

DRAFT RADIO SCRIPT

THE CHURCH BY PHILIP BARBARA

CAST:

FELIX –

BOSS –

CUSTOMER 1 –

CUSTOMER 2 –

ELLIOTT –

FELIX HUMMING:

People who need people

Are the luckiest people

In the world!

FELIX:

The boss tells me to shorten the line. Yesterday, it was out the door and down the sidewalk almost to the 47th Street diamond district. So many people itching to get in, eat lunch and get back to their office. Keeping them out of the doorway is one of his big worries.

BOSS:

I don't want a scuffle to break out. I don't want this place in the *New York Post*, Felix.

FELIX:

Leo behind the counter with me thinks the boss just wants us to move the hot dogs faster, make the sandwiches faster. We look at one another and shake our heads. No lines? We know it's not gonna happen.

It's his father's name in lights over the door, Putnick's Famous Kosher Cafeteria, and I've seen him fire people. Like Manuel. One morning there was a flap over a big catering order, how many

sandwiches were corned beef, how many pastrami. The order went out and then it got busy as usual for lunch. When things thinned out afterward I thought everything was forgotten. But the boss wasn't through yet.

BOSS:

Manuel, take off your apron. You're through here."

FELIX:

He had a small brown packet with Manuel's pay all ready. Manuel was right about that order, but the boss is like that. I'm waiting for the right moment to point out he doesn't run a mess hall at an army barracks. We got autographed photos of Howard Cosell, Gene Wilder, Ed Koch with Bess Meyerson, Billy Crystal, Paul Simon and Walt Frazier on the walls. When the boss isn't busy he stands below George C. Scott as General Patton. Why not be seen with Sophia Loren as the Madonna? But I try to keep peace.

He did accept one of my suggestions, that we offer the police a 10 percent discount so someone in blue is always here. I keep a table for them so they have a clear view of the door. Everyone worries about terrorism again, smaller like Orlando or San Bernardino, not another 9/11.

The boss has ideas of his own.

BOSS:

Maybe we can do more phone take-out platters, felix. That'd ease the situation.

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FELIX:

I look at him like he's a total rookie. "We tried that before. You gave take-out platters special names like 'Yankees' Home Plate.' Totally flopped. He nods, recollection kicking in.

BOSS:

Oh right. Why didn't that idea fly?"

FELIX:

Look, the food tastes better eating in. People like the atmosphere. I look out over the room: bright light streaming in through the windows, the smells of steamed meat and grilled peppers and onions. The boss looks too and nods again, he knows he has a nice place.

When you cross the threshold here, the atmosphere changes you. When I started 18 years ago, I thought it was just the heat in winter and AC in summer. But that's not it. It's more than that. As lunchtime nears I'm pondering the problem, keep the line short. I'm distracted, though I go about turning the franks and the knishes and steaming the rolls so they're just right for my regulars. The counter window steams up and plates begin to clatter. About 11:45, right on time, people start sliding trays down the line and I'm forking it over, slicing the corned beef and pastrami, piling it high the way they're used to. I'm looking out for Florence from the U.N. who told me she'll be here with some special guests, and I'm wondering who. At about 12:10, my favorite couple comes in. As usual, they're mooning at each other and take their sandwich and dogs on a shared tray, pay, and walk to the center of our universe: the ketchup and mustard stand. They give the plastic bottles a squeeze, a dab of mustard and a dab of ketchup. They take seats across from one another at a small table, not wanting to miss the other's slightest wink. The music is playing, and as I'm looking across the room, I can clearly hear one of my favorite tunes above the din, that Barbra Streisand song about people who need people, how they are the luckiest in the world. I feel everyone's contentment too...

*A feeling deep in your soul,
Says you were half now you're whole
No more hunger and thirst...
But first be a person
Who needs people.
People who need people
Are the luckiest people
In the world!*

I watch some people walk in alone but then share a table, smiling to one another by introduction and then sitting quietly ruminating with their food and their thoughts. That to me is a sense of things right in the world.

A customer jolts me back from my dream when he orders.

CUSTOMER 1:

A Nova lox omelet with onions, salted butter with his rye toast.

FELIX:

Sorry sir, we don't serve salted butter."

CUSTOMER 1:

No salted butter? You have salted everything else. Can you send out for some?

FELIX:

He sounds like the butter might be a deal-breaker, so I try to satisfy him. "Can't do that. It's irregular. But I'll tell you what. Come back tomorrow and I'll have some for you." I spoon some butter into a pan and place it on the grill, shake some salt over it. "After it melts, I'll put it in the fridge with my name on it. My name's Felix. Ask for me.

The guy nods and I see a bitty smile as he slides his tray to the cashier.

Then a guy I've never seen before comes down the line and looks hard at the menu on the wall and asks for something I never heard of.

CUSTOMER 2:

I'll take a national knockwurst.

FELIX:

Plain as that. I wasn't sure I heard right but he says it again. "I'll take a national knockwurst." Like it's a brand name or something. But I know all the brands of kielbasa, and every kind of beef we've served. I've never heard of national knockwurst.

Sir, you must mean Hebrew National. Kosher all-beef franks. It's our most popular lunch.

Splendid with mustard and sauerkraut. Some people take one, some take two. I roll a half dozen

over on the grill with my tongs by way of showing him. He arches his neck over the steamed window to see better. Whaddya have?

CUSTOMER 2:

No. That's not it. All I'm asking for is what I came for, a national knockwurst, made with all U.S. beef. Is this a New York kosher restaurant, or what?

FELIX:

He steps away from the steamed window and looks around, undecided.

I gotta laugh, a national knockwurst, as if with capital letters. Well, if he's trying to be a New Yorker, I figure he'd appreciate a deal.

Why not try today's special: two Hebrew National franks and an orange drink, four bucks. And because you look like you're new to town, and we appreciate you giving us your business, I think I can arrange for you a free knish.

He's still resisting, so I try again. How about our fast-sliced pastrami on rye. Or a Nova lox omelet with onions. It's a recipe as old as the wallpaper.

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CUSTOMER 2:

OK, give me the hot dog special.

FELIX:

I fit two dogs into buns, place them with a knish on a plate and hand it over. He moves down the line to Lois at the cash register, grabs an orange drink and stops short to look up at the picture of Cameron Diaz. I served her once. At least I think I did. You can't tell, so many beautiful ladies.

By 12:30, the line's all the way out the door and I remember what the boss says, keep the line short, but whaddya gonna do? We're busy. It's a sunny spring day.

Customers ask how I took up kitchen work. When I was a kid in Williamsburg, I stole food from sidewalk stalls. My mom encouraged it because otherwise we might not eat. But I kept getting caught and they finally sent me to the Hardwick School for tough kids, up in Ulster, in '75 when I was 15. The food there was terrible. Every night was mystery meat with beans or corn. We threw out more than we ate. But after awhile I got assigned to the kitchen and cooked for myself on the side, simmering onions with the meat. Word got around and others wanted what I ate. It helped me get along with everybody.

One night, two older kids with a zip gun grabbed a guard. That would be their ticket out, like Cagney in the movies, see, but the warden wouldn't do it. They held the guard for two days until the one without the gun gave up, tired and hungry. The other kid tells the warden to send in some food and coffee, for the guard too. I'm told to make up some sandwiches, but no coffee. Eventually the kid lets the guard out but he's still got the gun. He calls out that he wants another sandwich, but with no mustard. No mustard! He has a preference like he's at a deli counter. So I make the sandwich the way he wants, and a little while later he surrenders. The warden nodded his thanks to all involved.

Just before one at the restaurant, two of our finest, Officers Tonelli and Donnelly, come in. Tonelli likes pastrami on rye, Donnelly orders the two-dog special. They're soft spoken when they're here. On the streets it's the harsh noises, but here they find peace. I like to say, in here we have music, munching and meditating.

Finally I see Florence move toward me. She's hard to miss: black, real tall, a long neck, voice airy like she's talking and eating hot sweet potatoes. She comes in a lot since we're so close to the East Side, brings someone from some distant country who just arrived for a new U.N. assignment. Every variety of individual. While here, she offers them the NYFD cap that everyone wants since 9/11. She always carries a few. I prepare her usual, two franks with peppers and onions to go with a tall beer. She introduces me to these two fellas she's with, both with long beards and black suits and white shirts. You'd think they're brothers, and she tells them the food here is safe for both. One is Israeli and the other is Palestinian, she tells me.

This is Mo, she says. Mo bows to me.

I return the bow. Moses is it?

No, Mohammed, he says.

Welcome to New York, Mohammed.

She motions to the other guy and introduces him, also a Mo.

Welcome, Moses, I say to him. The guy nods.

Both men go for chicken noodle soup and bread. The three of them make their way to a nearby table, the two guys sitting across from each other with Florence in the middle. I see them clearly. They close their eyes in a silent prayer before taking up their spoons. The steam from the soup rises like a whisper. They talk and gesture and Florence is in there, too, sitting erect. For a moment it must be serious talk, making me think, 'Hey, the Mideast peace talks right here at Putnick's.' But eventually they become preoccupied and silent, they just look around, eating not talking, devoted to their lunch, nodding approval to one another. Then that Streisand song fades in again. Sometimes I add my own words.

*People who need mustard, people who need ketchup,
Are the luckiest people in the world.
With one side dish. One very special side dish,
Now resting deep in your soul,
Says you were half now you're whole.
No more hunger and thirst...*

You think I've been working here too long but I haven't. Hey, music's supposed to be transporting, isn't it?

Then Elliott slides his tray down and orders the two-dog special, a knish and a pastrami sandwich. I think he's compensating for not eating here when he was overseas doing business.

ELLIOTT;

Hay Felix, what's the mellowing agent in your recipes?

FELIX:

None. We serve lunch fast and hot, that's it.

ELLIOTT:

You know, I'd like to subsidize a Thanksgiving Day parade float for Putnick's.

BOSS:

Would it be a deli sandwich or a hot dog on wheels?

ELLIOTT:

Why not a big balloon like a soufflé of a chef's hat, with eyes and ears smiling down?" Would fit right in the scene. Images of Thanksgiving Day celebrations are among our country's most important exports.

BOSS:

Let me think about it, Elliott.

FELIX:

Suddenly there's a racket right outside, just what the boss hates. Some guy goes after Gloria the meter maid. You can't park this side after 1:00. She's writing a ticket when he returns to his car and goes berserk, calling her every foul name under the sun. Our door's open so everyone hears this, breaking the spell of our place. The guy shoves her against the plate glass window, she goes down, and the room collectively gasps. Two customers in line outside get her up and she runs in and takes cover behind me, right here behind the counter. Donnelly and Tonelli go out to intervene. The guy gets nasty with them too, so before you know it, he's against his car in handcuffs and off they go. I hustle Leo out there with the rest of the officers' lunch, all wrapped.

A parking ticket. Handcuffs. Jesus!

BOSS:

Okay, that's it! Felix, shut the door.

FELIX:

But there's people in line there.

BOSS:

They'll have to be patient outside.

FELIX:

I see a few regulars looking right at me through the window. I feel helpless. But as soon as the boss is distracted I open it again. He has to be sensible. You can't close the door on people.

Then the national knockwurst guy comes back to the counter.

CUSTOMER 2:

Do you have a menu printed in Braille?

FELIX:

Sorry, we don't.

CUSTOMER 2:

I'd like to bring someone here for lunch, but she's blind.

FELIX:

I'm getting the picture when the boss butts in. "What's the hold up here? And who opened the door?"

FELIX:

I was just getting an idea from a new customer. He wants to know if we'd print up a menu in Braille.

BOSS:

Braille? For why?

FELIX:

For a blind person.

BOSS:

They'd really slow things down.

FELIX:

He's right, I know. But I'm a smart guy too. So I tell him, But just think, boss. Some Hollywood sitcom writer might work the idea into an episode, like in that show with the crazy soup guy. Instead you'd be the nice guy. Word'd get around Putnick's welcomes the handicapped. Would be good for business.

BOSS:

Lots of blind people good for business? Who'd a known that. Okay.

FELIX:

That's when out of the corner of my eye I see Florence and her two Moes walking out. Only one is wearing the NYFD cap. But I have a feeling she'll be back with the other one. He liked the food. They'll eat and talk some more, and he'll eventually lose his objections. He'll wear the cap.

FELIX HUMMING:

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Are the luckiest people

In the world!

END