

ELENA BOSSI

Risotto alla Milanese

My grandmother's stormy look abated only when she hugged me or watched me play. She was a tall woman, with small, sharp eyes, and until her death maintained that dignified, arrogant air, above all towards my mother who would never be as beautiful, as noble, or as elegant.

No one cooked risotto alla Milanese like my grandmother. In her preparation she spared no one the pageantry of her to-ing and fro-ing from the pantry to the kitchen with ingredients. Her haughty presence sent currents through the house. She was an express train, willing to run down any who dared cross her path. Her attitude was of one engaged in a primordial task; one on whom depended the rise or fall of a nation. However, her army of useless conscripts were a hindrance, simply not up to the circumstances.

At first my mother took refuge in avoidance. There would be no confrontation, no competition. She kept out of the way and busied herself with other things. Nothing this woman did would upset her. She had no need to prove her worth as a cook, and she knew perfectly well how to make a risotto. It was luck that had put someone else in charge of the cooking and relieved her of her duties. Luck freed her up for more important, more relaxing activities. She varnished her nails and tidied up the chest of drawers. She pretended to read the newspaper, and from time to time, strolled, as if by chance, past the kitchen door and glanced inside.

My grandmother made rough measure of the portions, but we knew that she threw in exactly one hundred grams of rice for each person, then a handful for the pot. She browned the grains in a buttery sauté of onions. The onion she would chop with a curved mezzaluna, which always scared me. If my mother's fingers, or mine, got in its way, I imagined that the blade would not stop. It advanced across the wooden board, a machine she wielded with such absorption that my grandmother's face above the glinting steel grew fantastical and frightening.

When the rice had absorbed the colors of butter and onion, my grandmother poured in two-thirds of a glass of white wine and

made a cloud scorch up from the pan. This was the moment when my mother asked if it wasn't too much wine for that amount of rice, and my grandmother fixed her with a fierce look. One might never suspect her of a mistake, about this, about anything. She tilted her chin and with an imperious flick, tossed back her hair, which though quite grey, quivered with its own life. She swore in Italian and accused my mother of hideous things.

My mother gathered herself up like a bull for the charge, and remarked that she might not be as tall, elegant, or capable as her mother, but at least she had an adoring husband who didn't cheat on her.

Meanwhile, the rice had absorbed the wine and it was time to add the liquid *poco a poco*, so that the argument, as it built up, was interrupted from time to time by the addition of the precise quantity of broth.

My grandmother stirred the rice, but frequently she brandished the wooden spoon and cursed Judas.

The voices went on rising in volume and cruelty. Sometimes I thought they would kill each other. If they hadn't done so yet, it was only because the rice needed their attention and kept distracting them at the last minute from their fury.

My grandmother's frigidity, my father's lack of ambition: in the eternal cabal of mutual sacrifice and dedication, each woman threw back at the other her own life. All this was borne on their voices into the pan where the risotto was slowly cooking. "*Non sei mai contenta!*" "*Sei una vipera!*" "*Porco Giuda!*" they scolded, but careful also that the liquid not reduce too far, that the simmering not be excessive, and the grain be neither hard inside nor floury on the outside.

Next, while my mother took over stirring the rice, my grandmother diluted saffron in a measure of broth. When the rice was yellow, and the flame turned off, they added a large piece of butter and Parmesan cheese and covered the pan to rest the food for a few minutes before serving.

Now both women calmed down, just like that, and seemed to forget the battle. They smoked a cigarette together in the living room and told me to lay the table.

Nobody was looking. I got up on a stool at the stove, and lifted the lid of the pan. Surely all the violent anger and the horrible things they had said were still there, seasoning the rice. I wafted

my hand through the rising steam, to sweeten the food again, and thought how much I loved those two women.

In my own way and without their knowing it, I always helped prepare the risotto.

Translated from the Spanish by Cristina Piatti and edited by Penelope Todd and Kavery Nambisan