

# Archimede Fusillo

## LAST RITES

The only reason I stayed the night was because she asked me.

“Stai, Tanto e l’ultima sera”.

And there was ample room. Three bedrooms. Well two actually, the third had become a living-room. Chosen she so often told me because it was the only room in which there was still a fireplace.

“Gli altri sono tutti chiusi. Tuo padre e i tuoi zii.” She would shake her head and I came with time to watch for the familiar thin grin, a kind of hair-line mark pulled across her face.

The grin was subtle and cold. It drew in upon itself suddenly, taking the warmth from her eyes and the softness from her cheeks.

I saw it then on that last night. I can never be sure how long it had been there. As a child I never bothered to watch for it. Or if I did it had left no impression on me.

Just the image of my grandmother smiling gently, calmly, inwardly. And telling me how my father, her son, had sealed up all the chimneys save one because in the early sixties chimneys and open fireplaces were out.

So I stayed behind when the others left, taking boxes and rediscovered knick-knacks foraged from a dozen chests with them. Boxes filled to the brim with fragments of childhood. My childhood.

As my father walked by with the last of them I reached out and took the coffee-grinder that lay on the very top of the pile from it. He hardly noticed and paused only to shift the weight against his body, pushing out through the fly-wire door and into the drizzle.

It was July and cold, and already the moon was a frozen shattered bulb high above in a clear sky.

“E’ contento”, my grandmother said.

I shrugged.

“Si e contento.”

She watched her sons come and go with a detachment that startled me only later, much later. Once this night was over and done with.

"I dunno if he's happy nonna," I replied. "He really likes this place."

But she only grinned and reaching out with one callused and coarse hand, brushed my fingers lightly where they closed around the grinder.

"I remember when you used to make coffee with this," I said awkwardly. Silence always made me feel that way.

"Tu volevi sempre autare. Facevi un mess everywhir.."

"Yeah. It was fun for me to help I guess. I was little. Un bambino. I never meant to make a mess I suppose."

When my grandmother laughed her teeth rattled in her mouth. Sometimes, if she got too boisterous her teeth jumped out at you like some wind-up trick-shop gimmick and her mouth would spray spittle and saliva all over you.

Then she would swallow her laughter in one gulp. Her face would collapse and her hand would close over the offending dentures in a quiet pact of secrecy from which it seemed she wanted everyone to be omitted. Especially us grandchildren.

But not tonight. Tonight her teeth stayed firmly in her mouth, though every so often I'd hear her sucking on them, or catch the click-click as she played with them in her mouth with her tongue as though they were lollies.

Once, years before, when my eldest uncle — her son, got married, my grandmother had taken me aside at the reception and holding on to my hand had assured me that she was absolutely certain her new daughter-in-law who was not yet thirty then, wore a mouthful of dentures.

"How d'you know?" I asked.

"Das why she so ugly," she laughed back at me. "Look her face. Like old sheep."

And out popped her teeth onto the table and into the grated-cheese bowl, which she later passed to her new daughter-in-law with a calm that I found disquieting.

It was this daughter-in-law who now wrapped up coffee cups and seldom-used brandy glasses in yellowed newspaper and stacked them neatly in a cardboard box at her feet by the buffet in the living-room. The living-room where a fire crackled big and loud while tiny sparks flew out from it in spasms of bright red whirls.

The grinder in my hand was heavy, solid, cold against my skin. And when I opened the deep tray at its base it spat fine mists of ground coffee into the air and over the table.

I remembered watching my grandmother sit by the window facing the pomegranate bush in the mornings when my mother had dropped me off there on her way to work, coffee-grinder grasped between stockinged knees, her hands working a steady rhythm. And every now and then she would pause to empty the tray of ground beans into a tin and ask me if I wanted to load the chamber with fresh beans.

And the aroma of dark, rich coffee beans filling the air was so natural to me that for a long time after she stopped grinding her own beans, just the sight of my grandmother making coffee was enough to stir the memory of it from some damp recess in my mind.

We watched them pack away the house piece by piece. Pictures disappeared from walls leaving bright negatives in their wake that showed up the dirty wear of the paint, ornaments were removed from atop the television set, the mantle, the wood-grain coffee-table, rugs were lifted in screens of light dust from the floors, and calendars were picked from behind doors.

Dated calendars stuck one behind the other in a sequence of years. Smiling children wearing straw cowboy hats, sedate jersey cows in unnaturally lush valleys, antique cars under glaring photographic studio lights, bright-eyed dogs and wide-eyed kittens. All of them in a myriad poses and frozen images with "Compliments of" this or that butcher, newsagent, grocery store, or Real Estate agency lettered in black below them.

All of them rolled up and heaped into a sturdy green garbage bag my mother dragged behind her for that purpose. Disposal.

It has to be clean, the agent had said, before he could bring anyone through. And he added on the side: And if the place is empty it might be more impressive to a young couple, seeing as how the trendies really love these inner city dwellings.

Renovations you understand. The clutter of furniture and any unnecessary bits and pieces might ... He had shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish you could come stay with us," I found myself saying even before I realized what was going through my mind. And suddenly the aroma of coffee, freshly ground and sitting in a neat pile in an open tin filled the room and space around me.

There was a moment then when it seemed that my grandmother would smile knowingly and accept my proposal. But it was only for the slightest of moments and then she shook her head from side to side slowly and getting up from her chair crossed to where my mother's carefully packed dinner basket rested atop the plates of the gas-burner stove.

This had been her kitchen for thirty years. Her stooped back seemed to chastise me as she bent over to finger the ricotta pastries my mother had bought from the local deli. Pastries my grandmother loathed because they were mere imitations of what she herself could still produce at seventy-five.

In the slow but deliberate puncturing of her fingers into the crusty, flaky pastries there was a terrible malice. It settled on her like dew on tender grass, enveloping, embracing, threatening.

"Why d'you let them put you out?" I asked, my eyes settled on the slight arch of frizzled and mottling skin that was the gap between her chin and her ears. And they were still there. As constant as always. A string of finely delicate pearls beaded around a simple but elegant baroque brooch of silver. The pearls her husband, my grandfather had given her on their wedding day some fifty-seven years ago. His last gift.

Pearls given to a young bride in a tiny country village where beauty took second place behind manual dexterity and a commitment to work.

She played with them now, running them between the fingers of one hand.

"Non dovero lasciare la mia patria," she said stiffly. "L'Australia non era per me. Ho soltanto lavorata come una cana e basta. Niente.." She clicked her teeth and looked at me, as though drawing me into her displeasure at ever having left her village once her husband had died.

And though I knew the story well, I didn't let myself be drawn, but settled instead for her offer to walk in the garden.

A small garden, it was carefully tended and maintained. My grandmother never allowed weeds to grow beyond their first sproutings, always hoed and seeded in season, and grew the best blood-red figs I have ever eaten. Large pear-shaped figs which burdened the branches to such a degree that kids from nearby houses could pick the fruit at their leisure from the lane without need of a boost up.

We stood in the fig-tree's shade a moment and let my uncles pass with armfuls of jars and mismatched bits of crockery which my grandmother, their mother, had collected over the years. Jars put aside for

pickling cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, and the dark brown blood pudding I would sometimes take sandwiched for lunch to school as a young boy.

I watched my grandmother closely then, saw the narrow grin and caught the hasty breath, but heard not a word of her mumbling.

The fig tree was bare now, and its twisted branches scratched the tin roof of my grandmother's garage with slow measured strokes. Lonesome sounds that rained on me like thorns, burrowing into me with their dead ringing.

One of the garden's best features that tree, the agent had smiled. Not too many of them left I'm afraid.

Worth at least another hundred, my father had smiled back. We'll see, we'll see.

And my uncles smiling in unison. Partners dividing a legacy.

A cold rock sat deep in my stomach even as I watched my father drag the once proud fox rug behind him into the yard and roll it up into a tight ball. The fox rug I remembered staring at with fear as I lay pretending to sleep in my grandmother's bed in the long grey Winter afternoons of pre-school childhood. The frayed brown-grey rug my grandmother made up stories about as she tucked me in.

See the fox's eyes. They'll watch you sleep. See the fox's ears, they'll hear you weep. See the fox's teeth, they'll bite you deep, unless you shut your eyes and go quietly to sleep.

I wondered if she remembered as I did.

But she merely sat on her usual chair under the wisteria bush and fingered her pearls, watching her house being picked clean.

So clean we'll sell it to the very first people the agent brings, I'll bet, my mother had said.

And I sat in the fork of the fig-tree, refusing to help, watching her watch, and watching too the detached preoccupation of the new owners, the raiders, the poachers.

Click-click, my grandmother's teeth sang.

Click-click.

Click.

By sunset it was done. My grandmother's — No, the house that had once been my grandmother's but which she had turned over with an equal share to each son — This house was empty, hollow, echoing with the sound of men and women discussing profits, dividing chores, and deciding the best way to get the few belongings my grandmother wanted to keep to the home ...

Twenty kilometres away.  
But full of people your age.  
With your very own room.  
No cleaning.  
No shopping.  
No plates to wash.

When they were gone, I climbed out of the tree and followed my grandmother inside.

On the sink, along with her medication, was the coffee-grinder. I took it into the living-room with me and fell asleep on the mattress from my youngest uncle's room, swallowing tears.

In her room I heard my grandmother stirring for a few minutes. Then silence, closing in around us swiftly.

There was no mistaking the sound that woke me.

Twack! Twack!.

In the midnight darkness, with its close solitude, the sounds were accentuated, snapping in the silence in unbalanced rhythms: Twack, Twack ... twack ... Twack, twack, Twack.

By the time I got to her my grandmother had chopped her way through several thick branches, snapped the offending limbs from atop the garage and put a wedge deep into the throat of the fig's trunk where it sprouted new growth like fleshy arteries from a severed head.

In the moonlight the sap crawled like molasses along an upturned tablespoon and my grandmother's shadow was silver-black in its sharpness.

Twack!

Twack!

Click Click.

She stopped immediately she saw me, and smiled. Not a grin but a smile, full and abandoned. She got down from the overturned packing crate on which she had been standing and held the axe out in my direction.

Only then when I moved toward her did I realize I still held the coffee-grinder. For a moment I hesitated, watching my grandmother hold me with her eyes, holding me and challenging me to take up the axe. In my hands the grinder suddenly loomed large and heavy, a weight.

"Cento dollari," my grandmother said. Click. Click. "Cento dollari di piu perche ce un albero ..." She laughed loudly.

There was only an instant between her laughter and her tears. An instant that shattered my calm completely.

"It's your house", I whispered. "Your home."

My grandmother held me, the coffee-grinder crushed between us, pressing into our bellies, and I felt again the warm aroma of her. It flooded me with its childhood recollections. So much so that I didn't feel her slip the moist handle of the axe into my hand, turn me toward the tree and cradle the grinder from me.

"This is my tree", she whispered. "Mio".

One of the garden's best features that tree. Not too many of them left I'm afraid.

Worth at least another hundred.

Another hundred.

Hundred.

A lot of potential for a young couple.

She'll enjoy the home.

People her own age.

No cleaning.

Twack.

No shopping.

Twack!

No plates to wash.

Twack! Twack! Twack!

From her chair under the wisteria my grandmother watched me, coffee-grinder lost in the folds of her lap, her pearls like dots of light about her throat, laughing.

Tomorrow she would be gone.

This was her tree we were removing.

Tomorrow it too would be gone.

Click.

Click. Click.

One hundred less.

I laughed with her. Loudly.

Twack! Twack!