

Petite Julietta

There is endless blue sky above, and on from the sides of my eyes I can see the green leaves and curling of the vines are reaching up through the sunshine. The air is filled with the voices of the workers walking along side, content with the day's work done, their hats shelter their heads from the hot late-afternoon sun. My side is jostled and jiggled against the baskets as the cart moves over uneven ground. I wiggle my back against Uncle Aldo and he wraps his tan brown arm around my middle, softening the jarring of the cart. The arm is lean with stringy muscles. His shirt smells of sweat from the long day of work. I turn my head back to him with a smile, sneaking my hand into the basket for grapes.

He laughs, bending down to my ear, whispering, "don't eat too many, your grandma will be angry with me if you spoil your dinner, and there will not be enough grapes to make wine."

Silly man, there are more than enough grapes for the wine. There have been carts and carts full of grapes. Giggling I reach in for more. They are tart; the sour peels make my mouth pucker and the juice stain my dress red. Pulling me up to his lap he says, "Someday, my bellina, these grapes will be a beautiful wine, a wine, that when uncorked, will release the beauty of this summer day. In the aroma of wine will be the warm sunshine in the grass, the singing of birds, your happy smile, your little hands in the grapes and the echoes of your happy life."

I laugh at him, pulling his black hat off and putting it on my own head. It falls down over my eyes and the donkey brays loudly. Silly ass. It's tired of pulling the heavy cart, of its weeks of work in the field, his part in collecting the harvest. He is ready for home and rest.

Aunt Lavina tucks me into bed. Her hair smells of dinner- rosemary, garlic and lemon, but

not the two chickens she killed earlier in the day; killing chickens is stinky. She hums a quiet song, soft and sweet. Bushing wild curls from my forehead, she kisses me. "Sweet dreams little one, may the angels and La Madonna watch over you always. "

"Please tell me a story."

"Va bene, a story for you then."

Sitting on the edge of the bed she starts, "A king and queen had no children. The queen would pray and fast, but still no children were born to her. She happened to be walking one day and saw all kinds of animals together with their offspring, and said 'All the animals have their offspring, while I have none.'

"No, not that story. Another story."

"Another story?"

"I don't like that story. Another one."

"Va bene. 'Over and over it has been told that once upon a time there was a king and a queen. Every time the queen had a baby it was a girl. The king, who wanted a son finally lost patience and said, 'If you have one more girl, I shall kill it.' Just as she had feared...'"

"No, no, I don't like that one. Another one."

"Ok then. 'A man had a son, who was the handsomest boy you ever saw. The father fell ill and, one day, sent for his son. 'Sandrino, my final hour has come. Please behave, and hold on to ...'"

"Aunt Lavina, am I handsome?"

"Boys are handsome. You, my little one, are beautiful."

"Aunt Lavina, will my mother send for me one day?"

"Time for you to sleep now. No more stories tonight."

I wiggle deeper under the covers and the stiff sheets scratch against my sunburned legs, but any pain is softened by the watered wine poured for me at dinner. I was sure to clean even the seconds from my plate, so that grandma would not know that Uncle Aldo let me to eat far too many grapes, and now I am a stuffed olive in my bed, big and round and feeling as if I will burst. Through the open window I hear the crickets singing in the garden and, far away, a boy mockingbird singing in the dark, trying to steal a girl bird from her more grown-up boyfriend. Uncle Aldo told me this is what the boy bird will do to get some loving. Well, maybe just the boy mockingbird; I will ask him about the other kinds of birds.

Later in the night I hear aunt and uncle. Their soft voices and laughter move through the garden. The sound of their love so clear there is no need to hear the words. Love that finds its way through my open window and sings me to sleep like a lullaby. These are the happiest days of my life.

"Come here my ray of sunshine, sit closer to me. Let me tell you a bedtime story."

"Ah my Aldo, you and your bedtime stories. Yes, a story then. "

"Once there was a happy butterfly. It loved all flowers, but most of all it loved purple flowers, the ones that smell sweet in the hot afternoon sun, the ones that drip nectar so freely it is almost effortless for the insects to eat. Nectar of love that sustains all butterflies."

"You're a silly man."

"Yes, I am.....'Hey Jude, don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it better. And any time you feel the pain, my Lavin, refrain, don't carry the world upon your ..."

"What shall we name the vintage this year?"

'Hummm, how is 'La Dolce Vita'?' He wraps an arm over her shoulder as she leans her small body against his side.

Looking up at him over her shoulder she says, "That one has already been used."

"Here comes the sun, and I say, it's all right."

"You are content?"

"I am more than content, I am blissful."

"Do you want a child of your own?"

"Julietta is my child. She has been my child all but the first 6 months of her life. It is enough for me, if you are happy with just one."

"And if they come to take her?" Aunt Lavina asks.

"They will not come back."

"No.... after five years.... I suppose they will not come. And mother would not allow them back, even if they wanted to come."

"That I don't understand. The letters, are they from Roberto or Julia, or both? I have seen different handwriting on them. And why does she burn the letters? They are not hers to burn."

"Maybe there is something in them that no one should see. I'm sure Mother has her reasons. It is a complicated story. There are still parts I do not know, Julia running off to America with that hippy boy Aldina let live in her house, his talk of free love in San Francisco; Roberto chasing after her, thinking he will bring her home."

"What kind of mother leaves her husband and two children? That I don't understand. It's not natural."

"Julia has always been a dreamer; she would make up fantasies all day long. I think she always wanted to live in a different world, a have a different story. Now everyone she has left behind is

either heartbroken or angry.”

"No more of that story then, my love," he nestles his face into her thick hair, smelling the rosemary and lemon. "Shall we call this vintage La Petite Julietta?"

"You love her."

"How could one not? She is my petite Julietta. She is a ray of sunshine. My world revolves around you, our home and the life we have."

"Ummm" Aunt Lavina says, moving her hand firmly across her rounded belly, as if pressing out imagined wrinkles in her dress.

The gray-white light of dawn slips under my lids. Or was it the early morning cuckoo that woke me? It is the last day of harvest. The morning air fills with voices as the men gather for a day of picking. It is too early for me to want to get up. I turn to the wall where my mother's face smiles down on me. She is so beautiful. Her dark hair falls soft around her shoulders, her eyes bright, her upper lip and cheek have tiny beauty marks. She is fourteen in the picture. Grandma told me so. Someday I will be fourteen. Someday I will be beautiful and have long soft hair falling around my shoulders. The frame is of thin, simple brown wood. I reach back to find my memory of her, but there are no memories, so I fill myself with the safe, happy love I know. I hold her in this place of love with me, to make her real. Some day she will send for me, and we will live together in America. But today is the last day of harvest, the golden sun begins to fill my room, and I hear the voices of men at our table, and birds in the trees and Aunt Lavina from the bottom stair calling me to breakfast.

The kitchen is filled with the smells of ham and sausage and the noise of the grape pickers

eating. "Pass me more of this, hand me some of that," they say to each other. Grandma says it's our duty to take care of those who come to help us with the harvest, even though they get paid at the end of the week. I nudge my way into an empty spot at the table.

"Grandma," I ask as she sets eggs and crusty bread in front of me, "when is mother going to send for me from America?"

The voices stop and the kitchen's quiet, except for the sound of Young Roberto's fork on the plate as he stabs at his food. He has wild curly hair like mine, but he lives across the river and is not my relative. I am sure if this, all my relatives live on this side of the river.

Grandma smiles, the voices start up again and she says, "I don't know little one. Let's pray on Sunday that she sends a letter soon."

"I will pray every day for a letter!" The man next to me tousles my hair and laughs, the other men smile. Except Young Roberto, who looks at me bug-eyed. I think his breakfast is stuck in his throat. Grandma narrows her eyes at him, giving him the look. Grandma does not allow bad table manners.

Months of Sundays pass and there is no letter. I have forgotten to pray, but grandma prays often. If her hands are not busy with cooking and cleaning and feeding the animals, they are busy touching every bead on her rosary, her lips moving in silent prayer. But I forget to ask again about mother. I don't know if there have ever been any letters, nobody has ever read one to me.

The phone is ringing. It's 3am. Aunt Lavina's voice murmuring in the hall as she answers. Grandma has been ill for weeks and is going to die. They will not let me see her. I hope the phone did not wake her. Uncle Aldo's footsteps echo in the hall.

"Who is it?"

"Julia." Her sister's name falls flatly out of her mouth, bitterness in her dull tone.

I am frozen in my bed, my blood running cold. Julia. My mother who never sent a single letter. My mother who I never knew and had forgotten. It is December 2nd, 1976 and Julia is on the phone.

I stand at the open doorway, Aunt Lavina's back to me as she listens to my mother's the voice in the receiver. I strain to hear; to hear anything at all. But for me there is only silence. Uncle Aldo stands in the darkened hallway, midway between us, looking back and forth, not sure which direction to move in. Not sure who will need comfort, his wife or his niece. Aunt Lavina puts the receiver down and turns, "She is not coming."

Uncle Aldo steps to me and kisses my forehead. "We will talk tomorrow, go back to bed now young lady, and sleep." But there is no sleep, only numbness and disbelief. I stare at Cat Stevens, in the spot where her picture used to be. I don't remember when it was taken down, or which boy poster first replaced it, or even where the picture is now.

We did not talk about the phone call that morning. Grandma has died and Julia is not coming.

It snowed the day of the funeral. The world covered in fresh white; pure and pristine, but for the black gaping hole in front of us. We hold hands, the three of us standing at the edge, the torment and pain of hell rushing out of that darkness, biting holes in my heart. This is the saddest day of my life, but at least grandma can be with grandpa and aunt Lavina's babies in heaven. We say nothing on the drive home. The world blanked in white, still, unmoving as if frozen in time. Not a single face peeks out from the windows we pass. The tires crunch in icy snow.

The kitchen is warm and full of the smell of food. The mother of Young Roberto has left a note on the table, "Dear Family, Polo con funghi is on the stove. Lasagna and apple crema torta in the fridge. My deepest sympathies for your loss." Signed, "Aunt Aldina."

"Why does she sign Aunt Aldina? Who does she think she is, she's nobody's aunt. Grandma hated her. Just because she raised her grandson Young Roberto like grandma raised me. That doesn't mean anything. Lots of grandmas raise their grandkids."

No one answers me. No one seems to have heard. Aunt Lavina pulls three plates from the cupboard; Uncle Aldo finds bread and begins cutting. They move widely around each other, as if they are magnets of the same charge and get pushed away each time they get too close.

"I think this calls for a bottle of wine," Uncle Aldo says, walking to the cellar door. Cold air rushes up, smelling of stale earth and old dried herbs, faded and musty. The smell of better days past, gifts from the garden, left too long in the dark and now unusable and moldy. He returns with a bottle that he dusts off, uncorks it and gently sets on the table.

"La Petite Julietta, Vintage 1972."

The air of the room turns and gentle and kind. The dull numbness in my heart and limbs thaw with the promise of a new future. Summer escapes the bottle. The pastoral scenes of my childhood dance through the room. I hear the echoes of songbirds and blue skies and love. I am reminded that this sad winter will pass, and summer will come again. I smile. It will be all right. We will be fine. But Aunt Lavina sits heavily, burying her face in her hands, her body shaking with sobs. The depth of this grief confuses me. There is something more here, but I don't understand. Uncle Aldo's face is stern and cold. There is a single knock at the front door and then

the sharp, quick step in the hall. A priest and two nuns appear. Only one nun looks at me, a hard stare that sees the table behind me and not me at all. She comes forward to take my hand.

"Julietta, your mother has asked that you come to live with us at the convent of Saint James."

My mother has not come for me but instead sent the Sisters to take me. Uncle Aldo and Aunt Lavina hold each other and cry, but do not look at me, they do not see me anymore, as if I am already lost to them. The nun holds my hand tightly as we move from the house. I did not get to taste the wine. Instead, my life has shattered, all that I loved taken from me by a mother who abandon me.

The priest looks down into my face with a soft smile, his hand now on my head. "It's ok, your brother is waiting in the car."