The Contest

The contest began like the others. Peter, the owner’s son, came up with it to take his mind off the dark void, which he imagined had swallowed him. Just a year after a torn rotator cuff severed his dream of professional baseball he fell into a more active role at the family pizza shop – angrily overseeing the daily operation. From that day forward he served pizza and pizza served him. But at certain moments during these contests, Peter’s eyes would sparkle like they had in the past, and he seemed to escape his disappointment for a moment or two. This contest, unlike the arm wrestling, the thumb wrestling, the cheeseburger eating, the dough beating, was not a competition of strength or skill like most, but rather a test of will. The money was to be awarded to the participant who lasted the longest in growing a beard. After a week, the contest was barely noticeable on most of the participants, twelve in all, for most were adolescents and hadn’t the need for daily shaving. However, all this seemed to change on the tenth day.

The longest and hottest heat wave in a decade rolled into town a week earlier and parked itself obtrusively into the lives of the small New England suburb. The streets were
empty, the air conditioners were long-since sold out, and the water ban was in effect, causing lawns and vegetable gardens to petrify under the relentless sun. Other than the unbearable heat, this lazy Monday afternoon began like many others. Peter was wearily mixing the cheeses, a three-cheese blend, the cornerstone of their pizza pie success. Occasionally, beads of sweat dripped into the cheese, and a thin, yet distinguishable coat of fuzz glistened on Peter’s face. This fuzz was dusted with cheese from each time he scratched his face, looking like dust bunnies on a carpet.

Above the low grinding of the cheese blender Peter heard a screech resonate from the room housing the pizza ovens. The only other worker on duty was Danny, and Peter was all but sure he had burnt himself on the oven again. Peter switched off the blender, snapped off his rubber pizza surgery gloves and made his way toward the oven room to see what the problem was. These kids are going to destroy this place, Peter thought to himself. In fact, if business didn’t pickup he would be forced to let a few go. Ever since Domino’s Pizza opened a store in town, Spinazzola’s business had suffered.

As Peter rounded the corner he was taken aback by what he saw. Danny, a rather unaffected young man, was sitting with legs crossed on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably with a large pepperoni pizza in front of him. Peter rushed to his side, squatting on one knee, and awaiting the appearance of a raw, bubbly burn. However, Danny neither spoke nor moved; he continued whaling like a child, losing his breath as tears scattered across his face in all directions like an army of ants.

Minutes passed and Peter, feeling uncomfortable after many attempts to console Danny, became increasingly angry and soon screamed at him, demanding to know what
had happened. Danny slowly opened one eye and squeezed it shut again. “He’s looking at me as if he knows everything!” Danny whined.

“Who, Danny?” But just as the words floated out of his mouth, Peter knew. He stared amazedly at the pepperoni pizza, which bore a striking resemblance to the Son of God. The three-cheese blend had bubbled and browned, and because at Spinazzola’s the toppings are laid beneath the cheese, the pepperoni edges curled and crisped just enough below the surface to produce his ears, eyebrows, and nose. Peter, who had become entranced by the image, recovered and quickly turned away, shielding his face and feeling strangely guilty and vulnerable.

“Alright, box it up,” Peter said, regaining his composure. “The Shapiro’s will be here any minute for that order.”

Danny whipped the tears across his face roughly and became still and silent, eyes still fixed on the image. “I can’t give them this pizza, not this pizza. I won’t.” With these words he hopped to his feet and hurriedly made another pizza. He scratched at the reddish-brown whiskers, which had sprouted in patches on his face and neck.

Peter resumed the cheese grinding, pretending to be disinterested by The Pizza. Danny, meanwhile, brought The Pizza to the checkout counter for display purposes. The usual lunch rush crowded around, some scratched their head in amazement, some wept, some prayed, and one guy returned with his camcorder. Customers continued to arrive, but few left. A wave of excitement flooded the usual dullness of the afternoon. Danny, who had become the diplomat for The Pizza, proudly provided commentary about its genesis.
By the time Peter reemerged from the back prep room, a swarm of people had already filled the dining area. Peter rubbed his hands through his beard, which seemed coarser now than hours earlier. Danny shot back and forth between the pizza room and The Pizza as the crowd, not wanting to return home for dinner, ordered pizzas at a dizzying rate. After all, a miracle – for that is what they were now calling it- is quite an extraordinary thing, but the warm aroma of pizza is difficult to resist. Peter pounded dough beside Danny and as the order board filled up, he made a frantic call to all employees for immediate assistance, without getting into details. Worried about the safety of The Pizza, Danny carefully placed it within the glass display case that formerly housed Mama Spinazzola’s home baked cookies.

Spinazzola’s remaining employees arrived sporadically over the next hour. Marcus, the first to arrive, broke through the mob with terror in his eyes. A wave of hot, heavy air poured through the door behind him. His face glistened with sweat and his wild, forked beard sparkled. The mob, at this point, had formed a processional for viewing The Pizza. They placed flowers around it, rosary beads, and pictures of loved ones in need. Some prayed for forgiveness, others for financial help, others for health, some for rain, some for peace, and some for hope. All agreed they were witnessing a miracle and more pizzas were ordered, most being the large pepperoni, now referred to as a “JC Special”, for none dared utter his name.

Old Mrs. Arbuckle, the most respected woman in town, slowly approached The Pizza, eyes heavy with tears. Mrs. Arbuckle spent her days in devote Christian manner - attending Stations of the Cross weekly, morning mass daily, confessional hourly. Her granddaughter, Penelope, has been in a coma for two years after a horrible car accident
and Mrs. Arbuckle spent every afternoon reading at her bedside. With her lower lip trembling, Mrs. Arbuckle’s shaky voice could faintly be heard and Danny leaned in close. The crowd silenced as Danny carefully removed The Pizza from its protective casing.

Mrs. Arbuckle snapped open her purse, fished around inside then produced a paper towel, neatly folded. With eyes locked on The Pizza, she carefully unfolded the paper towel, snapped it in the air to do away with any dust particles, and tenderly laid it upon The Pizza. The crowd collectively held their breath as Mrs. Arbuckle peeled the paper towel back. Waving the grease image above her head Mrs. Arbuckle cried, “This is the miracle that Penelope has been waiting for!” and then fell to the floor panting heavily. The crowd helped her to her feet and she shot out the door quicker than she had moved in years, paper towel in hand.

When Father Callahan arrived the parade of curious bystanders and unabashed believers stretched out the door and into the massive parking lot, which was now closed to automobiles. “Well, it’s certainly not nothing,” he announced after viewing it. Then quickly added, “Of course the arch-diocese will have to conduct a full investigation into the matter.” Father Callahan was careful not to make any formal declarations, but he was no doubt impressed with The Pizza and its affect on the crowd.

The employees at Spinazzola’s had never experienced such a heavy volume of business. They raced around the shop, taking orders, pounding dough, spreading sauce, sprinkling cheese, and weaving through the crowd. Nearing sunset, the heat wave still hadn’t broken, 92 degrees, down from 102. The temperature in the shop, with pizza ovens blasting away and nearly eighty people crammed inside, was well above the 102-day time high.
While frantically topping pizzas, Peter was shocked to notice the thick, shaggy locks covering Danny’s face, which was shiny with pre-pubescence just hours before. In fact, as he peered across the prep table he realized that the entire crew had beards as full and as thick as rabbis. Peter’s mind raced to make sense of the strange circumstances of the afternoon while the phone continued to screech over the clamor of the multitudes.

The next moment a news crew burst onto the scene, parting the sea of onlookers down the middle. The appearance of Estrella Paloma solidified the importance of this day for the entire crowd. With a larger-than-life aura, she maneuvered through the crowd, extracting joyful and tearful reactions, directing the cameraman in every direction, and reapplying lipstick and eye shadow while gazing at The Pizza. Peter and the others were beckoned to the dining area for statements and a group shot.

When all twelve bearded employees encircled The Pizza, the crowd marveled at the undeniable sanctity of this day, for the men resembled the twelve apostles. Estrella Paloma was ecstatic with the possibilities of this story. She spouted out a list of possible headlines as she readied herself for an action shot, “the last supper…turning water into wine, and pizza into believers… a little slice of heaven. Let’s go with that one Ted. Whenever you’re ready.”

Estrella Paloma excitedly gripped the microphone in front of The Pizza as the twelve, bearded employees stood rigidly in the background. “Estrella Paloma here with what many are calling a ‘little slice of heaven’ at Spinazzola’s Pizza, a small town take-out shop usually applauded for its home cooked flavor. But today, the crowds are here to catch a glimpse of what some are calling ‘the second coming’. This time, however, the Son of God has materialized in the unlikely form of a pizza pie. I stand here with Peter
Spinazzola, owner of this restaurant and one of the twelve, bearded ‘biblical’ employees. Now Peter, is it true that you prophesized this apparition?”

Peter, both stunned and camera shy had the look of a fish gasping its last breath. “Uh, no… what gave you that idea?”

“Isn’t it true that you instructed your employees to grow beards in preparation for this ‘second coming’ as you’ve stated.”

“Actually, you called it ‘the Second Coming’, not me.” Peter’s eyes searched the crowd for a recognizable face, but they looked back with unfriendly eyes. Whispers carried through the room like a cool breeze.

Unfazed, Estrella Paloma quickly danced through the crowd and approached two sisters who wailed uncontrollably, hugging each other. “Excuse me ladies, why are you crying?”

“It just gives us hope,” said one.

“We are so happy. We were fighting before today, but when we saw each other here, we just realized how foolish we’ve been. The Pizza brought us together,” the other added emphatically.

As Estrella Paloma twirled amongst the growing crowd, Peter slipped into the back warehouse, struck up a cigarette, and messaged his temples, which pulsed like machine gun fire. These people are crazy Peter thought, wishing they would just go away. A fuzzy feeling overtook him as he closed his burning eyes. He must have nodded off for when he awoke the cigarette had already nipped at his knuckles. Two matching red blisters had formed where he held the cigarette. He blew on the blisters, asking
himself how he didn’t wake up when it hit his skin. With long, languid strides he
reentered the pizza shop to find that it was empty. How much time had passed?

“Hello?” his voice sounded strange to his own ears, for the chaos of the afternoon
seemed to echo in his head.

Danny, leaning his chair against the wall, belched out, “You alright?” His eyes
moved from the Pizza for just a moment.

“Where is everyone?”

“Gone,” Danny said, sipping on a beer. His beard had become increasingly
uncomfortable and he scratched like a dog with fleas.

“Where did they go?”

“Well, it turns out that the beards added greatly to the affect ‘cause when they
learned it was just some contest, people became upset. The beers are in the ice chest
behind you.”

“That was it, huh? Who told them?”

“I did. I didn’t really feel it made a difference. Many stayed after that, but you
could tell they were becoming skeptical. It all fell apart when Mrs. Arbuckle returned
with news that Penelope’s condition hadn’t improved one bit since she laid the paper
towel on her face. In fact, she said Penelope developed a rash instead. This drove the rest
away. Those two sisters were at each others’ throats after hearing that.”

Peter snapped a beer open and held the cool bottle against his forehead. “So much
for hope huh?”

“The Pizza’s really beginning to stink, but I can’t get myself to throw it away.”
“I’ll take care of it. You can take off, I’ll see you in the morning,” As Danny left Peter added, “And shave that squirrel off your face would ya!” Michael swept the floor and switched on the news, but their story had been passed over by others that were more important.

Peter was amazed upon opening the cash register; money spilled out, and he stuffed it into not one, or two, but three burlap sacks. He hadn’t the energy to count it; his head felt as if it were filled with sand. After switching off the lights he picked up the pizza and locked the door. Slowly and with some relief, he dropped The Pizza into the dumpster.

Peter tossed the bulging burlap sacks on the passenger seat, and started his car. In the near distance thunder thrashed about like some ferocious animal in a trashcan, lightning shattered the sky with intensity, and rain fell. Peter sleepily pulled out of the parking lot as the money sacks slid forward on the seat. While reaching to catch them, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror.

He quickly pulled his car to the side of the road and stared, unblinking, into the mirror. A shudder shot through him and he ran his fingers along his face, for he hardly recognized himself. The beard clung limply to his face like a wasted moment and his eyes appeared sunken and old. He leaned in closer and the growling thunder, directly overhead, shook his chest with such force that a sound escaped his lips, a soft, colorful sound that had become unfamiliar. A stream of laughter poured down from a place Peter had forgotten while outside, sweet cool rain kissed the dusty earth.