White Towels and Socks

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Cette biofiction capture la complexité des relations mère-fille à travers les moments fugaces entre l'auteure et sa mère, moments qui révèlent quelques unes des tensions entre les générations, entre une fille italo-canadienne de la deuxième génération et sa mère émigrante italienne.

I slip out of class a few minutes early to make the nine thirty-five streetcar. I can't miss it. I fly down the stairs and out the door of the college building. The rumbling clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk of the streetcar grows louder, then more distant, signaling that I am late, again, and dinner will be eaten late, again.

"Damn it," I mumble while jerking the door open, reentering the foyer while I wait for the next streetcar. "Why can't I be on time?"

Alone in the foyer, I speak to no one. The halls are empty. People on campus this late don't hang around; they are down the road at the streetcar stop, teetering from side to side, their eyelids heavy and half-closed.

Although there is no one in sight, the words that fall from my lips are less a question than a response to the voice rustling in my ears, like leaves scraping against the sidewalk as a gust of wind sends them into a whirl, round and round, spinning nowhere. "*Chi si prepara in tempo, mangia in ora*," my mother used to say to me as a child. This one sentence sums up the philosophy at the core of my mother; a proverb that relates food to life, to how I, her daughter, ought to be in the world.

In the most immediate sense, this proverb dictates: to eat at the proper hour depends upon preparation. A household where cooking structures each day, where what can and cannot be done, where what is or is not possible, depends upon eating at precise hours in the day. And to fall out of schedule—that is, to eat late—flips all other chores and responsibilities *sotto e sopra*, upside down.

Chores like grocery shopping, organizing the cupboards, wiping down the fridge before refilling it with fresh produce, vacuuming the house, dusting the house, washing the clothes, ironing the clothes, putting away the clothes: all of this rests on when the family begins and finishes each meal. Breakfast at seven a.m. Lunch at twelve p.m. Dinner at five thirty p.m. Everything else waiting to be done can get done, but after. To prepare in time means the family will eat on time. Start things late and be prepared to finish late. A simple rule on the surface. Sounds easy. Except, all things depend on the rigid tick of a clock that not only arranges the consumption of three meals a day but also structures each day in the lives of the women in my family.

When I arrive at my apartment it is close to midnight. I've lost my appetite. I will skip another meal, sleep right through breakfast, be awakened around noon by a grumbling stomach.

Underneath the preparation of three meals a day lies the responsibilities and duties of a wife, and in my context, a good Italian wife. In our house, the division of labour between my mother and father keeps her inside and tied to the clock, while my father roams the streets, lies on the couch, passes the time away. I grew up in a house where my mother rarely rested, and my father, before and after his shift-work at the grocery store, rested as much as he could. This imbalance festered within me a deep distaste for cooking—especially for others—and pushed me into the opposite direction of living a life structured by the clock, by routine, by someone else's schedule.

For a long time I felt condemned and controlled by the tick of the clock and I dreamed of running away from anything, and everything that pertained to the kitchen—to any domestic duties for that matter—as quickly as I

could. I did not want to be like my mother—the dutiful Italian wife—who prepared meals for a man ungrateful and unappreciative of the weight she carried working full-time at a textile factory that is too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, only to come home and be expected to whip up something to his satisfaction each and every night, each and every weekend. I never saw cooking as a choice for my mother, only as a duty she was obliged to fulfill, especially if she wanted to keep the peace. She rarely complained, maybe mumbled a few times, but she never ran away from her chores and responsibilities.

I, on the other hand, ran as fast and as far away as I could from who she was; from how I grew up seeing her. I chose differently.

As a graduate student there can be little routine. Each day can be different, a surprise. This "lack of structure" allows me the freedom to wake up and go to bed when I desire. Living on my own, I can cook and clean for myself when I want, how I want, and if I don't want to do anything, then I don't. My intimate relationships are often times long distance and this allows me to keep my space and keep up my discordant rhythm. Aside from vacations or long visits with a partner, I am on my own; I do my own thing. I have become the total opposite of my mother.

The night before my mother's arrival I tidy up my apartment. I re-organize scattered books and papers into piles on my work desk, change my sheets and stuff all my dirty clothes into a laundry bag. Turning to the bathroom, I scrub the toilet, tub, and sink. Every thing chrome sparkles. Now, all I need are clean towels for the rack. I know Ma likes it when fresh, clean towels are laid out on the rack, so I do that. I pull out two white towels from the closet and hang them next to the sink. Well, they aren't entirely white. Some stains just don't disappear no matter how many times I put them through the wash. "She won't notice," I say aloud, trying to convince myself. "Besides, it's dim in here."

I survey the room one last time before I move on to the kitchen. Something doesn't feel right. I fold and refold the towels, making sure they fall from the rack in unison. Nope, that's not it. I can't figure it out but it'll have to do. It's late and I'm too tired to do anything else.

I know the fridge is close to empty; it's not the first time. My writing keeps me seated firmly in my chair, which doesn't leave me much time to go grocery shopping. I decide to wake up early in the morning to shop for food. By the time I slip under the sheets, I think my place looks acceptable for her inspection.

When I awaken it's too late to run to the store; she will be here any minute. An early bird all her life, she wakes up before the sun rises. I, on the other hand, prefer the night when the streets are empty and the air is still.

The buzzer rings; she's at the front door of the building. After putting her things away I announce that we need food. We head off to the grocery store and return with bags full of goodies.

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While preparing lunch, aside from deciding on which fruits and vegetables we want with our meal, we don't talk about much else. Food consumes our conversations.

Before we sit down to eat, Ma washes her hands in the bathroom and dries them on the towel I laid out for her.

At the table we talk about the political turmoil in her condominium, her last conversation with Zia, my aunt, her difficulties with my father. Half way through the meal she says to me, "Can I ask you someting?"

"Sure," I reply.

"When I gave you dhose towels dhey wer' white. Now, dhey are black. Just like yur socks. Why you no use bleach?"

The air in the room suddenly turns heavy. I hold my breath, irritated not only by her comment but more so by the fact that, since she stepped through the door, she has not even asked me once how I am doing or asked me: Hey, what's going on? How's work? School? The regular stuff of conversations. I don't want to fight; we do enough of that over my father. I want to keep it light. I want this weekend to be a mini vacation for her. I want her to feel rested. So I don't make a fuss; if I did, it would be war all weekend. Instead, I promise to bring over all my whites and do them at her house. The weight in the room lightens; a fight has been averted. We eat the rest of our meal in silence.

When my mother critiqued how I cooked, cleaned the dishes, washed my clothes, I always felt it was an attack on my inability to do it the way *she* wanted me to. It was her way of disciplining me, of keeping me on my toes and, ultimately, of preparing me for my future role as a good Italian wife. To be otherwise made marriage unat-

tainable. "A woman who can't cook and can't keep house, can't keep a husband." I've heard this said so many times, in so many ways, by so many relatives, that I began to believe it. And by believing it I stopped wondering why I've been single for most of my adult life—I knew I would make a bad wife.

Sometimes I rebelled by doing what Ma disliked over and over again. I wanted to prick her back as hard as she had pricked me. Sometimes I yelled at her at the top of my lungs and accused her of being a perfectionist, bemoaning the fact that I could never do what she does, never be who she wants me to be. My resistance to her criticism, to her rigid rules, drove a wedge between us. But this wedge gave me the space to contest and re-shape who I might become, not who I was expected to be. This wedge gave me room to breathe, held her criticism at bay.

But when I view what my mother says to me in the kitchen only as criticism, then I cast her words in a negative light. And I perpetuate the image of the stern and demanding Italian mother who wants to control her daughter by moulding her into the spitting image of herself, setting the groundwork for the daughter's role as a wife. Clean white towels and socks, and a full belly, will keep the husband happy and keep his eyes from wandering. Marriage, in this light, becomes reduced to domestic tasks and how successfully a woman performs them (not the sole purview of Italian society, I might add). I am reminded of American television ads from the 1950s with the crisp and well-primped housewife, cheery in spirit, and constantly smiling while she cleans or cooks in the kitchen; and how, even today, sparkling clean countertops and sinks on television are surrounded by happy, healthy family members.

I want to push through this stereotype and explore how my mother's watchful eyes, her comments about my household performance, might be less about perfecting certain domestic tasks (although she does want me to do them well) and more about how I take care of myself as revealed through the organization (or dis-organization) of my days and nights.

The alarm buzzes at seven a.m. I smack the snooze button. Writing late into the night, I'm not ready to face the day. Seven minutes later the buzzer re-awakens me. Damn it! I crawl out of bed and into the shower. I adjust the water so it's on the cooler side and slowly open my eyes. Afterwards, with a towel wrapped around me, I scour my drawers for something to wear. Nothing. I turn to the mound of dirty clothes on the floor and rummage through the pile until I find a shirt and pair of shorts with the fewest stains and the least offensive odours. After a quick breakfast of toast, a piece of fruit, and six vitamin supplements swallowed down with a *latte macchiato*, I flip open my laptop and begin another day of writing.

Hours pass and I miss lunch. When I glance at the clock it's already one p.m. Okay, one more hour and that's it. Then I'll take a break. I promise.

Five hours fly by and another broken promise.

The phone rings; it's my mother. She calls me everyday at six o'clock sharp.

"Hi, Ma. What's up?"

"Nuting. Finish cleaning. Now, I watch TV." Like clockwork, my mother and father eat dinner at five thirty and, by six p.m., Ma has already cleared off the table, loaded the dishwasher, washed all the pots and pans. When the kitchen is in order she'll sit down on the couch and call me. After our talk she'll do a load of laundry (there are always clothes to wash) and maybe she'll scrub down the bathroom if no one knocks on her front door.

"You eat already?" she asks, knowing that I usually eat around eight o'clock.

"No, Ma. I'm still writing."

"You and yur writing. Always writing. *Quando hai tempo di mangiare*?" When do you have time to eat?

"Ma," I reply, trying to keep my cool, "I'll eat when I'm hungry." My stomach grumbles at the thought of food, but I tune it out. I have work to do.

"Yur fridge *è vuoto*, empty?"

"No, no it's not." I lie. To tell her otherwise would only lead to misery—my misery.

Ma pauses, then says, "Why you no come up?"

Ma lives north of Toronto in the suburb of Vaughan. It would take me two hours by bus to reach the major intersection closest to her apartment building. Then another fifteen minutes by foot.

"Ma, really, I can't. I'm—"

"*Riscaldo gli spaghetti, un po' di pesce. Faccio l'insalada pure*." I'll reheat some spaghetti, some fish and make salad, too.

My jaw stiffens. I offer her a compromise. "How about I come up next week. When I have more time."

Another pause.

Then a sigh. "Okay. I understand. Call when you wanna visit me."

"I will." My voice drops. "Bye, Ma." I hang up.

I stare at the phone for a long time. No, don't do it, I say over and over, trying to convince myself to not pick up the phone. I have stuff to do. I'll see her next week. I promise.

Hours pass, one, then two. The buzzer to my apartment trumpets, startling me. I'm not expecting anyone.

I speak into the intercom. "Hello?"

My mother's voice crackles through the speaker. "*So' Mamma.*"

I buzz her in.

She arrives at my door out of breath carrying bags full of leftovers and extra fresh pasta, tomato sauce, salad, frozen fish, and cake—all from her fridge and cupboards.

My stomach gurgles in anticipation of a home-cooked meal.

Ma scampers towards the kitchen, drops all the bags onto the floor. She turns around and gives me a once

over. "*Ma che porti?*" What on earth are you wearing? "*Mentre cucino, faccio il bucato*." While I'm cooking, I'll do your laundry. She heads to my bedroom. "Where is de machine?"

I'm spinning from the whirlwind of my mother's arrival. She's 64 years old and still I can't keep up with her. I lean against the wall to catch my breath.

"Ma," I say when I feel steadier, "I don't have any bleach."

She hollers her response from my room. "*So' portato un po' da casa*." I brought some from home.

Of course she would, I say under my breath, and head into my bedroom. There I see Ma, bent at the waist, her calf muscles stretching as she picks through my clothes, sorting them by colour. I move closer to Ma, feel the heat emanating from her body; watch the swift movement of her arms. I take a deep breath, bend down on my knees; help Ma sort through my laundry.

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KAY R. EGINTON

The Open Field

A ragtag of late October leaves
The cold northwest wind across
The open field,
The field here,

Protected, still,
The northwest, the wind,
The cold, oh,
The open field.

Kay Eginton lives in Iowa City. Her poetry is often published in the state-wide journal, Lyrical Iowa. *Her poetry book,* Poems, *was published by Penfield Press.*

AMBER FALES

On Becoming A Nurse

My mother worries about the things I'll carry:
the pain in the faces
the crying voices
the smell of shit and vomit.

My mother worries about what will live on in my dreams:
the red blood everywhere
the black eyes of the dying
the yellow skin of the sick.

My mother worries about the thin walls of my white skin
and what it might let in.
She does not know what I have somehow
already seen
and heard
and smelled
and dreamed.
And what I know:

I know
the heartache of knowing
and doing nothing
slowly kills,
but the heartache of doing
slowly heals.

Amber Fales is 27 years old and lives with her partner and two cats. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English in May 2006. She is currently working in childcare. Summer 2007 she will embark upon a career in nursing that will hopefully lead to midwifery or neonatal care. Writing has always been a part of her life, and she expects it always will .