

Chiara Klein

The ritual begins every evening when Alessandra gets home from work. Sometime between 4 o'clock and 7 o'clock, the lock of the front door clicks twice, announcing her arrival. "Ciao, my girls!" her voice rings out, in that distinctively resonant Italian timbre, hers infused with British formality leftover from time spent in England. From our respective bedrooms, Gabby and I call out in reply. In our three unique, cheerful octaves, the effect is that of a bell choir. And all at once, the house is full.

Then comes the period of inactivity: I can manage to distract myself only in trivial ways as the minutes tick slowly and my stomach grumbles in cadence. I hear Mich shuffle to the bathroom and then back to lie on his bed, as some unintelligible Italian TV show blares. I begin to grow restless when I hear the clattering of plates being set just across the hallway in the kitchen; and even more so when some rich, steaming aroma finds its way up the short flight of steps to my bedroom, settling around me and demanding my willing attention. I know the call will come any minute and my anticipation grows accordingly. And suddenly, there it is: "Girls!...Mich!...Pronto!" Gabby's door slides open, I thump down the stairs, Mich rolls over into his sandals and out into the hallway and the three of us converge for an instant before descending on the brightly lit kitchen, happy victims of the Pied Pier's tune.

Chairs scrape back and we exclaim over the dish placed in front of us. Alessandra beams as she turns from the stove to the table to finish serving. We settle down and begin to blissfully entertain the cream-drenched gnocchi, or dense spinach lasagna, or intricately seasoned bean and rice soup before us. For a time, only the sounds of greedy

forks bounce between the tiled walls. And then slowly we begin to look up, to meet each others' eyes, smiling as sauce drips down my chin or Gabby reaches for another piece of bread. "Com'era il tuo giorno, Mich?" "eh...bene bene. E tu? Cosa hai fatto?" There are always bits to offer, anecdotes that Alessandra loves to hear. Often times, our "babbo" just has to shrug as the three ladies gossip. But he usually gets his two cents in somehow, more often than not in the form of a cheeky American quip plucked from some ambiguous cultural vignette. "Yeahhh, baby" and "gorgeous" are recurring favorites. Alessandra makes a face, calls him an idiot, catches our eyes, and bursts out laughing. Plates have been scraped clean by now, and we push our chairs back to help clear the table. Before Gabby and I withdraw to our rooms, we turn back to blow Alessandra a kiss and thank her. "Ma, for what??" she returns, with feigned anger, before breaking into a smile once more.

Ritual is a term inextricably linked with Italian culture. The order bestowed on all things is not a matter of efficiency or even merely habit, but is instead reflective of a reverence for life's consistencies. This is a reverence conspicuously missing in our native culture of total disposability. Experiences, social causes, iPhone editions are tossed before they even have time to gather a layer of dust. Yet here in Florence, I have felt the wisdom and compassion of tradition, the deep calm that is born of routine. Almost as if there is a secret here, one nestled in window box gardens and hiding in the shadows of ancient cloisters, that we have missed while spinning our American hamster wheels; and too have been able to participate in my own now-beloved realm of ritual has been one of the greatest joys of discovering my Italy.