

## Chicken Parm

By Hunter Lu

CHICKEN FILLET, BREADED, PRECOOKED, FROZEN, 5 OZ was written in bold, black lettering on top of the forty-pound box, large enough to be seen clearly despite the dim light of the freezer, the result of a single flickering bulb. Cook Number One moved the CHICKEN FILLET, BREADED, PRECOOKED, FROZEN, 5 OZ out of the freezer, placed it on the floor, and took out a box cutter from his pocket.

“Did you know that chicken parm isn’t from Italy?” Cook Number Two said as he stirred a boiling pot of SAUCE, PIZZA, CANNED. “Some Italian dude made it up in New York. Crazy huh?” Sauce bubbled from the pot and splattered on Cook Number Two’s right bicep, directly on a tattoo that read LUV U FOREVER ANGELA, which covered up a laser removed tattoo that had said LUV U FOREVER JENNIFER.

“Uh-huh,” Cook Number One replied as he cut open the CHICKEN FILLET, BREADED, PRECOOKED, FROZEN, 5 OZ box and took out a bag of frozen cutlets. The bag was heavy, about ten pounds. The cutlets were hard and dusted with frost.

“Like...did you know that spaghetti and meatballs aren’t from Italy either? Supposedly it’s suuuper insulting to serve spaghetti with meatballs to a real Italian person. It’s like spitting on their ancestors or something. Really makes you think,” Cook Number Two said.

“Uh-huh,” Cook Number One replied.

For the past three days, the two cooks at this U.S. Army outpost, a dilapidated and abandoned three-story building commandeered on the outskirts of a small Iraqi city, had made chicken parm for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It all started when the resupply convoy stopped by with the monthly food delivery on Monday. As the two cooks scampered up the back of the 5-ton and started to carry out packages, they realized that the shipment contained nothing but ingredients for chicken parm: CHICKEN FILLET, BREADED, PRECOOKED, FROZEN, 5 OZ; SAUCE, PIZZA, CANNED, CHEESE, MOZZARELLA, PART SKIM.

On the first night, the infantry commander, bamboozled and stricken with heartburn, pores on his face glistening from the grease of chicken rolled in a crispy parmesan crust, stormed into the kitchen to confront the two young army cooks about their monotonous menu selection.

“Specialists, why the fuck was chicken parm served three meals in a goddamn row?” The infantry commander withdrew an unscented Pampers baby wipe from his pocket and mopped the sweat from his disappearing hairline.



Cook Number One shrugged as he stirred a giant pot of SAUCE, PIZZA, CANNED. “We don’t have anything else, sir. The resupply convoys only gave us ingredients for chicken parm. Take a

look in the freezer if you don't believe—”

The infantry commander pushed past Cook Number One and walked towards the industrial-sized freezer in the back of the chow tent. When the infantry commander lifted the freezer lid, he saw a huge bag of CHICKEN FILLET, BREADED, PRECOOKED, FROZEN, 5 OZ next to boxes of CHEESE, MOZZARELLA.

“I guess they thought we're opening an Olive Garden sir,” Cook Number Two said as he picked his nose. His pinky finger snaked deep into his left nostril, crawling like a treasure hunter until it pulled out a raisin-sized morsel. Cook Number Two stared at his creation, smudging it between his fingers, then ate it.

“This is ridiculous! Where are the side dishes? Rice, potatoes... steamed vegetable medley?”

“Nothing sir,” answered Cook Number One.

“What about breakfast? You can't expect us to eat chicken parm for breakfast. There's no sausage or bacon?” the infantry commander asked. More sweat had dripped down his forehead, moistening the collar of his uniform.

Cook Number One shook his head.

“Eggs?”

Cook Number Two shook his head.

“Surely there must be bread?”

Both cooks shook their heads this time, slower and more exaggerated to emphasize how upsetting the situation was.

“So, my men are supposed to eat chicken parm for the foreseeable future? Not even fucking toast for breakfast?”

“You can pretend that the crust of chicken parm is bread. It's made from bread crumbs, sir,” Cook Number Two suggested.

For the next two weeks, all the infantrymen at the outpost lined up for serving after serving of chicken parm, until everyone's mind was filled with rage. They hated chicken parm more than IEDs. They hated chicken parm more than the insurgents that tried to kill them every day. They hated chicken parm more than the POG Major that kicked them out of the FOB's DFAC for dirty uniforms.

The only person at the outpost who seemed to enjoy chicken parm was the infantry commander's Iraqi terp, Nas. A short stocky man with a thick moustache kept trimmed and luxurious, Nas was about twenty-five and spoke English with a slight New York accent he picked up from watching nineties hip-hop videos. He had given himself the name after his favorite rapper and was prone to yell, “Queensbridge motherfuckers!” or “The World is Yours!” Nas wolfed down his chicken parm. He had never had American food before and found it quite exotic.

Everyone agreed that the biggest tragedy of this whole debacle was that chicken parm was objectively delicious. It had all the good stuff of pizza spread on a piece of fried chicken. Unfortunately, none of the infantrymen could bear the idea of it anymore. This was devastating since pizza had been the number three post-deployment culinary fantasy after Jim Beam and strip club buffets.



A week into the chicken parm marathon, the infantry commander held a briefing about a local IED

maker who was responsible for a suicide attack that blew up an Iraqi wedding, killing dozens of men, women, old people, two babies, a few sheep, and a stray parrot. But everyone was having a really fucking hard time paying attention because they knew that after the meeting, it would be chicken parm again for chow. Morale was critically low.

Chicken-parm-phobia was now the central problem of the war. It plagued the minds of all the soldiers, from the lowest-ranked private to the most combat-hardened sergeant, on every patrol, raid, and clearing operation. How was a group of trained killers supposed to close in and destroy the enemy with chronic heartburn?

On that seventh day, a clever soldier from the mortar team had an epiphany. The clever soldier was inspired by an issue of Hungry Girl magazine. It was a rare piece of reading material amongst the dozens of Maxim and Guns and Ammo magazines that littered the outpost like a frat house. The magazine was marketed towards young suburban housewives, with articles like NEW YEAR, YOU YEAR, and FAST & EASY ONE-PAN DINNERS. No one knew where this mysterious magazine had come from and no one claimed ownership for fear of being called a pussy who liked foodie chick magazines. But now this foodie chick magazine was worth more than all the scantily clad bosoms in all the Maxims in the world. The Hungry Girl magazine had become well-worn, dirty with finger sweat and little flecks of dirt. It was passed around secretly; infantrymen grabbing the magazine with a sleight of hand, perhaps a stretch or a yawn to fool any witnesses, before quickly swooping it up to tuck underneath their shirts. Stealthily, they headed to the porta johns where they sat on the plastic toilet seats, baking in the fumes of sun-soaked shit and piss while they salivated at pictures of Tuscan braised short ribs and Peruvian halibut ceviche, moaning in carnal lust despite their forlorn taste buds, now permanently flecked with crumbs of parmesan, granulated garlic, and dried Italian parsley.

Flipping to page six, the clever soldier from the mortar team read an interview on REINVENTING NEW AMERICAN CUISINE by some hotshot hipster chef in Brooklyn and was struck by an epiphany. This clever soldier realized that by peeling off the crust on a piece of chicken parm, one was left with a plain piece of chicken breast underneath. Then all one needed to do was cover the chicken in pepper and tabasco sauce and BAM! Chicken parm reinvented. The clever soldier ran around and told everyone about his new recipe. The entire outpost was jittery with excitement at this discovery. The infantry commander even suggested awarding an Army Commendation Medal to the clever soldier for his heroic solution. But when everyone sat down for dinner that night and tried out the clever soldier's epiphany, they realized a bland piece of white meat doused with pepper and Tabasco sauce was actually pretty disgusting. The clever soldier was punished with latrine detail for the rest of the week.

On the tenth day, an acne encrusted teenage private was eating his chicken parm when he suddenly stood and flipped his tray, spilling chicken, sauce, and cheese all over the table and right in the face of another teenage private sitting across from him. Being covered with chicken and sauce pushed this other teenage private over the edge as well. Only instead of flipping his tray, the tomato sauce-covered private tried to jump over the table and choke the chicken flipper. But the chicken flipper was too fast and sprinted off laughing to the porta-johns located next to the parked Humvees, running in circles around the latrines until he vomited.

The next day, the chicken flipper was sent back to the FOB. From there, he was flown to a military hospital in Germany where he was classified as a psychological casualty. Everyone felt bad for him. But in the back of their minds was a jealous whisper reminding them that the chicken flipper had escaped the horror of everlasting chicken parm.



On the eleventh day, someone found a box of MREs buried in the back of an MRAP. Everyone was thrilled, but the joy was short-lived when they realized that the entire box was filled with tortellini and ravioli MREs, meals that contained the same damn ingredients that were in chicken parm. Some of the more religious soldiers started to wonder if God hated them.

But that same day, Nas arrived at the outpost with several bags of Iraqi food he bought in the city using his own personal American taxpayer-funded salary. Freshly ground, free-range lamb kebabs grilled with spices over charcoal before being dusted with tart purple sumac spice. Fresh-baked samoon, oval-shaped and firm like Italian ciabatta. Everyone feasted except Nas, who helped himself to another plate of chicken parm.

“I don’t eat grilled meat anymore,” Nas replied when Cook Number One offered him a piece of kebab.

“Why not?” Cook Number Two asked as a crumble of ground lamb dribbled out of his mouth and fell to the ground. He bent over and picked up the meat with his greasy fingers, mumbling about the five-second rule before placing it back in his mouth.

“They smell like burnt bodies,” Nas said as he wiped a bit of tomato sauce off his chin.

On the fifteenth day, a report came in over the radio. The infantry commander pumped his fist in the air when he heard the report and quickly gathered all the infantrymen in a formation.

“Great news, men. The food resupply is coming in: We got meatloaf!”

Everyone cheered. Men hugged one another. Some cried. One soldier fell to his knees and praised Jesus. “Thank fucking god. I’ve never been so happy for ground beef mixed with bread crumbs and eggs in my life,” said Cook Number Two to Cook Number One.

When the resupply convoy arrived later that day, the entire outpost was out in formation, waiting at parade rest. They swarmed aboard the 5-ton and removed box after box of BEEF, GROUND, BULK, RAW, 90% LEAN; EGGS, WHOLE, FROZEN; MILK, NONFAT, DRY; GARLIC POWDER; PEPPERS, GREEN, FRESH, CHOPPED and BREADCRUMBS. A chant began: “MEATLOAF! MEATLOAF!”

Nas and the other terps joined in, despite being clueless to the identity of meatloaf. They knew what meat was and they knew what a loaf was. But meatloaf? They were thunderstruck. Nas concluded it was probably some sort of American kebab. But they got paid by the Americans so they joined in the chant. Fifty Americans and three confused Iraqis chanted meatloaf for two solid minutes until the infantry commander hushed the crowd.

“Settle down gentlemen. Trust me, I’m just as excited as anyone here. But we do have some issues to discuss later. There’s been an increase of suicide bombers and IEDs in our AO.”

Silence. A private raised his hand and the infantry commander pointed to the teenage soldier, who coughed nervously before speaking.

“Sir, how long does it take to switch the cooking equipment from chicken parm to meatloaf? Because if it’s a long time, we should help the cooks.”

“I agree,” said another private. “Is meatloaf baked? Is it grilled? Fried? None of us know, sir.”

“Look people,” the infantry commander said as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Ask the cooks. I’m just the commander, I can’t answer these questions.”



Yet, the weight of these questions lingered, altering the formation’s previous joy into a deep anxiety.

The infantry commander observed the situation stoically. He recalled his officer training,

specifically to one night in Ranger School where he sprinkled Tabasco sauce on a napkin before sucking it like a malnourished lunatic. An army marches on its stomach. It was a Napoleon quote he learned in ROTC.

“Alright, let’s put off the IEDs for now,” said the infantry commander. “It’s Iraq...IEDs will always be here. But our dinner comes first. To the chow tent!”

At once, the anxiety evaporated and everyone now marched happily to the chow tent, except Nas, who stopped to read the last box of meatloaf ingredients.

“Meatloaf is just a hamburger without bread?” said Nas to himself. He already missed the chicken parm.

## Discussion Questions

- 1. Recall the order of characters introduced by the author; which characters came first, second, third, and so on? What character’s perspective does the story end on? Describe the effect this has on the reader.**
- 2. Compare the reaction to the repetition of the meals of the soldiers and Nas. Why did the author show they are different?**
- 3. Predict how both the soldiers and Nas will react to the repetition of having meatloaf over and over. What is the effect of the idea that even if something changes, it is still the same?**

