

## THE CHAMP

Angelo D. was training hard. This challenger, Kid Gullet, would be no push-over. In fact, the Kid hit him right where he lived: he was worried. He'd been champ for thirty-seven years and all that time his records had stood like Mount Rushmore—and now this Kid was eating them up. Fretful, he pushed his plate away.

"But Angelo, you ain't done already?" His trainer, Spider Decoud, was all over him. "That's what—a piddling hundred and some-odd flapjacks and seven quarts a milk?"

"He's on to me, Spider. He found out about the ulcer and now he's going to hit me with enchiladas and shrimp in cocktail sauce."

"Don't fret it, Killer. We'll get him with the starches and heavy syrups. He's just a kid, twenty-two. What does he know about eating? Look, get up and walk it off and we'll do a kidney and kipper course, okay? And then maybe four or five dozen poached eggs. C'mon, Champ, lift that fork. You want to hold on to the title or not?"

First it was pickled eggs. Eighty-three pickled eggs in an hour and a half. The record had stood since 1941. They said it was like DiMaggio's consecutive-game hitting streak: unapproachable. A world apart. But then, just three months ago, Angelo had picked up the morning paper and found himself unforked: a man who went by the name of Kid Gullet had put down 108 of them. In the following weeks Angelo had seen his records toppled like a string of dominoes: gherkins, pullets, persimmons, oysters, pretzels, peanuts, scalloped potatoes, feta cheese, smelts, Girl Scout cookies. At the Rendezvous Room in Honolulu the

a Cubs-Phillies game at Wrigley field he put away 43 hot dogs—with buns—and 112 Cokes. In Orkney it was legs of lamb; in Frankfurt, Emmentaler and schnitzel; in Kiev, pirogen. He was irrepresible. In Stelton, New Jersey, he finished off 6 gallons of borscht and 93 four-ounce jars of gefilte fish while sitting atop a flagpole. The press ate it up.

Toward the end of the New Jersey session a reporter from ABC Sports swung a boom mike up to where the Kid sat on his eminence, chewing the last of the gefilte fish. "What are your plans for the future, Kid?" shouted the newsmen.

"I'm after the Big One," the Kid replied. "Angelo D.?"

The camera zoomed in, the Kid grinned.

*"Capocollo, chili and curry,  
Big Man, you better start to worry."*

Angelo was rattled. He gave up the morning paper and banned the use of the Kid's name around the Training Table. Kid Gullet: every time he heard those three syllables his stomach clenched. Now he lay on the bed, the powerful digestive machinery tearing away at breakfast, a bag of peanuts in his hand, his mind sifting through the tough bouts and spectacular triumphs of the past. There was Beau Riviere from Baton Rouge, who nearly choked him on deep-fried mud pup-pies, and Pinky Luzinski from Pittsburgh, who could gulp down 300 raw eggs and then crunch up the shells as if they were potato chips. Or the Japanese sumo wrestler who swallowed marbles by the fistful and threw on sashimi in a fiery mustard sauce. He'd beaten them all, because he had grit and determination and talent—and he would beat this kid too. Angelo sat up and roared: "I'm still the champ!"

The door cracked open. It was Decoud. "That's the spirit, Killer. Remember D. D. Peloris, Max Manger, Bozo Miller, Spoonbill Rizzo? Bums. All of them. You beat 'em, Champ."

"Yeah!" Angelo bellowed. "And I'm going to flatten this Gullet too."

"That's the ticket: leave him gasping for Bromo."

"They'll be pumping his stomach when I'm through with him."

Out in L.A. the Kid was taking on Turk Harris, number one contender for the heavyweight crown. The Kid's style was Tabasco and Worcestershire; Harris was a mashed-potato and creamed-corn man—a trencherman of the old school. Like Angelo D.

Harris opened with a one-two combination of rice and kidney beans; the Kid countered with cocktail onions and capers. Then Harris hit him with baklava—400 two-inch squares of it. The Kid gobbled them like hors d'oeuvres, came

dle of the fourth round. After the bout he stood in a circle of jabbing microphones, flashing lights. "I got one thing to say," he shouted. "And if you're out there, Big Man, you better take heed:

*I'm going to float like a parfait,*

*Sting like a tamale.*

*Big Man, you'll hit the floor,*

*In four."*

At the preliminary weigh-in for the title bout the Kid showed up on roller skates in a silver lamé jumpsuit. He looked like something off the launching pad at Cape Canaveral. Angelo, in his coal-bucket trousers and suspenders, could have been mistaken for an aging barber or a bocce player strayed in from the park.

The Kid had a gallon jar of hot cherry peppers under his arm. He wheeled up to the Champ, bolted six or seven in quick succession, and then held one out to him by the stem. "Care for an appetizer, Pops?" Angelo declined, his face dour and white, the big fleshy nostrils heaving like a stallion's. Then the photographers posed the two, belly to belly. In the photograph, which appeared on the front page of the paper the following morning, Angelo D. looked like an advertisement for heartburn.

There was an SRO crowd at the Garden for the title bout. Scalpers were getting two hundred and up for tickets. ABC Sports was there, Colonel Sanders was there, Arthur Treacher, Julia Child, James Beard, Ronald McDonald, Mamma Leone. It was the Trenching Event of the Century.

Spider Decoud and the Kid's manager had inspected the ring and found the arrangements to their satisfaction—each man had a table, stool, stack of plates and cutlery. Linen napkins, a pitcher of water. It would be a fourteen-round affair, each round going ten minutes with a sixty-second bell break. The contestants would name their dishes for alternate rounds, the Kid, as challenger, leading off.

A hush fell over the crowd. And then the chant, rolling from back to front like breakers washing the beach: GULLET, GULLET, GULLET! There he was, the Kid, sweeping down the aisle like a born champion in his cinnamon-red robe with the silver letters across the abdomen. He stepped into the ring, clasped his hands, and shook them over his head. The crowd roared like rock faces slipping deep beneath the earth. Then he did a couple of deep knee bends and sat down on his stool. At that moment Angelo shuffled out from the opposite end of the arena, stern, grim, raging, the tight curls at the back of his neck standing out like the tail feathers of an albatross, his barren dome ghostly under the klieg lights, the

ball turkeys. The crowd went mad. They shrieked, hooted and whistled, women kissed the hem of his gown, men reached out to pat his bulge. ANGELO! He stepped into the ring and took his seat as the big black mike descended from the ceiling.

The announcer, in double lapels and bow tie, shouted over the roar, "Ladies and Gentlemen—" while Angelo glared at the Kid, blood in his eye. He was choked with a primordial competitive fury, mad as a kamikaze, deranged with hunger. Two days earlier Decoud had lured him into a deserted meat locker and bolted the door—and then for the entire forty-eight hours had projected pornographic food films on the wall. Fleshy wet lips closing on éclairs, zoom shots of masticating teeth, gulping throats, probing tongues, children innocently sucking at Tootsie Roll pops—it was obscene, titillating, maddening. And through it all a panting soundtrack composed of grunts and sighs and the smack of lips. Angelo D. climbed into the ring a desperate man. But even money nonetheless. The Kid gloated in his corner.

"At this table, in the crimson trunks," bellowed the announcer, "standing six foot two inches tall and weighing in at three hundred and seventy-seven pounds . . . is the challenger, Kid Gullet!" A cheer went up, deafening. The announcer pointed to Angelo. "And at this table, in the pearly trunks and standing five foot seven and a half inches tall and weighing in at three hundred and twenty-three pounds," he bawled, his voice rumbling like a cordon of cement trucks, "is the Heavyweight Champion of the World . . . Angelo D.!" Another cheer, perhaps even louder. Then the referee took over. He had the contestants step to the center of the ring, the exposed flesh of their chests and bellies like a pair of avalanches, while he asked if each was acquainted with the rules. The Kid grinned like a shark. "All right then," the ref said, "touch midribs and come out eating."

The bell rang for Round One. The Kid opened with Szechwan hot and sour soup, three gallons. He lifted the tureen to his lips and slapped it down empty. The Champ followed suit, his face aflame, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He paused three times, and when finally he set the tureen down he snatched up the water pitcher and drained it at a gulp while the crowd booed and Decoud yelled from the corner: "Lay off the water or you'll bloat up like a blowfish!"

Angelo retaliated with clams on the half shell in Round Two: 512 in ten minutes. But the Kid kept pace with him—and as if that weren't enough, he sprinkled his own portion with cayenne pepper and Tabasco. The crowd loved it. They gagged on their hot dogs, pelted the contestants with plastic cups and peanut shells, gnawed at the backs of their seats. Angelo looked up at the Kid's powerful jaws, the lips stained with Tabasco, and began to feel queasy.

The Kid staggered him with lamb curry in the next round. The crowd was on

counting down. Decoud twisting the towel in his fists—when suddenly the bell sounded and the Champ collapsed on the table. Decoud leaped into the ring, chafed Angelo's abdomen, sponged his face. "Hang in there, Champ," he said, "and come back hard with the carbohydrates."

Angelo struck back with potato gnocchi in Round Four; the Kid countered with Kentucky burgoo. They traded blows through the next several rounds, the Champ scoring with Nesselrode pie, fettuccine Alfredo and poi, the Kid lashing back with jambalaya, shrimp creole and herring in horseradish sauce.

After the bell ending Round Eleven, the bout had to be held up momentarily because of a disturbance in the audience. Two men, thin as tapers and with beards like Spanish moss, had leaped into the ring waving posters that read REMEMBER BIAFRA. The Kid started up from his table and pinned one of them to the mat, while security guards nabbed the other. The Champ sat immobile on his stool, eyes tearing from the horseradish sauce, his fist clenched round the handle of the water pitcher. When the ring was cleared the bell rang for Round Twelve.

It was the Champ's round all the way: sweet potato pie with butterscotch syrup and pralines. For the first time the Kid let up—toward the end of the round he dropped his fork and took a mandatory eight count. But he came back strong in the thirteenth with a savage combination of Texas wieners and sauce diable. The Champ staggered, went down once, twice, flung himself at the water pitcher while the Kid gorged like a machine, wiener after wiener, blithely lapping the hot sauce from his fingers and knuckles with an epicurean relish. Then Angelo's head fell to the table, his huge whiskered jowl mired in a pool of béchamel and butter. The fans sprang to their feet, fainting left and right, snapping their jaws and yabbering for the kill. The Champ's eyes fluttered open, the ref counted over him.

It was then that it happened. His vision blurring, Angelo gazed out into the crowd and focused suddenly on the stooped and wizened figure of an old woman in a black bonnet. Decoud stood at her elbow. Angelo lifted his head. "Ma?" he said. "Eat, Angelo, eat!" she called, her voice a whisper in the apocalyptic thunder of the crowd. "Clean your plate!"

"Nine!" howled the referee, and suddenly the Champ came to life, lashing into the sauce diable like a crocodile. He bolted wieners, sucked at his fingers, licked the plate. Some say his hands moved so fast that they defied the eye, a mere blur, slapstick in double time. Then the bell rang for the final round and Angelo announced his dish: "Gruel!" he roared. The Kid protested. "What kind of dish is that?" he whined. "Gruel? Whoever heard of gruel in a championship bout?" But gruel it was. The Champ lifted the bowl to his lips, pasty ropes of congealed porridge trailing down his chest; the crowd cheered, the Kid toyed with his spoon—and then it was over.

The referee stepped in, helped Angelo from the stool and held his flaccid arm

welter of button heads like B in B mushrooms—or Swedish meatballs in a rich golden sauce. Then he gagged. "The winner," the ref was shouting, "and still champion, Angelo D.!"

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