

COME SONO CONTENTA

By Nadina LaSpina

"Come sono contenta!" How happy I am! my mother says, as she helps me hang my skirts in the closet, makes room in her drawers for my undies, watches me set up my computer. "It's like I'm dreaming! I'm so happy you've come home to stay with me!" Her eyes sparkling, her face glowing with excitement, my mother looks young. "Come sono contenta!" she keeps saying and my heart breaks each time she says it. I can't tell her that I'm happy to be home with her. I've moved in to take care of her because she's dying. She has inoperable pancreatic cancer.

She seems so genuinely happy that I can't help wondering whether she knows how little time she has left. Three months at the most is what Dr. Cohen, the gastroenterologist, said. And that was almost a month ago, in April. "I'll move in with her," I told him. "I'll take care of her."

I'll never forget the look the good doctor gave me and my wheelchair. Obviously he didn't think that I was the ideal caregiver. "We can set up hospice," he said. "But you'll need more help than what hospice can give you." "I'll hire an attendant," I said. Then realizing that "attendant," the word used in the disability community, was probably not the word the doctor used, I corrected myself. "I mean an aid."

But I couldn't move in with my mother in April. I couldn't take off before the end of the semester. I had to wait until the beginning of May and finish teaching my courses.

I've never graded finals so quickly. Usually I agonize over each point, so worried about being fair to each and every student. But this past month I've felt as if I was in a race with my mother's cancer. Please god don't let anything happen until I'm done teaching, I've been praying every day. And I must have asked Danny a hundred times: "Do you think she'll be ok until I can be with her?" I'm sure Danny is not happy about my decision to move in with my mother but he has tried his best to be supportive, helping me prepare for the move, buying me things I need to have with me - new underwear, toiletries, laxative herbs.

It can't be that my mother doesn't realize how sick she is. We sat side by side in Dr. Cohen's office a month ago, after the results of her tests came in. In the thirty-five years she's been in this country my mother never learned English well enough to carry on a conversation, but I know she understands pretty well. And the doctor used plain words. What could be plainer than the word "cancer"? And the word "nothing?" As in "nothing to do." I wanted to put my hands over my mother's ears to block out those plain words. I tried my best to drown them out with my own, talking fast and loud, to confuse my mother, to shield her. But I know she heard. I'm sure she understood.

Besides, I'm sure my mother knew she had cancer long before she had the tests. She had been covering up the symptoms, my mother who had always described her every complaint in the minutest details. She had not told me about the vomiting, the

constipation, the pain. Always fashion-knowledgeable, she hid her weight loss and her swelling abdomen with loose clothes and big shoulder pads. And she covered up her paleness with blush-on. When I insisted she have the tests, she shrugged: "Your father wants me with him, that's all."

She said "that's all" in English. There are some English expressions my mother has made her own, incorporated them into her own language. After 35 years, her language has become a mixture of the standard Italian she keeps from forgetting by reading novels and magazines and watching Italian programs on Channel 47, her native Sicilian dialect as well as imports from other dialects that her friends speak, and words and expressions in English. I think "that's all" is my mother's favorite English expression. So curt and final. "That's all" means there is nothing else to do and nothing else to say, no arguments allowed. And what arguments could I have? Always the good Sicilian wife, my mother never questioned my father's decisions, never went against my father's wishes. What does it matter that my father is now dead, has been dead for almost a year? Thirty-five years ago she left her family, her friends, her town where everyone spoke her language, to follow my father to a new far-away land. She's now ready to follow him again.

But I did argue with her as best I could and managed to convince her to have the GI series and the MRI. For me. The day we went to the doctor's office to talk about the results, my mother got dressed up. A loose pink sweater with shoulder pads and matching pink lipstick. "I don't want the doctor to think I'm afraid," she said when I told her how pretty she looked. "Afraid of what?" I asked. "Of dying," she said.

Sitting in my car while I drove her home from the doctor's office, she said: "I don't want to talk about it." I was too stunned and grieved to talk anyway. I kept my eyes on the road. We have not talked about it yet.

"This is the greatest mother's day present," my mother now says, "come sono contenta!" and, bending down, she puts her arms around me and my wheelchair. I hug her back and all I feel is bones. Nicky, the old black and white mutt, lazily raises himself up off the kitchen floor and comes to put his front paws on my lap. When there are hugs going around, Nicky always has to have his share.

"It feels like you never left," my mother says. And I remember her tears, twenty-some years ago, when I told her I had found an apartment in the city. It had not been easy to find an apartment I could afford in a building with an elevator. I was already in my late twenties, past the age when children move away from home; I was teaching Italian at NYU while still working on my PhD. But I was my mother's crippled daughter, the little girl she had carried in her arms in Sicily until I got so big my feet almost reached the ground when she carried me. Until I got so heavy she could no longer grin and bear the terrible pain in her back. I remember her crying while I described the small studio with a window that faced a brick wall. "I never thought when you were a little girl that this day would come, when you would go live on your own..." she said. Then, smiling through the tears, she exclaimed: "Come sono contenta!"

When my mother undresses that night I see how much more weight she has lost since the last time I saw her undressed in the doctor's office. She's a skeleton, my mother who, though always slim, even at 78, had been still shapely. She wears a padded bra to hide the emptied out skin sacks that had once been full breasts. Her belly is that of a woman ready to deliver. Its size makes her every movement difficult. Her bony legs tremble as she struggles to keep her balance.

Suddenly I remember my mother's young supple body, the body I was so close to when I was a little girl. So close that I felt a part of it, that I thought I could never exist separate from it. I remember my mother's strong arms holding me, carrying me. I remember the softness of her breasts, her sweet lilac smell. The feelings those memories evoke are overwhelming.

Then I also remember when as a teenager I compared my scoliosed back and my skinny polio legs with my mother's straight slender trunk and shapely legs. How I envied my mother then for her still perfect body -the body I would have had if I hadn't been disabled! Now I want to close my eyes, not have to look at her; at the same time I want to hug her, I'm filled with tenderness. She quickly puts on her nightgown, surely sensing my discomfort.

In the morning she stands very wobbly at the stove to make coffee in my father's little espresso pot. "I haven't washed this pot with dishwashing detergent," she says. And I smile remembering my father's rule: "Never use soap, soap kills the taste of coffee."

It's a beautiful spring day. So we decide to sit out in the garden. I carry the hot pot in one hand and wheel my chair with the other, so carefully. She brings out two dainty gold-rimmed cups. We sit in the sun side by side and sip the coffee. The garden is a bit of a jungle since she has not been able to tend to it. I certainly can't help much with gardening but I do manage to unwind the hose and I water her rose bushes from my wheelchair. "Be gentle," she cautions me, "don't let the water hit too hard."

That first week I'm with her, my mother does all she can to show me how happy she is to have me with her. We celebrate Mother's day with veal parmigiana delivered from the Italian Restaurant on Bell Boulevard, and she keeps repeating "che buona!" how good it is, while she very inconspicuously and delicately spits into a paper napkin. I make believe I don't notice. But Nicky lets her know by whining that he thinks it would be less wasteful to let him have what she's spitting out.

We look through the Italian magazines I bought for her and I read aloud about Roberto Benigni while she sits holding her belly trying to hide the pain she's in. We watch Cinema Paradiso on video in four or five sittings since she can't sit through a whole movie. "I'm ok" she reassures me when I hear her crying in the bathroom and look in on her. And when at night I get up because I hear her moaning, she apologizes for waking me. "I forgot you were here," she says. "Come sono contenta!"

When the hospice nurse comes on Tuesday, my mother, always the gracious hostess, offers her something cold to drink. It's unusually hot for May and the nurse accepts. I'm surprised to hear my mother communicate so well with her. "I feel better because my daughter is here," my mother tells the nurse in almost flawless English. The nurse's name is Ellen. She's my age, maybe a little younger. She tells me she needs to look at me when I speak because she's very hard of hearing. I now notice that she's wearing hearing aids. I like her very much. I feel we have a bond, the three of us, my mother with her cancer, me with my wheelchair, this nurse with her hearing aids.

While we sip orzata, sitting in the garden, Ellen goes over the long list of medications my mother is on. She says to increase the colace when we tell her of the trouble my mother is having in the bathroom. She tells me that my mother doesn't want stronger pain medication because she doesn't like to feel too drowsy. She can have it whenever she's ready, she says. She explains that she'll be coming more and more often as my mother gets sicker, and that we can also have a home health aid when it becomes necessary. I feel less anxious. I know Ellen is just the right person to see my mother and me through this.

May 16th is my birthday. My mother decides she's going to make my favorite Sicilian meal. Falsomagro. The word means "fake-lean." Falsomagro is a beef roll, innocently lean-looking but stuffed with all kinds of goodies and cooked in tomato sauce. The day before my birthday, she makes a list of all I need to buy at the Italian store on Francis Lewis Blv. Prosciutto di Parma, Parmigiano Reggiano, Caciocavallo... For the large thin slice of beef she sends me to the butcher shop on Bell. "Your father never bought meat at the supermarket," she reminds me.

We don't have a very good night. We make repeated trips to the bathroom. Bent over in pain, she holds on to my wheelchair, using it as a walker. I wheel slowly and smoothly, carefully maneuvering around furniture and through doors. All the time we talk --about our neighbors in Sicily wondering what has happened to them, and about the house in Brooklyn where we lived when we came from Italy, and about the picnics we used to have when I was in the convalescent home in White Plains. Both of us acting as if we're truly enjoying this nighttime reminiscing. As if she wouldn't rather be sleeping --free of pain; as if I wouldn't rather be sleeping --with Danny and our cat. Both of us acting as if we don't mind at all that she's dying.

We get started preparing the falsomagro in the morning. Both of us sitting at the kitchen table, she has me beat the beef down so it gets even thinner and tender, while she peels and then quarters three hard-boiled eggs. We moisten the beef with olive oil, then sprinkle breadcrumbs and grated parmesan cheese on it. A few sprigs of parsley, a layer of prosciutto, then she places the quartered eggs and sliced cheese along the middle, together with lots of broken up sausage. Nicky sits at attention between my mother and me, waiting patiently for bits of cheese and sausage. My mother does the rolling, because I'm too clumsy. Even with her hands shaking, she can do it just right. She ties white string around the falsomagro so it won't come apart when we cook it. When it's all done we sit back and admire it. "Che bel falsomagro!" my mother says with pride.

But we have a hard time browning it in the frying pan. My mother can't stand at the stove for long, I can see it's too painful for her. In my chair I'm too low to do a good job. Suddenly I remember that my old crutches are stored in the closet in what used to be my room. I haven't used crutches in the last two or three years, since post-polio has made walking much too difficult and strenuous. Now I go get them out of the closet and I stand, very precariously. "Attenta," careful, my mother keeps saying, as I take a few tentative steps, holding on to the crutches for dear life. When I'm in front of the stove, standing with my legs apart for maximum balance, my crutches securely under my arms, I bravely let go of one hand so I have use of it. My mother sits in my wheelchair and positions herself right behind me. I feel her trembling hand on my back trying to balance me. "Put the brakes on," I tell her.

Feeling safe and steady now, I light the burner and start turning with my free hand the falsomagro in the pan. From behind me my mother gives me instructions. When the falsomagro is all browned, she tells me to lift it out of the pan and put it in the big pot where the tomato sauce is cooking. That's when I run into trouble. The falsomagro is too long. If I stick the fork in the middle of it and try to lift it with one hand, I'm sure it'll brake. But I'm afraid to let go of the crutch with my other hand. Then my mother, still sitting in my wheelchair, puts both her hands around my waist to steady me. Very carefully, using both my hands now, I lift the falsomagro out of the pan and place it, not as gently as she would have liked, but all in one piece, into the pot with the sauce.

While the falsomagro cooks in the sauce, we can both relax. I get back in my chair, my mother lies down on her bed. "Check to make sure it's not sticking to the bottom of the pot," she says from time to time. I obediently go to the stove and, not really seeing what I'm doing from my chair, with the big wooden spoon I give the falsomagro in the pot a little push. "It moves so it's not sticking," I report back to my mother.

Then it's time to cook the pasta. My mother makes her way to the stove holding on to the walls. We choose "rotelle" out of the rich variety of pastas in her cabinet. While from my chair I stir the rotelle, she gets a big serving bowl out of the china closet. "We have to get the falsomagro out of the pot," she says. And this time I'm the one to position myself behind her and put my hands on the small of her back to steady her. She puts the falsomagro in the serving bowl and very carefully carries it to the table. She sits down to slice it with surgical precision, in spite of her shaky hands.

Finally, proud of our joint accomplishment, we are ready to enjoy my birthday meal. My mother has put out her prettiest dishes, the ones with the rainbow border. She has insisted on a tablecloth and on embroidered napkins. The meal is pure perfection. The pasta is exactly "al dente," the sauce is sweet and tangy. I take a slice of falsomagro and eat it together with my pasta because I can't wait. The falsomagro is the best I've ever tasted. It's so good I want to remember the taste forever. I know my mother will never make it for me again. I doubt I will ever want to make it for myself and, if I ever did, I know I could never make it this good.

My mother can't really eat. She fakes it. Chews and spits in her napkin, trying to do it without me noticing. Or drops piece after piece on the floor for Nicky to eat. "Ti piace?" do you like it? she keeps asking me. I wish I had the right words to tell her just how much I like it. Just how much I appreciate the effort she put into making it. Just how much I wish she could make it for me again on my next birthday.

I eat so much falsomagro, I'm too full for my birthday dessert. I can only manage to eat half a cannolo. It's delicious. The shell so light and crisp and cinnamony, the ricotta cream so smooth. Bits of candied fruit give the cream a fresh tangy taste. "The Italian pastry shop on Francis Lewis is better than any pastry shop in Little Italy," I tell my mother. She smiles, as she picks up the other half of the cannolo and eats it. She really eats it. I wait for her to spit it out into her napkin but she doesn't. She swallows it, effortlessly it seems. "Che buono!" how good it is, she murmurs and closes her eyes to enjoy the taste without distractions.

When she opens her eyes again, I'm surprised to see a look I have not seen on her face for a while. A look of mischief. "We need some amaretto to get this down," she says. "We sure do," I laughingly agree as I go get the bottle of amaretto and two long stemmed glasses from her china closet. I fill the glasses, still laughing. She raises hers. "Buon compleanno," happy birthday, she says to me. Her eyes sparkling, her face glowing with excitement, my mother looks young. She looks as beautiful to me as she did forty-some years ago when she would carry me in her arms and her face, soft and smooth and always a little flushed, would be only a kiss away. We clink glasses. "Grazie, mamma" thank you, I say. "This is the best birthday I've ever had." She laughs as she sips her amaretto. "Come sono contenta!" she says.

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