



*Over and Under the Counter*

A Memoir By Andrea Froncillo

**An Excerpt**

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**Today, there is a culinary movement in Italy called Slow Food.** This is a marketing tactic, of course, designed to make people take notice of what they are eating and how it is prepared, an indignant response to the Westernization of Europe, a backlash against the "hurry up" mentality that is slowly infecting the other side of the globe. When I was growing up, there was no such movement; since we were never sure if there would be enough for tomorrow, food was a prize. We prepared our meals carefully and enjoyed them with the greatest of leisure, considering ourselves lucky with each and every bite.

On Sundays, eating took even longer than during the week. Sunday was family day, not a day to work or shop or travel. My mother went to mass in the early morning, but we rarely joined her. My father had no interest in going, and my mother knew better than to try and convince any of the rest of us. As soon as I woke up, I walked by myself down to my grandparent's apartment, where the family would gradually assemble over the course of the day. The streets were calm on those mornings, devoid of the hustle and bustle of the week. Even the smells were different on Sunday mornings; the breeze from the sea was more pronounced, a tangy, oysterish scent that drifted through the streets. The produce cart was folded shut, empty and quiet. It was like a different kind of church out there, and carried the same kind of sacred hush.

The doors and windows to my grandparents' apartment were all open wide when I rounded the corner. Nonna was bustling about, arranging flowers in glass jars and placing them on every open surface. As soon as I walked through the door, she pulled me close, holding my head against her shoulder for a just moment and kissing me on the forehead. She smelled of nutmeg.

She was a tiny woman, my Nonna. A tight bun secured her black and silver hair on the crown of her head, and a faded apron swaddled her waist. Her eyes were like dark shiny currants on her face, and her olive skin was crinkled with fine lines that ran from her cheeks to the corners of her mouth, making her look like a figure from a painting. She wore dark colored dresses that fell to the middle of her calves, and soft black shoes that showed the lumpiness of her feet where they were deformed from hours of standing over the years.

She immediately put me to work. I helped her beat the rugs and scrub the windows and wash the vegetables. Over the course of the morning, the small rooms filled with uncles and aunts and cousins. Everyone brought food with them, and we arranged it all on platters and set them out on

the thick wooden tabletop. Anchovies in olive oil. Glistening white rounds of fresh mozzarella, dripping with whey. A spicy sausage, cut into irregular chunks. Sweet green grapes.

The soccer game came on the radio in the early afternoon, and the men gathered around, frowning and cheering, polluting the living room air with cigarette smoke and farts. If we got too noisy, they just turned the volume up. The more they drank, the louder they voiced their opinions. Every goal was punctuated with cheering or cursing; every foul was hotly debated. By the middle of the afternoon, it sounded like the soccer game was being played right there in the apartment, complete with stadiums of roaring fans.

My aunts clustered together in the back bedroom with glasses of wine, airing their complaints and sharing the latest gossip. Sometimes I poked my head through the door to find them collapsed on the bed in hysterical laughter; other times one of them would be holding a tissue up to her eyes, her nose red and puffy, while another woman patted her shoulder.

We cousins teased and slapped and pinched, chasing each other around the house and generally being as cruel to one another as possible. We tried out swear words on each other: *Bocchinaro*, *Figlio di Puttana* and *Ricchione*. It was like practice for the real thing: practice insults, practice swear words, practice getting a reaction. Making the girls cry was of paramount importance. It was like a science experiment: say this, and they yell back at you. Say that, and their eyes gush over with tears. Fascinating. We sometimes snuck cigarettes out of our mothers' purses and went outside to get a puff or two. I had my first smoke that way, in the dark, narrow alley behind the apartment. My eyes stung like someone had splashed acid in them, and my lungs felt like they might explode, but I kept on puffing. Important not to act like it hurts.

Even the children got to drink a little vino on Sundays. The adults made us a drink by pouring a few splashes of wine in a glass, then filling it to the top with mineral water. Legal drinking age does not exist in Italy. It is not even a thought - wine is what you drink with dinner, some days better wine than others, but *always* the vino. When I came to America, I was disgusted by the attitude towards drinking. Billboards for alcohol are everywhere, full of half-naked, laughing people, and yet Americans are ashamed of drinking, flaunting it and hiding it at the same time. Most people have no idea how to pick out a good bottle of wine; everyone drinks, but feels guilty about it. One day it's illegal for a person to have a drink, the next day it's not. How does a person learn responsibility that way?

Around noon, Nonna began the real cooking. I was her assistant in the kitchen: she gave me all the mundane tasks, like chopping onions and fetching things from the cupboards and drawers. She was cranky sometimes, muttering this or that about someone in the house. Peppino was too flashy, she might murmur underneath her breath. He was bound to get in trouble. Marta had better stop with her whining, she might say, or she'll drive Guido away. She was talking mostly to herself, but my ears were always perked up, hoping to hear insider information. She didn't take kindly to my asking questions, so I just listened. She never said anything about my father when I was in earshot, but I could feel her disapproval for him. Her eyes were guarded when she looked at him, and she always hugged my mother extra long, as if to make up for it. What could Nonna do? Husbands are chosen quickly, babies are born. Nothing can be done.

For the first course, we made pasta and *braciola*. Nonna cut a flank steak into wide strips and scooped a mixture of pine nuts, raisins and parsley into the center of each strip. I rolled them up, careful to keep the filling inside, then wrapped a thin layer of cotton around each roll and tied it with a knot. We placed a heavy skillet on the stove and added a generous splash of olive oil. When the oil was hot, Nonna tossed in a handful of crushed dried peppers. There was a sharp hiss as they hit the pan, and I put my head close to inhale the sharp scent that rose into the air.

Nonna placed the steak rolls into the pan and they sizzled as she seared each side. When the meat was sufficiently browned, she added rough chunks of fresh tomatoes, lots of them. I stirred and stirred, and the tomatoes reduced into a thick sauce, and we ladled this mixture of over a large bowl of hot rigatoni. The tomatoes clung to the thick tubes of pasta, and we grated a generous heap of *Pecorino* over the top.

"*Mangia!*" Nonna called, placing the huge, steaming bowl on the table. The radio was turned up even louder so that the sound would reach into the dining room, and everyone gathered in, drawn by the smell. The adults sat around the main table, and the children sat on chairs around the sides of the room, balancing their plates on their laps. The sauce tasted rich and sweet, the noodles were chewy, and the steak tender and flavorful. Above the din of the radio, the sounds of smacking and grunts of appreciation could be heard. For a moment, even my grandmother took a deep breath and relaxed.

After the pasta, we made the fish. Fish can be prepared a million ways: breaded and pan-fried, cooked into a stew, baked in the oven. Nonna made it differently every time, depending on the type and amount of fish that she had that day. Whenever I asked her what kind of fish she was cooking, she reached over and pinched my cheek and gave it a little slap.

"It's a dead fish," she always said. She wagged her index finger at me and winked.

When I went to culinary school a few years later and asked Nonna for some of her recipes, she told me that there were none. And then I remembered: there were no cookbooks in her kitchen. No notecards with scribbled recipes, no loose pieces of paper. It dawned on me that Nonna didn't know how to read or write. Everything she knew she learned by watching and listening. She cooked with sight and smell and texture and weight - a handful of this, a pinch of that. She carried knowledge in her narrow fingertips and the smooth centers of her palms; in her flaring nostrils and narrowed eyes. She cooked with her whole body, and put her heart into every dish she made. She wouldn't know what to do with a recipe if she had one.

When the dishes were finally been cleared away, we started thinking about dessert: Nonna's famous lemon torta. This was a much-anticipated part of Sunday, the best and last course of the day. Nonna prepared a custard with lemons and eggs and ricotta cheese, stirring the mixture in a heavy pan over the gas burner until it became thick and opaque. She poured the custard into a pastry-lined springform pan, and added a thick scattering of pine nuts and another layer of pastry dough on top. As it cooked, the kitchen filled with the smell of lemons and sugar.

We cousins could hardly wait until the torta came out of the oven. We were worried that the adults would eat it all, and so we invented ways to make sure we got our fair share. We snuck around Nonna while the torta was still cooling and made quick, dull jabs with the sides of a spoon, filling our hands with warm chunks and shoving it greedily into our mouths. The torta was thick and tart, the custard creamy and warm in our mouths. The pine nuts added a satisfying crunch. When we were found out, we were slapped and chided and not given another bite, which only made us more anxious the next time and ensured more furtive torta-stealing.

The aunts washed the dishes as we children exhausted the last of our energy. All of the food had made us sleepy, so we were nicer to each other. The radio was finally off, and the adults smoked and talked, their voices lazy and slow as they nursed small glasses of port. The air was colder

now, and the breeze made me shiver a little. The families took their leave, one by one, coats and hats collected, goodbye kisses and hugs made and given. My father finally motioned to us, and I followed with slow, reluctant steps. I hate endings.



**With all this talk of food, you might think that there was always enough,** or that we never went hungry, but then you would be wrong. Mama normally called everyone in for dinner, but when she didn't call, you figured out quickly that there wasn't going to be dinner. Tombola - buy a basket full of things - fruit, salami, cheese, pack of sugar, etc. makes a nice basket - sometimes had a bill she knew - would sell 90 tickets for 1,000 lira each, someone would shake the pannaro with the numbers and pick one out, and that person would win. She might make 20,000 lira.

The reason why Italians are famous for their pasta is that it's cheap. Pasta made us inventive - it became the backdrop to the other flavors, the canvas around which the dish is built. When there was nothing else in the house, we tossed linguine with garlic and olive oil and sprinkled spicy chili flakes over the top. A rind of Parmigiano to grate over the top was considered a treat. When we had a little money, our pasta dinners were more inventive: rustic marinara sauce made from crushed cherry tomatoes, garlic and olives, for instance, or sausage and broccoli rabe with lots of garlic and spicy red pepper.

*Secondi*, or the meat course, was almost always out of the question, except for Sundays and whenever I could bring back some extra fish.



**It's hard to act debonair when your clothes don't fit.** My clothes never fit. That's because they weren't new, bought for me and only me. When you can't afford flour for pasta, a new outfit doesn't seem so important. I had to make do with my uncle's castaways or the odd piece of used clothing that we found at a little flea market in Resina. Resina is a little town just outside of Napoli. People went there for two reasons: to shop for cheap shit that they couldn't get elsewhere or to hire someone for an under-the-table job. There was the occasional boxing match there, too, but I didn't know about that until much later. The town had a center square, called the *pugliano*, because it was full of sleazy thugs with greased back hair and gray, crumbling teeth. They had scars on their faces and bulges underneath their jackets, and even the *polizia* stayed away.

They set up the black market there on the weekends, a haphazard arrangement of long folding tables piled with everything from homemade bread to contraband from various countries. If you were unlucky enough to have a prize possession stolen from you the week before, you were likely to find it here: a camera, a bicycle, a radio. God help you if you actually voiced the opinion that it had been stolen, and positively dangerous if you were stupid enough to point a finger at one of the figures slouching around the sides and claim to know his face. It was smarter to just buy the object back and consider yourself fortunate that you ever saw it again. If you couldn't afford to buy it back again, well: life is unfair.

Lucky for me, I didn't have anything worth stealing. Mamma and I only went to the market when we had some money to buy clothes or other things that we needed. There were tables full of American clothes, *panni americani*, the most sought-after items of all, most of them used, but still better than anything we had. After the war was over, Americans donated vast quantities of used clothing to various aid agencies, who sent them in barrels to poor European countries. Along the way, various people intercepted the goods and sold them for a profit.

We woke up very early on flea market Saturdays so that we would be one of the first to paw through the clothes and find the best stuff. The market opened at 6:00am, and my mother and I were first at the table, lifting up shirts and pants and sweaters, gauging what would fit whom, trying to bring back something for everyone. When we found something particularly nice, mamma would hold it up to one of the men who hovered behind the table, watching with eagle eyes to make sure that nothing got pinched.

"How much?"

The man would answer in a cool, brisk tone.

"15,000 lira," he might say.

My mother would sigh and shake her head. "Mamma mia!" she would gasp. "15,000 lira? What, are you crazy? Does the table go with it?"

"Signora," the man would exclaim. "The garment you are holding is pure cotton, pure and fresh! A very nice piece. I could not possibly take less than 13,000 lira."

"I have children to feed!" Mamma would be indignant. "I can't pay you 13,000 lira for one shirt!"

"So now you're asking me to feed your children, too?" He acted annoyed.

Mamma would put the garment down. "Fine," she would say, shrugging her shoulders.

He would lean forward and pick it up, offering it to her again. "Signora, I am a generous man. I will give this to you for 12,000."

"I can pay 9,000." Her voice would be firm and nonchalant.

The man would sigh. He would look at the garment as if it was a thing of rare and precious beauty. He would shake his head and purse his lips. Finally he would say "10,000. No less."

The bargaining process seemed to take forever. It embarrassed me. I couldn't stand the haggling, the shouting, the insults and exclamations. I felt humiliated to see mamma arguing like a crazy woman for a bargain, but she was good at it.

The previous owners of the clothes were all bigger or fatter than me: the sleeves grazed my fingertips, the pant legs got caught beneath my heels when I walked, the waists had to be cinched tight in order to stay up. Americans must be fat and rich, I decided, because it takes a lot of money to buy enough food to get so big.



Blue jeans were the most prized item on the tables. My eyes lit up whenever I found a pair, and if they were faded or ripped or too big, no matter. As long as I had a pair in my possession, I could find a way to make them fit. Putting on blue jeans was like putting on confidence. I thought people would be blind to the cracked belt that held them around my hips and the way the butt sagged in the back, because they were blue jeans, plain and simple. They made you cool.

Shoes were a different story. We could only afford cheap plastic slip-ons, the equivalent of paper socks. Within minutes of putting them on, your feet started to sweat, and they made obscene sucking sounds with each and every step. After a few days of swilling around in the heat, our toes developed little white patches around the sides, and our toenails got a frosty look. Both the feet and the shoes reeked of cheese and mildew. Most of the time, I just went barefoot.

I often dreamt of America, where there are so many clothes that they can ship their old ones across the ocean, a country where everyone wears blue jeans and where there is more than enough work for the fathers, and everyone has fistfuls of money to spend. In my mind, Americans were always laughing - *ha! ha! ha!* - because there is so much to be happy about.



**I was born without the gene for sitting still.** It simply couldn't be helped. I was only nine when my Nonna's kitchen began to seem too small. I was bored with Nonno's produce stand, tired of the predictable streets of our neighborhood, hungry for adventure the way I was ravenous for dinner, the way I lusted after the girl who changed her clothes with the curtains open while I watched from the rooftop. I wanted to be a part of the action. I wanted to challenge the streets for a fight, a catastrophe, anything to get my blood flowing, to give me the chance to prove myself.

I am a bull, stomping at the gate: *let me out!*

And so I roamed. I was full of ideas for making money. I had no shame: anything was worth a try. I needed money in my pocket, food for my family, adventure for my spirit. I didn't have a

goal or a plan, just an intention to see what the world had for me. Opportunity sparkled everywhere.

I stopped by various businesses in the early mornings and offered to help them unload their supplies. At the *Panificio*, I unloaded sacks of flour from a big truck. The sacks were heavy, 50 kilos each, and my back ached at the end, but I walked away a few lira richer. At the liquor store, I helped unload liquor and wine from the truck, heavy cartons filled with glass bottles. Sometimes they paid me in lira, and other times they handed me a bottle of whatever is in the boxes. I took it all, whatever was offered. I was too young to push my luck. As long as I could exchange a few stories and walk away with something for my time, I held my head up high.

One afternoon, I brought back a bottle of anisette and proudly hand it to my mother, thinking that she would add it to her coffee as a special treat. Instead, she took one look at the bottle and burst into tears. She grabbed my shirt collar and pushed me out the door and down the steps, marching close behind me. We walked across the street to the liquor store, and she handed the bottle of anisette across the counter with one hand while her other hand clutched my forearm in a vise grip.

"My son took this from you," she said to Antonio, the store owner, her voice trembling and shrill, "and he is here to apologize."

Antonio smiled and slid the bottle back across the counter. He looked at me, and then at my mother. "*Signora*," he said gently, "I gave this to Andrea as payment for the work he did for me. He did not steal it." He looked down at the counter, not wanting to offend the distraught woman in front of him.

My face and neck were red with shame. My head felt hot. There was a long pause, and then my mother picked up the bottle and nodded. "Grazie," she said.

As soon as we left the liquor store, I turned to face her. "I know I do a lot of bad things," I said, "but I don't steal. Ever."