

Well Fed Child

by Viviana Tul

Autumn slowly sneaks away and suddenly it's winter. I'm living in California, but grew up in New England, so it never really feels like winter. Rainy, yes but never all that snow and ice and cold. This winter isn't rainy, just chilly with short bright sunny days. And suddenly it's Christmas, my first Christmas in my first house in California, a fixer-upper that I was able to buy, but not fix up. No more sharing apartments, renting my own, living in condos with narrow, dark hallways and only concrete patios. My parents have died so I'm on my own in my very own house, with a front yard, two small side yards and a backyard where there's a garden and, of course in California, a winter garden.

I am originally from Italy coming to America with my father and my mother when I was six, so I'm Italian, I'm Catholic. I don't go to church very often but will still have fish on Christmas Eve. It's tradition. Christmas Day I will celebrate with friends but the evening before it's only me and I will prepare *Sarde in Saor*, a traditional Venetian seafood recipe, "sarde" is sardines and "saor" means "flavor" in the Venetian dialect. Sardines caught in the Adriatic, fried and then enveloped in a vinegary mush of sauteed onions. I'm not Venetian but from the nearby city of Trieste. My

sardines are not from the Adriatic but caught off the coast of Monterey Bay in CA and I'll get them at the local seafood market.

At home I fry my freshly-gutted and scaled, intact with their heads and tails, two-pounds of sardines in hot oil, then put them aside and fry lots and lots of thinly sliced onions in the oil, cook them down, and then add a concoction of vinegar and water, cooking the onions down even more. In a tall bowl I'll make a layer cake of marinated onions and fried sardines, first onions, then sardines, then more onions, layer on layer until there's none left. I'll also make a wonderful salad with radicchio I am growing in the winter garden, a hearty green radicchio that is native to my part of Italy.

On Christmas Eve morning it's cool, much cooler than usual. In my not fixed-up new home, there is no central heat, just a gigantic brick fireplace that takes up one wall of the living room and an old electric baseboard heater under the window in the bedroom. So that chilly morning, I'm trying to decide how to get out of bed, turn on the baseboard heater, then get back in the bed without getting too cold. A quick jump in and out and the heat is on. And, after warming up and a very quick breakfast of coffee latte and a few Italian Stella D'oro biscuits, I'm out of my pajamas, in sweats, a knit cap, and warm down parka, and ready to go outside and harvest lettuce.

Suddenly in shock, I look in despair at lettuce that is no longer green. The night was definitely cold and the lettuce is coated with a silvery frost. Oh, no, in a panic I race back into the house, fill a pot with hot water, run back to the garden, and throw the water on the lettuce almost immediately realizing that it was absolutely the wrong thing to do. The lettuce leaves fall and lie flat and wilted on the ground. My Christmas Eve dinner is ruined! I should've done nothing. The day would have warmed up, the sun would have melted the frost, everything would've been ok if I had done nothing.

Dragging myself back into the house, into a cold living room I sit in front of a cold fireplace in a very dark state of mind and begin to cry, to sob uncontrollably for what seems forever.

“Viviana, what is wrong with you?” I ask myself, “it’s just lettuce!” After my father’s death the therapist had told me it was OK to talk to myself, just as long as I didn’t answer. “You can make a salad with some other lettuce.”

But then I start to answer myself and that’s not good.

“It’s not just lettuce!” I reply. It’s the memory of Christmas Eve dinners with mama and papa, the food they lovingly prepared, and the absolute joy of family and holidays.

We had arrived on a cold January day in the dead of winter from a vibrant Italian city to a small New England town, but they made it work, it was hard but my mother and father had made it work. They did it for me. And it worked splendidly for me. All I wanted was part of that childhood wonder on this Christmas Eve.

So, it wasn't just fish and lettuce. It was the magic that happens when people dream and then make those dreams come true. And yes, it is about food, about *Sarde in Saor* and *Radicchio Zuccherino di Trieste*, about being nourished and loved, about being a well-fed child.