

**OUR NEW THING**

By

Harol Marshall

“Nothin’s the same,” Sully complained. He twirled his spaghetti and lifted the fork to his mouth with the help of a soup spoon. “Good pasta, though. At least that’s not goin’ down hill.”

“Depends on where you eat,” his dinner companion said. “Some o’ these new places ain’t worth shit. Put artichokes in everything. Can’t get a good scampi without somebody addin’ artichokes.”

“You got somethin’ against artichokes, Vin?”

“No, I’m just sayin’ that’s all. You gotta stick with the old places. If a joint puts artichokes in their scampi, then I say it shouldn’t call itself by an Italian name. Garlic, butter, shrimp, and a little wine. That’s it. That’s all you need long as you cook it right.” Vinnie shoveled in another mouthful of pasta. “Your mother ever put artichokes in scampi?” he asked with his mouth full, wiping his napkin across his chin.

“I see your point,” Sully acknowledged, “but I happen to like artichokes.”

“In scampi?” Vinnie the Skunk sounded incensed.

“No, not in scampi. Just boiled with butter. Good sweet butter with a little salt. You know, like the kind you can’t buy anymore? And that’s another thing. The supermarkets these days with all their salt-free butter and *organic* food.”

“Ain’t all food organic?” Vinnie snorted. “Otherwise, you couldn’t eat it.” His snorts sounded like a skunk digging grubs in your lawn late at night, softer than a pig’s snort but still not quite human, which is how Vinnie came by his nickname, a nickname he hated and which nobody, including Sully, used to his face. Once when he’d had a little too much to drink, Vinnie confided to Sully that people might think he smelled bad if they heard that nickname.

“Exactly,” Sully said, responding to Vinnie’s question about organic food. Sully knew Vinnie was smarter than most people gave him credit for, mostly because he never bothered to clean up his language except when his wife was around. “And now there’s slow food, too.” Sully grimaced. “Whoever heard of slow food? You ever hear of slow food?”

“Nope.” Vinnie slurped up another mouthful of pasta. “I ain’t never heard of slow food, except maybe at that place down on Market and State Street where we don’t go no more. Mama Mia’s? Slowest food I ever seen. You go in that place you hafta wait twenty minutes for your drinks to come out, even if all youse do is order wine. Then forty-five minutes later, *maybe* they come out with your dinner.” Vinnie punctuated the word *maybe* with his hands as if he were guiding an orchestra into a slow crescendo.

“That ain’t slow food, that’s lousy service,” Sully said, swirling another spoonful of spaghetti onto his fork. “They’re different.”

“Same thing to me.”

“I think we should do somethin’ about it.”

“What? You wanna firebomb Mama Mia’s? That ain’t nice. Besides Joey Yammy Ears is her nephew. You don’t wanna have him on your tail. He’s a mean SOB. I think it’s the nickname. It don’t let nobody forget how he wouldn’t wash his ears as a kid. Nobody should have to live with a name like that, you know? I feel bad for him.”

“That ain’t what I’m talkin’ about. Maybe *you* got dirt in your ears and can’t hear too well no more. I’m talkin’ about our problem.”

“Yeah, yeah, I follow you. I wouldn’t like nobody talkin’ about my ears, though. It’d make me mean, too.”

“You’re already mean and nobody ever said nothin’ about your ears, except maybe they’re a little on the big side now that you’re older. Nothin’ wrong with that.”

Vinnie moved his mouthful of spaghetti to the right side of his cheek. “Who said I had big ears? Tell me. I’ll smack their ears ‘til they fall off.”

“Nobody. I can’t remember,” Sully said. “We’re gettin’ away from the topic here. The point is, *our thing* ain’t our thing no more. We’re bein’ outgunned by the new generation. The Russians and Chinese are takin’ over everything. And then there’s the Gangbangers—the Bloods, the Crips, Eighteenth Street. It’s all anybody talks about anymore, they’re all over the news.”

“Where’s Eighteenth Street, anyway?”

“Who cares where it is? L.A., I think. Let’s get back to the issue here. It’s like suddenly *mafia*’s a dirty word, you know? I don’t like that. And neither do a lot of our friends, our good friends.”

“Yeah, but they ain’t gonna do nothin’ about it. They’re too old. Alls they wanna do these days is play with their grandkids. I got grandkids, too, but it don’t mean I wanna sit around all day readin’ fairy tales and playin’ computer games. I hate computers.”

“Computers is here to stay. Might as well get used to ‘em. If you don’t learn how to do e-mail pretty soon, you’ll be outta touch with everybody. Even my wife uses it. Blabs all day sendin’ jokes back and forth to her friends and relatives. She’s got a lot o’ relatives, too, so it keeps her busy. I don’t get it. Usually, she don’t want nothin’ to do with half of them.”

“Jeez, mine, too. I don’t get it neither. On the computer, then she tells me she don’t have time to make dinner and we gotta eat out someplace. Makes me wish more and more for the old days.” Vinnie tipped up his pasta bowl and slurped the sauce in the bottom. “Good sauce,” he said. “At least that ain’t changed.”

“I got an idea about what we can do,” Sully said, leaning across the table and lowering his voice. “Here’s the thing. The only ones doing things the old way these days and makin’ a killing in the process, are the financial people. It’s like Wall Street is the mob anymore. Even the government can’t touch these people. It’s almost like they *are* the government. Makes you wish you decided to go to Harvard and become an investment banker instead of a bookie. Now there’s where the real money is. You read about how much these financial executives make?”

“I know, I heard. It’s criminal.” Vinnie shot Sully a look of disgust.

“Remember when we got pinched for chargin’ a vig o’ twenty percent?” Sully wore his own disgusted look. “These days the average guy thinks he’s lucky if he gets twenty percent on his credit card. We shoulda been smart enough to give everybody a piece of plastic with their name on it and a pretty picture and we coulda stayed outta the slammer.”

“Don’t make any sense to me,” Vinnie said. “What difference to the government if you give ‘em a card and send ‘em a bill, or you tell ‘em in person ‘pay me by the end of the month or I’ll bust your bones.’” Vinnie shrugged his shoulders like a bad impression of Joe Pesci.

“That’s where we were dumb,” Sully said. “Nobody does things the old way anymore, it ain’t cool. Besides, you don’t need to. See, the government don’t care what you do to somebody as long as you don’t engage in what they call assault and battery. The cops’ll bust you real quick for beatin’ people up, but if you steal all their money and send them into bankruptcy, or you take away their house, or their car, or you pay ‘em next to nothin’ for a day’s work so’s they have to steal to feed their kids, that’s okay.”

A look of stunned disbelief crossed Vinnie’s face.

“And here’s what else. These days you can get the government to collect your money for you.”

“No kiddin’.”

“I’m not kiddin’. It’s called a lien. Comes right out of the poor slob’s paycheck and into your automatic deposit account at the bank.”

“Geez, I like that idea. Woulda saved me a lot of trouble in the old days. Not so many broken bones. My right hand is still a mess.” Vinnie rubbed his hand. “Arthritis in all my joints,

especially my knuckles. I go through a bottle o' aspirin a week and that ain't good for your stomach, you know?"

"I know what you mean. I got stomach trouble these days, too, but we're gettin' off topic again. See the thing is," Sully leaned back in his chair and pointed his fork at Vinnie. "These white collar guys, they figured out how to beat the system, not because they're smarter than us, but because they're better educated. Went to Ivy League business schools instead of hangin' out on street corners in Brooklyn. You know anything about those schools, you know that's where you go to learn how to pull off the big heists without gettin' sent upstate for it."

"You're probably right, I shoulda gone to Harvard." Vinnie gave Sully a quizzical look. "You think I coulda got in?"

"With your contacts? A done deal. Besides, I don't know too many people smarter than us, do you?"

Vinnie shook his head. "Nope. And the proof is, we're still here and not dead or in the slammer."

"And enjoyin' life in the best country in the world," Sully added. "And that's another thing. There ain't no appreciation for the country no more. Nobody knows the meaning of the word patriotism."

"You can say that again."

Sully grinned. "Nobody knows the meaning of the word patriotism."

Vinnie broke off another slice of Italian bread and swirled it around his pasta dish. "That joke's so old its got nose hairs," he said, but he laughed. "I know what you mean, though, about not appreciatin' the country. Nobody wants to pay taxes. What's with that? I paid taxes on all o' my legit enterprises and sometimes I threw in a few more bucks just so's I could sleep at night. I mean, what if your house catches on fire and there ain't no firemen around because nobody paid their taxes and the government can't afford to hire 'em? And then your kid gets caught in an upstairs bedroom and passes out from smoke inhalation and you rush him outside, but there ain't no ambulance around because the city can't afford that neither, and then . . ."

Sully interrupted. "See, people don't think like that no more. Alls they think about is where's their next flat screen TV comin' from and maybe they could use the money they have to pay the IRS to buy themselves an LCD for their bedroom because they like to watch TV with the old lady before they go to sleep at night."

Vinnie nodded. "Sounds like me and Evie."

"Yeah, except you're not marching in the streets with the teabaggers screamin' about paying taxes. And here's another thing. Our organization never brought the country to its knees and then blackmailed the government for money. We wouldn't do somethin' like that. If we knew we were destroyin' a place, we woulda moved somewhere else, like when we took our whole operation from New York to Vegas, for example. We did plenty to help the economy out there. Vegas wouldn't be Vegas without us."

"I know," Vinnie said with a smirk, "it'd be Veg. Get it? Veg? Us?"

"And you're accusin' me of old jokes? But I like that one. Cute. Except you're gettin' us off the subject again." Sully leaned across the table a second time, fork extended. "It's time for us to change with the times."

Vinnie straightened up in his chair. "So. What? You want us to go to Harvard? I'm too old. Besides, they don't have a sports team worth spittin' on unless you count rowin' boats down the river."

"There's the Celtics. I like the Celtics."

"They ain't the Knicks."

“I like the Knicks, too, but I used to run the numbers up in Boston years ago. So I got to like the Celtics.”

“Yeah, I remember. Nothin’ but micks up there then. Today it’s all spics.”

“That ain’t PC,” Sully chided.

“PC, shitsee.”

Sully ignored him. “Here’s my idea. We bring back the glory days and save the country at the same time.”

“How we gonna do that?”

“By goin’ legit.”

Vinnie pinched his chin between his thumb and forefinger. “You and me. Go legit. Where’s that gonna get us?”

“Got a lot of people to Wall Street makin’ a billion dollars a year. What would you say to that? Think you could live okay on a billion dollars?”

“A billion dollars.” Vinnie stretched out the words, stroking his chin like he was feeling for stray whiskers. “That’s a lot o’ money.”

“Yup,” Sully said. “You could tile your bathroom with flat screens. Watch all your favorite programs every time you take a crap.”

“Just like that.” Vinnie took his hand off his chin and snapped his fingers. “We’re gonna make a billion dollars.”

Sully snapped his fingers back. “Just like that.”

Vinnie frowned. “Which bank you plannin’ to rob first?”

“We’re not gonna *rob* a bank. We’re gonna *own* a bank. Our own personal bank that we can rob anytime we want for however much money we want, just like they do on Wall Street.”

Vinnie shook his head, dragging out his words again. “It sounds good, but I don’t know if we could pull off somethin’ like that.”

“We’re gonna bring back the old days,” Sully said, sounding like a motivational speaker on late night TV, “and we’re gonna do it in a way nobody can nail us.”

“Like I said, it sounds good.”

“It is good, and everyone that matters, you know who they are, will know that *La Cosa Nostra* ain’t dead and gone. They’ll know we’re alive and kickin’ and nobody kicks ass better than us, not even those Wall Street Ivy League prissy pants scared of their own shadows if you catch ‘em in a dark alley at night.”

“I’d like to get some of them in a dark alley and kick the crap out of ‘em for what they done to this country.” Vinnie took a swig of wine. “When can I get started on one?”

“I told you. That’s not the way we’re gonna do it,” Sully said. “First things first. We start by changin’ our name. You know, like Blackwater did. Blackwater don’t exist no more, so nobody can go after ‘em.”

“Another thing we shoulda thought of years ago. What did they change it to, anyway?”

“Xi.”

“Z? That don’t make no sense. What’s it stand for? Zebras?”

“It don’t stand for nothin’. That’s the point.”

“I say we change our name to X. At least it stands for somethin’. X-rated.”

“I get the feelin’ you’re not with me on this.”

“I’m with you. I was just havin’ a little fun. What name are we changin’ and what are we changing it to?”

“We dump *Cosa Nostra*. No more *Our Thing*. From now on, it’s *Our New Thing*. *Cosa Nova*. How do like that?”

“New is nuovo, not nova. You forgettin’ your Italian?”

“Nova sounds more modern and it’s easier to say.”

Vinnie scratched his head. Sully knew Vinnie was thinking. “I like it so far,” Vinnie finally said, “but I need more details. Whatever I do these days, I gotta get it past my wife.”

“No problem. Here’s the thing, no pun intended.” Sully smiled. “First, we buy ourselves the right kind of bank, not the kind over there on the corner.” Sully pointed out the window at the community bank across the street. “We wanna have what they call an investment bank.”

“I like that,” Vinnie said. “Investment bank. It even sounds legit.”

“Don’t it, though?”

“Still, I need to get this operation past Evie. She told me if I went back into the business, she’d cut off my balls and she would, too.”

“No problem, I told you. We’re gonna run a legitimate operation. Investment banks are legit all the way. The difference between them and a regular bank is that they don’t have to play by the rules so they make money hand over fist. Investment banks were *made* for guys like us.”

“And you can run one of these places without gettin’ thrown in the slammer?”

“They’re doin’ it every day. You ever read how much the CEO of Goldman Sachs makes?”

“Yeah, it’s criminal.”

“Exactly.”

“How do they make their money, though?”

“Easy. They sell stuff. You remember seein’ *The Music Man* on Broadway, right?”

“Yeah, I liked them barbershop singers. Reminded me of my ole man’s shop down on Thirty-second Street.”

“Remember Harold Hill, how he sold the town a bunch of band uniforms and band instruments?”

“Yeah, but he never delivered and then skipped town with all the money.”

“That’s the same thing they’re doin’ on Wall St. Only what they sell are what’s called *financial* instruments. See, they invent these pieces of paper with all kinds of words nobody can figure out, then they get some rating company to say they’re good as gold, then they go out and sell ‘em to people who buy the crap because somebody says its got an A rating.”

“So that’s how they robbed the country?”

“Yeah, but there’s more. Then, after they sell these crappy instruments that ain’t worth shit, they place bets on them not being worth shit.”

“Geez. Who’s their bookie?”

“When it’s a legitimate operation like this, you don’t use bookies. That’s the thing. The whole world’s a mark.” Sully lifted the napkin off his lap and wiped the sweat from his top lip.

“That just ain’t right, you know?” Vinnie shifted in his chair. “No wonder the country’s in a mess.”

“And that’s what we’re gonna change. Like in the movie *The Sting*. We’re gonna sting Wall Street, make ourselves rich, *and* help the country. This is our chance to give back since we’re too old to join the army any more. America’s been okay to us, let us live the good life. We need to return the favor, and that’s what you tell your wife. Evie won’t have no argument with that. So what do you say? You in or not?”

“Depends,” Vinnie said, “I need another glass o’ wine and some dessert. Then when I hear more details about your plan, if it ain’t too cockamamie, I might go along. I’m sick of not gettin’ no respect no more. And you’re right about Mafia bein’ a dirty word. My wife don’t even let me say it in front of the grandkids. Says she don’t want them knowin’ about their granddaddy’s former occupation. I tell her it ain’t former, but she says if I tell her that again she’ll box my ears, and she’d do it, too. Got a real wise mouth on her these days, not like the old days when I could tell her to shut up and she did. Now she tells me to shut up. Can you believe that?”

“I can believe it. I got the same problem. That’s part of what I’m talkin’ about. Everything’s changed, so we need to change, too.”

“Thanks, Sweetheart,” Vinnie said when the waitress brought his dessert and set another glass of wine on the table before looking down her nose at him.

“And no pinchin’ my butt when I turn around to leave,” she told him, “or I’ll tell the boss and file a charge of sexual battery against you.”

“See that?” Vinnie turned to Sully, “there’s another example of what we been talkin’ about.” He looked back at the waitress. “Send Rosie out here next time. She likes a good pinch.”

The young waitress stalked off and Vinnie shrugged his displeasure.

“Cheesecake’s good,” he said, “you should get some.”

Sully called the waitress back and ordered a slice of terra misu. “I can’t ever decide between terra misu and the cheesecake.”

“Yeah, they’re both good at this place,” Vinnie said. “You ever been down south?”

“Sure, Florida. Couple other places, why?”

“They don’t know New York cheesecake from pie ala mode down there.”

“I don’t order it any place but here,” Sully said. “I know better. Florida’s not really the south, you know. More like South Jersey with sunshine. You wanna hear my plan or not?”

“Sure, I’m just sayin’. You should get good cheesecake when you can. Even my old lady don’t know how to make it right. I always order it when I come here. It’s better when Rosie brings it to the table, though.” Vinnie winked. “She’s got a great ass. Feels like one of those Krispy Kreme donuts. The way things are goin’, though, I may have to start pinchin’ donuts just for a good feel.”

The two men chuckled. Vinnie the Skunk had a good sense of humor. He could make jokes out of anything, even bumping somebody off. “I’m sendin’ him to a better place,” Sully once heard him say after he shot a guy through the back of the head. “Hell, anyplace is better than Jersey City, ain’t it?”

Vinnie paused and looked around pretending to be ashamed of himself. “Maybe I shoulda just driven him to Bayonne.” Then he laughed. Everybody around him laughed, too. Nobody dared not to laugh, but that was the old days when things were different. Today, Vinnie was washed up. Nobody would hire him. Who wanted a one legged hit man on crutches?

“If you’re gonna pinch somethin’,” Sully said, knowing he was no match for Vinnie when it came to wise cracks, “why not pinch somethin’ worth some dough?”

“Good one,” Vinnie said, “donuts, dough. I like it.”

“I’m serious.”

“Is that your plan? Rob a donut shop?”

“Geez, have you been listenin’ to anything I been sayin’?”

“Sure I have. Go ahead, let’s hear your plan. I’m all ears.” Vinnie sat back and grinned, daring Sully to make a crack about his ears.

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