

ABBY

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Chapter 43 - Interns

A Saturday evening skit had called me “Miss Cindi” as in the movie *Driving Miss Daisy*. They made an outrageously funny story which included an old raciest step-n-fetch-it phrase of “yaz’za, boss Ma’am, Miss Cindi, what ever you say”. That horrified me. Everyone else roared with laughter from the way they did it. From then on the Mansion House residents frequently called me “Miss Cindi” whether I liked it or not.

I found myself softly singing to pop songs played over the loudspeaker system.

The mechanics had taken in elderly trucks, repaired them to roadworthy status, and launched a trucking business. They wanted a painting shed, which led to a fancy, expensive, environmentally correct tin can building hidden along the railroad tracks that ran through our property. They used large quantities of dark green paint. Needing more space kept our elderly bulldozer going. The distances for hauling the soggy dirt became so long they acquired a pair of old ten tire heavy dump trucks and had those running.

The Garden Shop watched the aqua-farm ponds grow as we moved more dirt. They planted two species of trees that loved swamp water. Atlantic White Cedar of the species *Chameacyparis thyoidea* had been almost destroyed in excessive logging in the first half of the twentieth century for steam locomotive water tanks, and other water drenched used. Those were planted in all of our artificial dikes to hold the soil alternating with Tupelo trees of the species *Nyssa aquatica*. The kitchen decided to float bee colonies on the ponds for the bees loved Tupelo for making honey when the Tupelos had grown big enough to have flowers. I gave up thinking I could know everything going on anymore. Tara confronted me. “Miss Cindi, let them. You don’t have to know everything anymore.”

The song *Love is Blue* interrupted us. Tara liked the way I sang that.

The combined kitchen staff of the restaurant and the dining hall couldn’t wait for those trees to grow. They found and bought genuine tupelo honey. That is honey made by bees visiting tupelo flowers. They sent it to one of their food suppliers to have it chemically analyzed. What made it different could be added with natural and artificial seasonings and ingredients. They went to our group of artists for a label.

I hated that label.

Tara intervened. “Now, Cindi, they love you. Christina and I have decided you do not know how much you are loved around here. Not erotic love. You have lots of that too. Deep profound love of the kind Jesus talked about that his male disciples could never figure out. No wonder; they were males. What Mary Magdalene may have

thought didn't make it through the Romanization of the Christian Church. Christina has your five sister-wives in on this. Let the kitchen do its thing."

The next label design became something worse to me. In an arc across the top it read "Miss Cindi" and below that in another arc named the product. It had a picture of me in a red skirt suit with my long blond hair over my right shoulder in front of a door of a log cabin in the bayou swamps. It made the modern woman appear as local on a visit home who had made it in the world. On the logs read a saccharine message about old fashioned good home style food like mother used to make. My mother had grown to hate cooking, and had taken up other avocations such as politics about the municipal water supply.

The first product they sold came out as Tupelo Honey. Of course. Then pancake syrup. Dark chocolate ice cream topping followed. Seafood seasoning, spoonbread, and dinner sized chicken pot pies joined the parade in the restaurant, the store at the gas station, and the garden shop. They took an idea from the man in Switzerland named Nestlé who had invented milk chocolate out of bitter cocoa. The Spanish had been importing that cocoa from South America. He had added sugar, milk, and then a touch of cinnamon. Our kitchen added light doses of cinnamon to many recipes. I wanted to scream in protest when they added strawberry preserves. It took weeks to order enough strawberry preserves to have stock on hand for sale until at least 5pm. They didn't stop, added blueberry preserves, and then peach preserves.

Barbie-Doll frequently worked at the restaurant cash register. She heard the customers' comments and occasionally asked. She reported back the Miss Cindi foods had all the charms of the Aunt Jemima brand with none of the lingering raciest tones. The foods brought the customers together. Some learned each others' names. They told Barbie-Doll they came whenever they felt down for the lift in their spirits provided by our cheerful staff. Those women often ordered tea. The kitchen found a special tea from South Asia and stocked that. They added cinnamon, and poof, the Miss Cindi brand grew again.

The number of groups meeting in our restaurant grew. A few of the women's groups turned into *Sweet Potato Queens* groups after a self-help book of that name that had become popular in the South.

Tara told me to live with it. She wanted me to let myself believe how much the residents loved me. Several residents had reported and would say again I had saved their lives even when I thought that had been a group result. According to Tara, that may have been a group effort when it had only been possible because of what I had accomplished. Her comments and all those feminine hormones I took made me cry.

The song *Grandma's Lye Soap* played softly. Singing that broke up my crying from what Tara had told me. It matched my masculine voice better than many of the other songs.

Our business coach Cindy Johnson heard about all this and wanted a carton each of Tupelo honey and pancake syrup for her ship at sea. Afterwards, she reported the crew loved both. The images of the backwoods girl done good and what mama used to make touched their hearts on their long sea cruises. They wanted to buy so much they would have taken everything we could make. I felt she browbeat me into finding a commercial food operation that could make increased quantities. She hadn't been that hard. We did find that kind of a factory a little less than an hour away.

Tara brought me to the stage at a Saturday skit night and parked me at the microphone. "Sing the Johnny Cash hit a *Boy Named Sue*, except sing it as a *Boy Named Cindi*." She nodded at the crew for a computer playing music, and set the words on a stand next to the microphone. As I sang the closing line of "I still hate that name", the residents leapt to their feet with thunderous applause. As they calmed down Tara returned to the microphone. "We all know Cindi thinks she didn't sing that so well. Practice will make it better. Dr. Christina supports me to tell you Cindi doesn't know how much she is loved here. Everybody back up for a loving applause for our *Boy Named Cindi*." They did. I wept.

Somewhat later, an irate customer of Cedar Valley Trucking hung up the phone on me which, of course, left me frustrated and angry. The door opened into the office where I sat as I fumed. A young Cajun waitress named Chayse put her head in the door. "Miss Cindi, ma'am, you'd better come."

I clamped my jaw shut in the nick of time before venting anger over being called "Miss Cindi". I still didn't like that 'Ma'am' part, and especially not from a pretty personable waitress almost my own age. I stalled for time for settling my feelings. "What's up?"

"I couldn't describe this right if I tried, and it may not be believable anyway. Just come, Ma'am, please."

My head went into some of the worst things that could go wrong as I resigned myself, stood up, and followed her to the restaurant. And why did she call me "Miss" and "Ma'am"? That sounded ominous in making this official at the quietest time of the day in mid-afternoon.

Better than a dozen teenagers were sitting together at a row of tables in the upper level of the restaurant. They seemed better dressed than the usual teenager.

One of the girls stood up on the other side of a table and near the far end. She wore a pleated skirt which seemed unusually high quality apparel making her very well dressed. She had a soft weak voice. "Miss Cindi, Ma'am, we're from the High School." Her voice become better. She didn't say which High School. "We need help."

'Why me' went through my head. "I'm barely a few years older than you. What in the world could I possibly do? What do you need?"

"Miss Cindi, Ma'am, our High School class couldn't raise the money for a college tour. The last two years' classes raised the money and visited several colleges at a big east coast city. But we can't afford it. We," she waived a hand across the others, "want to intern here." She puckered up for crying, but held it in. "We have to start somewhere."

I remembered our hard times at the original Mansion House. I visualized very annoyed waitresses, kitchen staff, and mechanics being angry with these teenagers for being underfoot and in the way.

"Miss Cindi, Ma'am, we'll work for free as interns."

I had to say something. "Uh, I have no idea. Just for starters, would you stop calling me 'Miss Cindi' and 'Ma'am' all the time? I'm more your age. I know you mean that as a sign of respect, like your teachers, but you're making me uncomfortable. I let

the staff do that when we're in front of customers, but I wish they wouldn't. Have you talked with anyone about this? About how to do this?"

"No, Ma'am. Oops, I'm sorry. We were afraid we'd be laughed at for this idea, so we voted to ask here first. What are we to call you, anyway?"

Memories of my being kidnaped and abused flashed through my head. "OK. You call me what you need to call me." I rotated my restaurant name tag upwards as if reading it. "Says Cindi. How about that?" It also read 'Chair', but I didn't echo that.

Her face lost a little of its tension.

I interrupted the awkward silence. "Do you know each named activity here is run as a separate business." I glanced over them at Chayse. Her face wore an expression I couldn't fathom. Her expression shifted ever so slightly into sadness. Not anger at these kids, but sadness. I took that as my queue. "If we can do this, do you know you would be doing all the dirty stupid work? The things the staff dislikes and grows to hate?"

Her eyes glanced around her classmates. "Miss Cindi, Ma'am, we have to start somewhere, and there isn't anywhere else close enough."

"OK, tell you what. Give Chayse your names and how we can contact you. Phones; text; e-mail; whatever. You go ask the school's guidance counselor for his help. Or is that a her? I have no idea who else we need here, but I'm certain there is something. Honest; I have no idea." A thought came from a memory. "Those who say it can not be done, should not get in the way, of those who are doing it anyway."

We all grew a tear or two in our eyes from that quote. That thought sat in their heads a little as their faces lost a doubtfulness. A slight smile grew among them.

I continued. "I'll have to work on this, but find out what you can. Chayse. Are you willing to be their contact person?" Asking her would be a good test of how our staff might react to this.

She nodded. The ends of her mouth curled upwards a little.

With that hint I departed before I let anything excessively stupid out of my mouth, or humiliated myself any worse than I felt.

I told Tara, and had him call the weekly men's breakfast group for what they thought. The tax preparer told us to call the insurance agent who became our best resource.

I e-mailed our coach Cindy Johnson.

A week later a response message arrived from her coaching client Susie of Two Puppies Home Care.

"Dear Cindi

"Our coach Cindy made me the lead to respond to your request of her because we have the most experience with unskilled labor. This message has contributions and been reviewed by everyone here. Judy, Katie, and Becky have been especially helpful who replied almost the same thing of 'how can you even think of saying no'.

"Get the insurance agent in on this as you had better have the minimum coverages. Have each of those kids write out their learning objectives. Nancy's and

Taylor's unique contribution is the idea of having them make a weekly meeting where each is to say what they have learned, and their new goals. Give them something to be proud of among themselves.

"You think big. What can they do to expand your operation? Here's an idea from Linda of having those who want to be mechanics repair, repaint, and refurbish an old car for resale. That way they can make a little money and won't be in the way of the mechanics too much. Joyce thinks they could make the runs for the repair parts as that must cost someone time they can't be fully paid for.

"And lastly, from my own heart, ask the nearest Community College if they could come give classes at your location. We here admire what we did creating that Repair Bay Theater for live performances. Use that during the week for classes.

"Cindy told me that you don't like being called Miss Cindi. With these kids they need someone to look up to, and that has to be you. Take this opportunity for your own growth, but you knew that already. Bet you didn't know you knew that. All of us here know what a loving person you are, so be all of that you can be. You made everyone's life where you are so much better. You eased their pain, and gave them hope.

"Keep us posted. Write often. Send pictures. Who knows, we might descend on you for a community college class in restaurant operations. I've always wanted to cook, but have never taken the time to learn.

"With warm affection and admiration, your crossdressing comrade
"Susie"

My sister-wives liked that message, and especially the comment 'how can you even think of saying no'. I had been terrified of what they might think. Foolish me for that as they quickly loved it.

At a big meeting of all of the Mansion House residents our inside lawyer Danielle threw in a monkey wrench that morphed into being very helpful. He dressed as another she with big lactating breasts and had changed his masculine name to a feminine version. He reported he had been struggling with our Federal Tax Status as a Charitable Organization. The IRS had not audited us, but he worried. Having these interns would securely strengthening our "Educational Purpose". We could also be audited by the state or the local jurisdiction because our tax status saved us from paying real estate taxes. The taxes on uninhabitable and unuseable swamp land were not much, but we had acquired mega-acreage almost measured in square miles. It had been nearly worthless swamp land until we converted it into ponds for bass, shrimp, oysters, clams, and other aquatic critters that arrived in the water from the sluggish bayou river. That water kept up the ponds' losses from evaporation.

The blue catfish voraciously ate everything and had made itself into a public pest. Big ones would cross over the berms and squeeze between the bars of the wrought iron fence we installed to keep the alligators out of our ponds. We had to go after those Blue Catfish, and installed hardware cloth with a half inch spacing to keep those pesky fish out.

The tiny bass that made it into our ponds were acceptable. The kitchen liked those after they had grown in size. Our dining hall for ourselves experimented with seasonings for the blue catfish making those popular for dinner among the residents.

The oysters and clams filtered over a gallon of water an hour per adult which kept our pond water clean. Underwater grasses seeded in, and later the tupelo trees had aerial roots down in the water. All that sheltered the newly hatched very small fish, the minuscule spat of the new oysters and clams, and the new tiny shrimp.

The mechanics designed and had built a tall windmill that reached above the nearby trees. It pumped water from the lowest corner back up to the highest corner of the connected ponds. Our trouble became the pump would kill those little aquatic creatures. They had an Archimedes screw made for the windmill. The little ones survived that reasonably well as they moved with the water flow until they latched onto a safer place.

We kept buying nearly worthless swamp land and making it into more ponds.

We did all that, and more. Of all the surprises none became more spectacular than the girl intern who wanted to drive the big trucks. Shannon had the round face of so many of her peers from being overweight with maybe a little Native American. Driving the big trucks had been her own idea. No one had put it there, and she insisted all on her own. She became the most adamant of them all of working without being paid. She had correctly guessed there could be no way we could pay for a second person in a truck cab. She had another idea, too, of she would take every big tractor trailer truck of ours returning from a run, wash it, check the tires, and all the fluids.

She would squat or get down on her knees left bare by wearing a skirt with a flashlight and inspect every brake drum. Cracks in those were the bane of every heavy truck fleet. She did that to every tractor trailer truck she could get to that stopped for fuel. The State Police found out what she had been doing and would send us big trucks that flunked their inspections. They could pay a big fine and towing costs, or they could drive on their own to our exit and us. On her own she expanded our business in a profitable way.

We had so many big heavy truck brake drums and disks being thrown away we dedicated a dumpster for scrap iron and steel. The dumpster company complained it became too heavy. The mechanics overhauled an abused single axle dump truck for collecting and hauling away those iron and steel parts.

Late one morning I had gone to the auto body paint shop that the residents had insisted we build the right way. I had been fretting over the air handling equipment when a diesel truck horn blared on the other side of the gas station. It became quite insistent. I trotted out there. One of our twin axle tractors with a similar eight tire trailer as close to the max weight as ever had left a little while before, and returned. What in the world?

Two of the staff had the right side cab door open as they helped a man to the ground. There in the driver's seat sat Shannon without a commercial CDL driver's license and with that maximum weight semi-trailer. She couldn't take the test for that license because of her being underage.

I heard our ambulance siren. Our driver had suffered a heart attack. Shannon not having a clue of what to do about that sudden ailment had taken over, looped that big rig around an interchange, and brought it safely home.

She looked down at me from the driver's seat. "Please don't yell at me, Miss Cindi, Ma'am. I know I should not have driven this big rig on the highway. I couldn't think of any other way of bringing the disabled driver anywhere for help."

The ambulance Med-techs had an oxygen face mask on the driver lying on the ground. One of them took his pulse using an image of a clock with rotating hands on a cell phone. "Here, take a nitroglycerin pill", which he gave the man. "OK, lift him gently on a stretcher and let's get him to the hospital." They did. The ambulance siren

screamed as the driver hot footed out onto the side road, blazed through the intersection with flashing lights, and went to the nearby hospital.

Shannon still sat in that driver's seat guarding that truck. She had correctly set the knob releasing all the air from the braking system which set the brakes.

I turned to the Cedar Valley Trucking manager on duty. "Get another driver." I brought my attention back to Shannon as I looked up at her. "Did you do everything right?"

"Oh yes Ma'am, Miss Cindi."

"OK, show me." I climbed up into that cab on the passenger's side. Customers could see whatever they wanted up my skirt. "As the trade says, fire this puppy up."

She gave me a look mixing fear and disbelief.

"Fire it up; drive down the side road to the next road, and back again. We have to turn this around to send it back out, and I want to see you do everything right. You told me you did, so show me."

Her face went into a determined seriousness as she twisted the ignition key. That big diesel engine coughed, popped, rumbled, and roared. She checked both outside mirrors. Her foot went on the brake peddle before she engaged the transmission. Her eyes were on the air pressure gauge as she admitted air into the braking system. With a last look at the outside mirrors she rolled that big rig and took it out onto the side road. She drove as if giving the course.

There wasn't space at the next road to loop that entire rig around. She turned up a slight grade and backed that whole thing onto one of our private roads among the ponds. Backing up a heavy trailer is a skill, and she did it perfectly keeping that trailer going straight onto that narrow one lane dirt trail. Going forward again she made a turn onto the side road and took us home.

She never lost her deep seriousness. She stayed terrified of being caught breaking the rules, or being yelled at for any mistakes.

When she took that big rig into the Cedar Valley parking area she did that all on her own. I hadn't said a word about where to go.

She set the transmission, turned off the engine, and released all the air setting the brakes.

I puckered up. "You were perfect Shannon. You can smile again. I'll file an incident report with the State Police, but I will write it out in full about the emergency. I will tell them if they want to give you a ticket that I will see them in Court. I've been in there enough with our mechanics and others when they have been drunk or in fights. That judge will give you a suspended sentence. Count on it. Betcha the police won't even try. We give them sub sandwiches, hamburgers, fries, coffee, and sodas for our safety, which is another good reason."

The police did one better. They arrived late one morning, and asked for Shannon. They must have known which day she would be here instead of out with a long distance haul. They had her fetch her flashlight and tire pressure gauge, and show

them her inspection routine.

They asked her to give them a ride with a heavy trailer. The only heavily laden trailer we had on hand turned out to be a customer's bulldozer on our lowboy trailer. Her face became deadly serious as she backed a tractor under the front of that trailer, felt the pin engage, and hooked it all up. Her face stayed terrified with fright as she pulled out onto the side road with an officer in the right hand seat. The police didn't know they were on the same route she had driven with me.

When they returned they made quite a ceremony of handing her a letter of commendation for returning with the stricken driver. Their letter went up on the store bulletin board and the Cedar Valley website. The restaurant posted a copy.

They had something else in mind, and had called her parents and family. With an audience of them and everyone available in our cars and trucks businesses they handed her a full CDL license.

She didn't know what to do about that, so she did what she had always been good at. With tears in her eyes she startled the police officer with a hug.

The restaurant staff gave an impromptu lunch with Shannon's surprised parents with her at a head table. Barbie-Doll took photos and sent those to a newspaper.

After that we stocked every one of our big trucks with what the hospital wanted as an oversized first aid kit. Our driver recovered. Whenever one of our drivers saw a big truck pulled over on the side of the road, our driver stopped and asked. Our reputation grew. State police on the interstate would call wanting to know if one of our trucks with its big first aid kit could be anywhere nearby. If the other driver had become drunk, high, sick, or injured, we sent a replacement driver for moving that rig to safety.

With Shannon driving for days out and back with her own sweet shy style, I thought she had better have a self defense course. We discovered Love's Travel Stops tracked Shannon for her first aide kit and big helpful attitude. They had a slogan about her of *attitudes are contagious; is yours worth catching*. Chayse suggested everyone could use both that self-defense and attitude training.

She was proven right when a rugged looking man with a big knife attempted a robbery of the restaurant. The waitress on duty feigned a jammed cash drawer caused by her tapping computer keys locking it up. She faked trying to open the drawer as another waitress came up behind him and swung a ten pound bag of rice. She used all her strength with both arms slamming it into the back of his head which sent him flying face down to the floor with rice from the broken bag strewn all around him. As taught in that course, she jumped on his ankle breaking it and putting him into extreme pain.

That self-defense course became a little too much for our habits with the Community College. A Judge at a networking breakfast said we should form a separate small educational charitable foundation, and the accountant agreed.

Kim, Tara, and Christina were charmed with the idea.

Wheelchair Bob's girl friend had another idea. More houses were being built on the other side of the Interstate, and on our side of that highway beyond the property limits of the growing shopping mall. Could our people form another business? Their idea came from our Saturday repair shop for all the people who commuted Friday and

Sunday evenings to and from the big cities for work. The string of headlights Friday evenings of their returning to their homes and the taillights going out on Sunday evenings had a local name of the "bee line". Could they set up a house cleaning and maintenance business? How about food shopping, pet sitting, and dog walking?

Our business coach had sent Susie of Two Puppies Home Care for help on establishing the house care business. They asked her, who sent them more business financial stuff than they had ever dreamed of. They even wanted to use the name, but I said no as Susie had been thinking of franchising. We were sitting around when one of those magic moments hit us all. They named this new business "Two Girls Happy Home Care". They thought of dropping the "Happy" word a short time later, but did not. They found and contracted with plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and other trades.

I kept after them to make their business independent of us, but no. They wanted to be part of our organization and financial systems. It all became clear when I became the voice on the phone for calls from an irate customer. I hated that, but what became necessary and useful developed into someone to translate for the customers so our people could rephrase what they said they did. Customer expectations became more realistic. People who were away all week could come joyfully home to a clean and repaired house with a warm, fresh baked spoonbread on their kitchen counter.

I knew my sister-wives were up to something one evening after dinner. They were behaving a little oddly. When they had us sit in a circle my stomach clenched up for whatever this would be.

Kim, of course, led the discussion with holding hands and an English language version of a short Native American sacred story. They wanted me to teach a course on business management for the Community College. Nobody cared that I had only a few college credits.

The first class evolved into our own interns and staff as guest speakers. Barbie-Doll had the right mixture of insight from the residents' meetings and from the restaurant front desk which enabled her view of speaking as if from the shop floor.

We had become a genuine charitable educational foundation whether I had ever wanted to or not.

The 'foundation' word stuck. The men's breakfast group played around with that as a pun on the Mansion House had become a community foundation in the broadest sense of the word. The Judge said a foundation could discriminate which was a vulnerable area for us of our hiring preference for our own residents, volunteers, jail work release graduates, and interns.

A car slid to a stop with squealing tires. Wheelchair Bob's girl friend trotted around finding me. One of the outside hired waitresses told me, and got in a good whack on my padded butt launching me which said they all knew about my secret. "Go, Miss Cindi, go." Loving support comes in many forms.

I ran to the gas station store.

An intern talked so fast she ran out of breath. The motel at the next interchange had been identified to close. The national franchise would pull their agreement for failing finances, and they would be filing bankruptcy.

Her face said what she didn't say of her expecting miracles from me.

Lightning flashed in my vision. "How is the house cleaning business?" I already knew from their insisting they be part of the Mansion House operation, but that wasn't the issue.

Eyes and mouths popped open in surprise.

Bless his heart Wheelchair Bob caught it. "Honey, Sugar Pie, I think you are in for a big surprise."

I nodded. "Keep talking."

"Honey. You already have the financial track record of Two Girls Happy Home Care of the cleaning, bed making, washing, and having repairmen. Yes?"

I almost lost myself when Wheelchair Bob the Iraqi war veteran with post traumatic stress syndrome used a feminine form of speech with the closing question. My sister-wives would want to hear all about that on what had become significant for me every day at my late evening diaper change. They had latched onto that idea and had made it a big deal in our family. Even I understood what we were doing with that.

"Bob; call the Finance Committee first. Call the motel and say we want to come talk. I'll have Kittie call that business development representative at the bank. Get a recent SBA loan application up on your computer screen and fiddle with it."

He grinned. "Yaz'za, boss Ma'am, Miss Cindi, whatever you say."

I threw a fake slap at him, and he grinned right back as he did a fake dodge from the blow.

We both laughed.

Those resident meetings about buying that motel were the toughest fights I had ever seen. The space available at our hotel had declined to not enough left available to the public with all of our outside hires, volunteers, and interns staying there.

The new sign we bought for that motel became almost as expensive as our big sign for our gas station.

Making it successful took awhile. Those who say it can not be done should not get in the way of those who are doing it anyway.

Barbie-Doll took me aside one day. I had long thought that name to be ridiculously demeaning, but she and her threesome reciprocal sex toys of Tara and Pat had stuck to it. She had developed a simple entertaining style from her work at the front desk of the Cap'n Jackie restaurant. Her news came from our art group who wanted to have quality art work on the restaurant's two vacant interior walls. They wanted to make a near duplicate of the eight water lily murals by Claude Monet at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. Sounded crazy to me. The restaurant staff voted for it with a proviso it be made as panels instead of being painted directly on the wall so it could be moved if ever needed.

A customer wise cracked where did the pirate ship go. Barbie-Doll shot back

there is no pirate ship in the art work as you are standing in it looking out at the water.

The teenage interns watched and discussed all of this as if the adults were out of their minds.

I heard about this later. One of the interns named Karen asked to buy a bottle of Tupelo Honey for her mother she called her Momma. "Momma wants to know if this is a quality place, or a fast food brothel on the interstate. I thought the honey might help."

Barbie-Doll took a random bottle from the display shelf behind the cash register, a cheap cardstock box we used for the purpose, put the bottle in the box, closed the locking top, and parked it on the counter top. "No charge."

Karen puckered up.

Barbie-Doll came around the counter, and put her long masculine arm around Karen's shoulder. "It's OK dear." She switched her voice and her words to rural swamp talk. "Ain't no big deal. You work as hard as anyone around here. Take it to her with all of our love."

When I heard about this, my head went into the employment laws and rules about no personal contact. No one said a thing about that.

The next two days were Karen's off-duty time. She returned with a page in her Momma's handwriting of how to prepare genuine Cajun-Creole piquant pronounced PE-KAWNT. After how to include a list of ingredients, cooked slow, and the last words were "prepare with love". If we were the quality establishment we claimed, she proclaimed we had to have at least one GOOD local cuisine.

Bless their hearts, the kitchen staff made room for a big tureen on an open burner. They had that pot going by 10am, and by 2pm the aroma had the entire kitchen ready for a taste and the customers asking about it. By 4pm customers were not leaving. Every outside hired staff, jail work release inmate, and intern arrived. Most of the Mansion House residents had heard, joined, and were jamming the restaurant.

Barbie-Doll called her sex toy Tara that I had better be there. My sister-wives bothered with air brushed makeup on my face, brushed my hair with conditioner, and renewed my lipstick and nail polish. Wow, that aroma had power when I arrived.

The residents knew this had to be an experimental meal, and the customers caught on. Barbie-Doll brought Karen to the checkout counter, and had her describe it to a rapt and hungry audience. Barbie-Doll made little hints and nudges of things to say, but not too much.

Karen began exhibiting her nervousness before her experience with the weekly intern success and goals meetings took over. "My Momma wrote out this recipe for me to try here." She paused as every eye in the room announced this had gone past the "try" stage. Karen took in a big lung full of air. "We start by browning meat in a skillet. Doesn't matter what. Add flour, chili powder, paprika, and more spices to the grease making a roux. Add the ubiquitous local trinity of onions, celery, and peppers. Stew it with stock and anything else you feel like trying especially with hot sauce and other fresh spices. The ingredients reflect every immigrant wave that ever arrived here all the way back to the Carribs. We didn't add too much for this first batch. Warning. True Cajon doesn't use tomatoes. That's the Creole influence from the Sicilian influx to the

sugar cane fields a hundred years ago. We added chopped tomatoes and a dollop of tomato paste.”

The real chef intruded. “We counted. Two tablespoons for everyone here and coming will almost empty the pot. We cleaned out our supply of little cups for sauces for everyone to have an equal amount. When you come back for a real meal expect rice, or you can order any starch or side dish you want.”

My little cup went beyond delicious.

Misty went to work revising our menu. The piquant took over with options when ordering, a description, yummy photos of dishes, of Karen and her Momma with their heads together, and history. The piquant menu item became two full pages. The menu had to grow in size for that. Barbie-Doll ganged up with Misty for a fake leather binder. I learned more than I ever wanted to know about leather, virgin vinyl, and cheap vinyl. Barbie-Doll and the other check out staff would sell the menu for ten dollars each. When they caught someone trying to shoplift and smuggle one out, the price became twenty dollars each, or the police waiting nearby could be easily summoned. They paid.

It didn't take long, about a day, for the kitchen to gang up with the Architectural Committee for another expansion. Kittie and her banking committee sensed the bank would be difficult; maybe even outraged. She made me come too, in my best outfit and all made up with my long blond hair over my right shoulder. She also brought the Head Chef Jackie, Barbie-Doll, Karen, and a few others. I never opened my mouth with my wrong voice for my image. The bank loan department came close to being outraged. Kittie picked up the nearest phone in their conference room, called the Cap'n Jackie restaurant, and reserved a table for ten at 4pm when the piquant would be ready. She had the Head Chef give special cooking instructions over the phone.

The aroma smacked the bankers right where it counted. A Cap'n Jackie actress walked the floor with a violinist. Our music ensemble grew with a Sweet Potato Queens Group bulldozing their way up on that little stage. They sang pop country songs.

The interns made up most of the server crew putting on a demonstration of what a five star restaurant could be. This batch of piquant had a solid dose of sherry added. The bankers couldn't resist. That became an enormous building project including taking out so much of what had already been built. The big sign for the Interstate became even bigger. We pushed the interstate authorities to change our part of the typical dark green sign for food and fuel. The new entry had the Cap'n Jackie restaurant logo with the words in big lettering of fuel; food; family.

The city newspaper ran a big two page article. That challenged Misty to include that in the menu. He made it all fit.

The truckers in the store needed more booth space which became another construction project. They bought more fuel, and wanted carry-out as did the Potato Queens and other customers. The new kitchen went from oversized to about right.

Alligator meat went very well in Piquant. So did crocodile. We went from not knowing what to do with the alligators we shot in or near the fish ponds to buying all the fresh killed “crocodilegators” that came to us. The jail work release took over preserving the ‘gator hide and selling it to manufacturers for shoes and handbags.

I ever more wanted to change my voice to match my feminine ‘Miss Cindi’ image.