. Their stilla Sicilliano! Oh manega!

HEIDI. What does he mean?

HANS. You don't want to know.

ARMANDO. What area we gonna do nowa? Me and my papa? Liva on the streets? It getsa cold in Brookleen.

HEIDI. Why can't they stay with us?

HANS. What are you talking about?

HEIDI. The little apartment you have in the basement. You set up an extra cot and they're all set to go.

HANS. But I use that as my office.

WENDI. You use that to play your saxophone Hans.

HANS. Out of the question! We don't know these people.