

COME SONO CONTENTA (How Happy I Am)
by Nadina LaSpina

"*Come sono contenta!* How happy I am!" my mother said, as she helped me hang my skirts in the closet, made room in her drawers for my underwear, watched 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 looked young. "*Come sono contenta!*" she kept saying and my heart was breaking as I heard her say it. I couldn't tell her that I was happy to be home with her. I had moved in to take care of her because she was dying. She had inoperable pancreatic cancer.

She seemed so genuinely happy that I couldn't help wondering whether she knew how little time she had left. Three months at the most was what Dr. Cohen, the gastroenterologist, had 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, as I sat across from him in 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 aide, a home health aide."

But I couldn't move to Queens to be 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 at the New School.

I had never graded finals so quickly. Usually I agonized over each point, so worried about being fair to each and every student. But in the past month I 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 asked Danny at least a hundred times: "Do you think she'll be okay until I can be with her?" And then: "Will you and Pico be okay while I'm with her?" I knew Danny was feeling very anxious about my decision. But he tried his best to be supportive, helping me prepare for the move, buying me things I needed to have with me - new underwear, toiletries, laxative herbs.

It couldn't be that my mother didn't realize how sick she was. 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 had been in this country my mother never learned English well enough to carry on a long conversation, but I knew she had no trouble understanding what was said. 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, she who had always described her every complaint in the minutest details. She had not told me about the vomiting, the constipation, the pain. She had hidden her weight loss and her swollen abdomen with loose clothes and big shoulder pads. Covered up her paleness with blush-on. When I insisted she have the tests, she shrugged: "*To' padre mi vuole*, that's all." Your father wants me with him, that's all.

She said "that's all" in English. There were some English expressions my mother was particularly fond of. Like many immigrants she spoke a hybrid language. It was a mixture of the standard Italian she kept from forgetting by reading novels and magazines and watching the Italian channel on TV, her native Sicilian dialect as well as imports from other dialects her friends spoke, and certain English words and expressions. "That's all" was one of my mother's favorite English expressions. So curt and final. "That's all" to her meant there was 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 did it matter that my

father was now dead, had been dead for almost a year? Thirty-five years ago she had left her family, her friends, her town where everyone spoke her language, to follow my father to a new far-away land. She was now ready to follow him again.

But I did argue with her as best I could and managed to convince her to go see her doctor, then the gastroenterologist he recommended. I practically had to force her to have the GI series and the MRIs. For me. I told her to just do it for me. The day we went to the doctor's office to talk about all 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.

"We can get a second opinion," I said, sitting in my car while I drove her home from the doctor's office. "I don't want to hear about it," she replied. I was too stunned and grieved to talk anyway. I kept my eyes on the road. "Don't worry, your father wants me with him, that's all!"

"This is the greatest mother's day present," my mother was now saying, "*come sono contenta!*" and, bending down, she put her arms around me, hugging the back of my wheelchair as well. I hugged her and all I felt was bones. Nicky, the old black and white mutt, lazily raised himself up off the kitchen floor and came to put his front paws on my lap. When there were hugs going around, Nicky always had to have his share.

"It feels like you never left," my mother said. And I remembered 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 pain in her back. I remembered 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 undressed that night I saw how much more weight she had lost since the last time I saw her undressed in the doctor's office. She was a skeleton, my mother who, though always slim, even at 78, had been still shapely. She wore a padded bra to hide the emptied out skin sacks that had once been beautiful full breasts. Her belly was that of a woman ready to deliver. Its size made her every movement difficult. Her bony legs trembled as she struggled to keep her balance.

Suddenly I remembered my mother's young supple body, the body I was so close to when I was a little girl in Sicily. So close that I felt a part of it, that I thought my body could not exist separate from hers. I remembered my mother's strong arms holding me, carrying me. I remember the softness of her breasts, her sweet lavender smell. The feelings those memories evoked were overwhelming.

Then I also remembered when as a teenager, undergoing surgery after surgery in American hospitals, and being taught to walk with braces and crutches, I compared my scoliosed back and my skinny legs framed in metal bars with my mother's straight slender trunk and shapely limbs. How I envied my mother then for her still perfect body -the body I would have had if I had not contracted polio as an infant.

Now I wanted to close my eyes, not have to look at her; at the same time I wanted to hug her, I was filled with tenderness. She quickly put on her nightgown, surely sensing my discomfort.

In the morning she stood very wobbly at the stove to make coffee in my father's little espresso pot. "I never wash this pot with dish-washing detergent," she says. And I smiled remembering my father's rule: "No detergent, it kills the taste of coffee."

It was a beautiful spring day. So we decided to sit out in the garden. I carried the hot pot in one hand and wheeled my chair with the other, so carefully. She brought out two dainty gold-rimmed cups. We sat in the sun side by side and sipped the coffee. The garden was a bit of a jungle since she had not

been able to tend to it. I certainly couldn't help much with gardening but I did manage to unwind the hose and I watered her rose bushes from my wheelchair. "Be gentle," she cautioned me, "don't let the water hit too hard."

That first week I was with her, my mother did all she could to show me how happy she was to have me with her. We celebrated Mother's day with veal parmigiana delivered from the Italian Restaurant on Bell Boulevard, and she kept repeating "*che buona!*" how good it is, while she very inconspicuously and delicately spit into a paper napkin. I made believe I didn't notice. But Nicky let her know by whining that he thought it would be less wasteful to let him have what she was spitting out.

We looked through the Italian magazines I bought for her and I read aloud while she sat holding her belly trying to hide the pain she felt. We watched *Cinema Paradiso* on video in four or five sittings since she couldn't sit through a whole movie. "I'm OK" she reassured me when I heard her crying in the bathroom and looked in on her. And when at night I got up because I heard her moaning, she apologized for waking me. "I forgot you were here," she said. "*Come sono contenta!*"

When the hospice nurse came that Tuesday, my mother, always the gracious hostess, offered her some cold *orzata*, an Italian almond drink. It was unusually hot for May and the nurse accepted it. I was surprised to hear my mother communicate so well with her. "I feel better because my daughter is here," my mother told the nurse in flawless English. The nurse's name was Ellen. She was my age, maybe a little younger. She told me she needed to look at me when I spoke because she was very hard of hearing. That's when I noticed that she was wearing hearing aids. I liked her very much. I felt we had a bond, the three of us, my mother with her cancer, me with my wheelchair, this nurse with her hearing aids.

While we sipped *orzata*, sitting in the garden, Ellen went over the long list of medications my mother was on. She said to increase the Colace when we told her of the trouble my mother was having in the bathroom. She told me that my mother didn't want stronger pain medication because she didn't like to feel too drowsy. She could have it whenever she was ready, she said. She explained that she would be coming more and more often as my mother got sicker, and that we could also have a home health aide when it became necessary. I felt less anxious. I felt Ellen was just the right person to see my mother and me through this.

May 16th, my birthday, was coming up. My mother decided she was going to make my favorite Sicilian meal. *Falsomagro*. The word means "fake-lean." *Falsomagro* is a beef roll, that looks innocently lean but is stuffed with fattening delicacies and cooked in tomato sauce. The day before my birthday, she made a list of all I needed to buy at the Italian store on Francis Lewis Boulevard. *Prosciutto di Parma, Parmigiano Reggiano, Soppresata, Caciocavallo...* For the large thin slice of beef she sent me to the butcher shop on Bell. "Your father never bought meat at the supermarket," she reminded me.

We didn't have a very good night. We made repeated trips to the bathroom. Bent over in pain, she held on to my wheelchair, using it as a walker. I wheeled slowly and smoothly, carefully maneuvering around furniture and through doors. All the time we talked --about neighbors in Sicily wondering what had 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 were truly enjoying this nighttime reminiscing. As if she wouldn't rather be sleeping -free of pain. As if I wouldn't rather be sleeping -- at home in bed with Danny and our pussy cat, Pico. Both of us acting as if we didn't mind at all that she was dying.

We got started preparing the *falsomagro* in the morning. We sat at the kitchen table side by side. She had me beat the beef down so it got more thin and tender, while she peeled and then quartered three hard-boiled eggs. We moistened the beef with olive oil, then sprinkled breadcrumbs and grated parmesan cheese on it. A few sprigs of parsley, a layer of prosciutto, then she placed the quartered eggs and sliced cheese along the middle, together with lots of broken up sausage. Nicky sat at attention between my mother and me, waiting patiently for bits of cheese and sausage. My mother did the

rolling, because I was too clumsy. Even with her hands shaking, she could do it just right. She tied white string all around the *falsomagro* so it wouldn't come apart while cooking. When it was all done we sat back and admire it. "*Che bello!*" how beautiful, my mother said with pride.

But we had a hard time browning it in the frying pan. My mother couldn't stand at the stove for long, I could see it was too painful for her. In my chair I was too low to do a good job. Suddenly I remembered that my old crutches were stored in the closet in what used to be my room. The last time I had used those crutches was almost a year ago when my father was dying. It had been years since I had used crutches outside of that house, since post-polio made walking much too difficult and strenuous. Now I went to get them out of the closet and I stood, very precariously. "*Attenta,*" careful, my mother kept saying, as I took a few tentative steps, holding on to the crutches for dear life. When I was 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 had use of it. My mother sat in my wheelchair and positioned herself right behind me. I felt her trembling hand on my back trying to balance me. "Put the brakes on," I told her.

Feeling safe and steady now, I lit the burner and started turning with my free hand the *falsomagro* in the pan. From behind me my mother gave me instructions. When the beef roll was all browned, she told me to lift it out of the pan and put it in the big pot where the tomato sauce was cooking. That's when I ran into trouble. It was so long that, if I stuck the fork in the middle of it and tried to lift it with one hand, I was sure it would brake. But I was afraid to let go of the crutch with my other hand. Then my mother, still sitting in my wheelchair, put both her hands around my waist to steady me. Very carefully, with my left hand I slid the spatula under the beef roll while with my right hand I stuck the fork in it. I was able to 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* cooked in the sauce, we could both relax. I got back in my chair, my mother lay down on her bed. "Check to make sure it's not sticking to the bottom of the pot," she said from time to time. I obediently went to the stove and, not really seeing what I was doing from my chair, with the big wooden spoon I gave the *falsomagro* in the pot a little push. "It moves so it's not sticking," I reported back to my mother.

Then it was time to cook the pasta. My mother made her way to the stove holding on to the walls. We chose *rotelle* out of the rich variety of pastas in her cabinet. While from my chair I stirred the *rotelle*, she got a big serving plate out of the china closet. "We have to get the *falsomagro* out of the pot," she said. And this time I was the one to position myself behind her and put my hands on the small of her back to steady her. She put the *falsomagro* on the plate and we looked at each other. Who was going to carry it to the dining table? I picked up the heavy plate and held it with both hands while she slowly pushed me in my chair to the dining room. She sat down at the table and started slicing the *falsomagro* with surgical precision, in spite of her shaky hands.

Finally, proud of our joint accomplishment, we were ready to enjoy my birthday meal. My mother had put out her prettiest dishes, with the blue trellis border, her crystal glasses, and her best silverware. She had insisted on an embroidered tablecloth and embroidered napkins.

I poured myself a glass of pinot grigio, she poured herself some mineral water. The meal was pure perfection. The pasta was exactly *al dente*, the sauce was sweet and tangy. I took a slice of *falsomagro* and ate it together with my pasta. I just couldn't wait and follow the Italian etiquette of eating the *primo piatto* before starting on the *secondo*. The *falsomagro* was the best I had ever tasted. It was so good I wanted to remember the taste forever. I knew my mother would never make it for me again. I doubted I would ever want to make it for myself and, if I ever did, I knew I could never make it this good.

My mother couldn't really eat. She faked it. Chewed and spit in her napkin, trying to do it without me noticing. Or dropped piece after piece on the floor for Nicky to eat. "*Ti piace?*" do you like it? she kept asking me. I wished I had the right words to tell her just how much I liked it. Just how much I

appreciated the effort she put into making it. Just how much I wished she could make it for me again on my next birthday.

I ate so much *falsomagro*, I was too full for my birthday dessert. I could only manage to eat half a *cannolo*. It was delicious. The shell so light and crisp and cinnamony, the ricotta cream so smooth. Bits of candied fruit gave the cream a fresh taste. "The Italian pastry shop on Francis Lewis is better than any pastry shop in Little Italy," I told my mother. She smiled, as she picked up the other half of the *cannolo* and ate it. She really ate it. I waited for her to spit it out into her napkin but she didn't. She swallowed it, effortlessly it seemed. "*Che buono!*" how good it is, she murmured and closed her eyes to enjoy the taste without distractions.

When she opened her eyes again, I was surprised to see a look I had not seen on her face for a while. A look of mischief. "We need some *amaretto* to get this down," she said. "We sure do," I laughingly agreed as I went to get the bottle of amaretto and two long-stemmed cordial glasses from her china closet. I filled the glasses, still laughing. She raised hers. "*Buon compleanno,*" happy birthday, she said to me.

Her eyes sparkling, her face glowing with excitement, my mother looked young. She looked as beautiful to me as she did forty-some years ago when she would carry me in her arms and her face, beautiful and smooth and always a little flushed, would be only a kiss away. We clinked glasses. "*Grazie, mamma,*" I said. "This is the best birthday I've ever had." She laughed as she sipped her amaretto. "*Come sono contenta!*"

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