First Sunday of Some Month

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I thought of him as quite the martyr, never looking at anyone as he thumped the stub of his amputated finger methodically on the table. He always took the smallest piece of meat and passed up the sugar for his coffee, though there was more than enough for everyone, now. On the first Sunday of each month, our Grandma invited our family to dinner, not out of warmth and goodness, but rather as a social obligation of her role. She was that way though.

Being the youngest, I had not yet tired of the routineness of these occasions where the same meals were served and the same topics discussed. Up until this particular Sunday, I had never really paid much attention and hardly noticed that my Grandpa even existed in the corner card table chair that was brought up from the basement. Now old enough to drink coffee without adding cream, I was intrigued by the silent man who ate by himself with the fork his mamma had given him as a boy. The few times he did speak were only to recite one of his old-country stories. He usually told them in Italian, slipping into English now and then for my sake. I never knew exactly what my Grandpa was saying, but through his expression, I knew what he meant. It was this day that I decided to stay and watch him finish eating, though the table was cleared and the TV already on. When he was done, I quietly asked, “Full?”

He half-nodded and then cupping his hand over one ear, told me a story of the old-country. I could almost hear their voices echoing inside his curved palm. I suppose he held it that way so he could hear himself speak.

“Italo! Italo Nello. Go and get the planta, we have a visitor.” The young boy scrambled from his place at the table where he was helping his mamma and her woman friend make the pasta. He reached for the sack of cornmeal on the hook beside the front door and then waited patiently for their guest
to knock. There hadn't been a peasant, (or visitor as his mamma humbly named them), for some time, but she always knew when one was coming.

"No mangiare, no mangiare figlia mia," the peasant woman moaned from the porch.

Italo opened the door and without looking at the woman, held the sack before her. She scooped up a cupful and then lifted it to his face so he could see how much she had taken. She left without thanking. He placed the sack back on its hook and hurried to join the women still at work. He knew that more would be begging in the days to come. His papa was getting thin again and his mamma's woman friend looked worried. His mamma just worked harder.

"How quiet your boy is," said his mamma's woman friend.

"He's a good boy," said his mamma and she kept on working.

"Your boy, he should be out playing," said his mamma's woman friend.

"He's busy," his mamma said. "Put more flour down, Italo." Italo didn't look up from his work.

Three months later, when Italo and his mamma were making the bread, she stopped her work and told him to get the planta from its hook. The peasant on the porch this time was his mamma's woman friend. He didn't look at her when he handed over the whole sack, turned his back and then closed the door. It was the last of their cornmeal.

I played with a pile of salt someone had sprinkled over a purple wine stain in the center of the tablecloth.

"More," he said, tapping his wine glass with the fork his mamma had given him as a boy. I half-leaped from my chair and, reaching the jug from its place beside the table, poured the heavy liquid for him.

"Basta," he said and I plugged shut the bottle. He sat sipping his wine for a moment before beginning again. His next story was of the Great Depression. He covered his stubbed index finger with his right hand.
Now in America, he was no longer called Italo Nello. Instead his new wife insisted he be called Pete. She didn't want him to be known as an immigrant, although she had come over on the same boat as he. She was that way though. He was a slight man, too simple for her, but at the same time, much too handsome. Each morning he would pack his own lunch before catching the streetcar that would take him downtown. There he worked at a pecan factory amongst the other new Americans. Speaking a mixture of languages, they talked the penny-paid days away.

"Hey, Pete. You don't stop that blowin' songs through your teeth, we're gonna miss that there noon whistle," said the man who worked the nutcracker line. Pete stopped whistling, but didn't look up from his work at the sorting line.

"Pick 'em good, Pete," the foreman chanted to amuse himself in his boredom. All the clanking, hissing and tinkering stopped with one blast of the shrill bell and men reached under conveyors for lunch sacks. Straddling benches and backs of chairs, the men gathered to eat, each praising his own ethnic appetite. Pete slid a step stool beside the group. He had made himself a scrambled egg and zucchini sandwich, and after each bite nibbled a piece of provolone cheese.

"Hey, Pete. Why you eat that there thing when it's still growin'?" said the man who worked the nutcracker line. All the others laughed. Pete smiled, but it only lasted until his next bite. Before long, the man who worked the nutcracker line let out a familiar belch that indicated to the others mealtime was over. Already working diligently, Pete didn’t notice the foreman call his name.

"Get the wax out, Pete. I need you here at the nutcracker line. My nutcracker man's wife just gave him a baby boy and he's runnin' crazy."

Pete was obediently by his side and nodding as the foreman asked if he knew how to work that machine. He didn't really though, and so he lost his finger to a pecan cracker.
By now the others were gathering for dessert. My Grandma didn’t bother to ask why we were still sitting there, nor did anyone else, for that matter. She was too busy boasting of her homemade American apple pie. The filling was always too tart and the crust too soggy, but she thought it was the best and that’s all that counted. She was that way though. When she pushed a piece in front of her husband’s face, he poked it away with the fork his mamma had given him as a boy.

“No pie,” he said shoving himself from the table and folding up his chair. I always skipped my Grandma’s dessert after tasting it for the first time. She’d pass me by, claiming it a shame I didn’t like sweets. I followed my Grandpa to the basement when he went to put away the chair. He brought with him the fork his mamma had given him as a boy. Unusually long, and having three prongs instead of four, it had worn thin and was tarnished beyond repair. He reached inside the makeshift bar he had crafted in his basement and poked at the cherries fermenting in a jar of brandy. He took one for himself and then set the fork in front of me with a saturated cherry suspended from its sharp prongs. He had remembered I had always loved them, even as a little girl. I ate slowly, sucking the sweetness from it while he told me the story of the special fork his mamma had given him as a boy.

And then another month of another year, we were again at my Grandma’s house. There was no longer any need to get the card table chair from the basement. My Grandpa had been in the hospital for over a week. I had expected my Grandma to cancel our Sunday dinner to be with him, but she didn’t. She was that way though. After dinner I excused myself early from the table and went to sit at my Grandpa’s bar. I scanned the dusty shelves filled with unopened wines, some still wearing the Christmas bows they came in. I opened the door where my Grandpa kept the jar with the brandied cherries. Next to it was the fork his mamma had given him as a boy. I shut the door without having one.