

Grace Enough by Lois J. Peterson

Like many Italian meals, this one looks as if it's over long before it has even begun. In the dining room, three tables of varied height and width have been pushed together. The tablecloth is littered with crumbs, with olive stones. Cutlery and plates have been pushed aside to make room for elbows and wine glasses. A savaged loaf of bread lies abandoned, half-off its plate. Three bottles of wine are on the table, one of white, two of red. All are half empty. Or half full. It does not matter which. There's always more wine.

The kitchen is still quiet. Nonna stirs the spaghetti sauce in its deep aluminum pot. Its heat sends up scarves of steam which cloud her glasses. Why is everyone here in her house tonight? Perhaps a birthday is being celebrated. Or a graduation. The answer might come to her later, as will the recollection of the name of the small girl with the green fingernails who rushed through the room earlier, tipping a basket of bread from the counter.

Nonna turns from the stove to watch latecomers arrive. A girl with a careful face, slick make-up, and dressed in black, bends down to pat the dog who has followed her indoors and pads along the hall towards the kitchen.

"Good dog, Bruno," says the girl who could be any of Nonna's granddaughters. She scratches behind the dog's ears and his grin reveals yellow teeth. "Good dog. Stay."

Bruno, heavy and stolid, grey-muzzled and rheumy-eyed, slumps under the kitchen table and blinks.

The young woman has been followed into the house by a man who might be her father; they share the same eyes, the thin chin. He is one of her sons, this Nonna knows. She has so many, and many sons-in law, too.

The man and the girl are welcomed by others who turn from the table, lift their heads from their glasses, look up from conversations.

"Come. Come in. We are waiting."

"Hi, Gina. Your timing's great. "

"Smell that spaghetti!"

"Gina. Go say hello to your Nonna."

Nonna stirs the sauce, and leans away from the proffered kiss.

"Come and sit down with us" the girl says. "You don't have to do that, Nonna. We'll take care of everything." She removes the stained wooden spoon from her hand and lays it on the counter. Nonna steps back as bubbles of sauce rise and burst, spraying tomato onto the shining white surface of the stove. It looks like blood.

She stands in the doorway watching her family in the other room.

Over the fireplace in a niche of bricks, a candle burns inside an amber glass lamp. Above it glows a bowl of red plastic flowers. A tinted photograph shows a man sitting in a chair, a mandolin resting across his knees.

Nonna remembers how her husband left the family with no warning, falling to the cement floor of the school janitor's room where he'd worked for thirty-two years. There was no one with him when he died, no one to hold him back. Nonna hears strains of music, but when she looks away all she hears is chatter and laughter.

She retreats from the room and returns to the stove. The aroma of onion and garlic, tomato and oregano, bring with them the knowledge that this is no longer her kitchen, her sauce, her herbs and spices. She takes a wooden grinder from the ledge behind the stove and scatters a shower of dark pepper into the sauce.

Nonna peers into the pot to see if chicken has been added. But she sees only the thick, slick red gloss of sauce, and the occasional mound of a meatball. Earlier, a man had removed the chicken from the oven, dumped it all on a large platter, and taken it from the room. She had followed to watch the children cluster around the chicken wings. They had been overcooked, and the children's mouths were soon brown with grease and crumbs. Nonna doesn't know which of the three boys and four girls belongs to which adult. They are all passing through the stage she's seen so often, those years between three and eight when they resemble everyone else and each other. Each has huge eyes, dark hair and olive skin. Nonna no longer knows that all resemble her.

During the evening the children will be buffeted by admonishments from everyone.

"Quiet now. Such a baby for such a big girl."

"Play later. Eat now."

"Where's your brother?"

"Just a little wine. Some water."

"*Basta*. Enough. Now look what you've done."

Some children listen and obey. Others ignore everyone, even their own parents. But Nonna has held and loved and cared for all these little ones. Once they turned to her with their hurts and hopes; once they obeyed her above all others. Now they ignore her as does everyone else.

Nonna steps aside to allow two women to pass into the kitchen. Enveloped in dense shawls of steam, they drain the vats of spaghetti and pour the thick streams of sauce over the pasta.

"*Grazie*. Thanks Nonna," says one as she takes the ladle from her hand and stirs sauce into the spaghetti. Nonna watches as the food is carried into the dining room where everyone is busy moving bowls around the table, passing plates, urging children to their seats.

"There you are. Sit here."

Nonna sits, folds her hands in her lap and watches as her plate is piled with food, with a tangle of bloody spaghetti, meatballs, salad, a ragged piece of bread.

"Eat. Come eat. Everyone."

"Look at the food. It's wonderful. Who did all this?"

Nonna would like to tell her family that she stood over the deep pot of sauce all day. That she woke at daybreak to slice and fry onions, that she added garlic and herbs before braising the pork bones for two hours, then she added cans of tomato paste, and water, herbs and pepper. She would like to tell them that she alone recognizes when the sauce reaches the right thickness, the moment when the last strands of water at the edge of the pan are ready to be drawn into the sauce and it can then be left to cook at low heat to allow the flavours to gather together until no single ingredient can be distinguished from another.

But although her family never speaks of it, to themselves or to her, these tasks have been taken from her. All that remains for Nonna to do is to stir the sauce and step aside so others can take charge of the meal. She would like to tell them that the only safe place these days is at the stove where steam and aroma gather to warm her.

"Why are you here?" she suddenly asks.

"Nonna. It's Gina's birthday. You remember."

"We're here for her birthday. Look at the wonderful meal you made for us all."

Across the table Gina rises from her seat. Her chair tips and falls. "Why do we keep pretending?" she cries. "Why do we pretend that Nonna still does everything. Why can't we say that everyone else has to bring the food and set the table and make sure the house is clean?"

Gina's voice flies around the room but her gaze is on Nonna who turns from the man who might be her son, from the woman who she does not think can be her daughter. She looks again across at the girl with the bright lips and eyes that glisten with tears. And Nonna knows that this girl, Gina, her granddaughter, is the only one who understands how far she has gone from them all.

"Why do we keep pretending?" Gina asks again.

Everyone is quiet as Nonna looks down at her lap, thinking of the warmth of the kitchen behind her. "The dog should not be in the house," she says.

"I thought you'd like to see him. Don't you remember Bruno?" asks her granddaughter.

"Of course I remember him." Nonna's voice is sharp. "But dogs should not be in the house." She returns to the kitchen and flicks her hands at Bruno. He rises and lumbers off, unsurprised and blinking. "Outside now." Nonna opens the front door and puts the dog back out into the night. "Good dog, Bruno. Stay,"

As she returns to her family Nonna recites to herself all the rules for a good dinner, all the things she taught her daughters, and the wives of her sons, so they could prepare the meals that she can no longer make.

Invite everyone. Welcome everyone. Fill their plates. Describe how the meatballs are made, with a little Parmesan and fresh herbs. How the chicken is cooked once in the oven, then cooked again in the sauce. How the salad is always eaten plain. It needs no dressing, perhaps just a little vinegar, just lettuce, a few slices of tomato, perhaps some carrot. How the bread is cut, holding it against your chest, sawing the knife towards the body. So easy.

Invite everyone. Welcome everyone. Smile through raised voices. More spaghetti? There's still so much left. And the sauce is always so good.

Nonna looks around the table at her children and grandchildren and the daughters-and sons-in-law, then across the room to where her dead husband smiles at her from his place over the fireplace.

Nonna bends to her food and says one word. "Grace."

"Yes, grace. Let's have grace," a voice repeats. And everyone bends their heads, closing their eyes and clasping their hands in their laps or over plates piled high with food.

"Bless this meal and all who share it. Amen."

The family remains quiet for a moment as if they are wondering if this is grace enough for Nonna.

"*Sta bene*. Good." She plunges her fork into the heap of food in front of her. Everyone settles back in their chairs and the room fills again with the sound of cutlery and voices.

"Sal. Fetch more wine."

"Nonna likes meatballs. Give her one. No, two."

"Remember her meatballs?"

"But these are good, too," Nonna says to herself as voices rise and fall around her.

Later, plates are cleared and the table looks as it did before the meal began. Scattered with crumbs, littered with crusts, the wine bottles still half-full. Or half-empty. It does not matter which.

In the kitchen, bright pans sit on of the stove, sending steam into the air to settle in moist drops against the ceiling. While outside, the dog sleeps on in the dark. ♣
