

Toti O'Brien

SALT OF THE EARTH

The nuns' pasta had a wide reputation, and consistently bad. It was actually a term of comparison used to point at terrible cooking.

Why pasta of all food? In our country it wasn't a course but a symbol. Always present (a twice-daily entrée), its success depended on timing and care more than ingredients and skills. Pasta was only good if perfectly cooked in sufficient, full boiling, properly salted water, just as long as necessary... Drained and seasoned in a blink then, with firm expert gestures. Hesitation would be fatal. Timing needed scientific calculation. All prospective eaters should be fork in hand while the cook, vivaciously, scooped away.

Pasta, thus, meant domestic efficiency and love.

Its seasoning added to the concept. Being usually a simple tomato sauce, its appeal hid in minor details each cook claimed to master. Not all tomato sauces were the same, cooks suggested with a tone of conspiracy. Due to mysterious tricks—slight adjustments, never explained—pasta condiments went from exquisite to frankly disgusting, which defines the nuns' tomato sauce.

I have repeatedly tasted it, when allowed to stay in school for the afternoon. Having lunch at the nunnery—where I frequented elementary—was a joy. It provided me with a thrill of freedom due to the long absence from home. The meal's quality was the least of my worries. I would have gulped stones without noticing.

I can reconstruct both taste and consistency of the *pastasciutta* we ate. First of all it wasn't dry, as its name implied and tradition exacted. It was wet. The sauce, too thinned out, mollified the noodles, giving them a gummy texture and a tendency to stick to each other. They were usually insipid and cold, tepid at best. The condiment, bloody red, had the slight acidity of can contents insufficiently labored by the magic of mothers, aunts, grandmothers.

Pasta felt overcooked. It probably wasn't. It became it by the time it left those towering pots, taller than us, to reach into a few hundreds of plastic plates (one more striking lack of taste).

Catholic schools weren't fancy places by then, in my country, but a cheap form of education. They were crowded. Kids of working class often remained after noon, though lessons were uniquely taught in the morning. But their folks couldn't afford nannies, and older siblings were already

employed. If grandparents had died or—as it commonly occurred—still lived in the village, nuns would be the default.

They organized naive (yet no less delightful) after-school activities, such as choir singing, craft making, ball games in the courtyards, or, of course, helping out. This last happened to be the most interesting. Helping anywhere—included those giant, imposing, quasi-industrial kitchens I finally explored, thus acquiring a zest for community life. I found comfort in the plainness, the essentiality devoid of comparison. I had never enjoyed complex rituals around food... they loaded something natural with an artificial surplus, indigestible.

To me the nuns' pasta was good. I was hungry from exertion and fun, hurried to fill up, then run towards more exertion and fun.

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She came in as a substitute when I was in eighth grade. Our literature and language instructor (who taught several courses, being responsible for the class overall preparedness) had left without warning at mid-year. She had a nervous breakdown, we were told. It sounded scary and vague. She was questioning her religious vocation...she might leave the congregation.... It sounded zesty though not unheard of. It recurrently occurred.

We had examinations to pass, Middle School to complete. Being briskly abandoned was bad. Our principal would find someone strong and reliable... not too much of a disciplinarian, we hoped. We couldn't help worrying.

She was unbelievably small: a child-size, a miniature. Old by our standards—that could be anything after forty. We of course couldn't judge by her hair, sealed under the veil. But a grayish mustache shaded her upper lip, conferring authority. Not that we would doubt such a quality: Sister Mia was a powerhouse. She could have handled a regiment instead than a bunch of teens. I wonder if she actually did, at least once. I would not be surprised.

In a blink she assessed our scholarly weaknesses (our previous teacher had slackened before quitting) and perfected her plan of attack. We would all pass the exams with top grades, she announced. We shivered, afraid of being overburdened. But we shouldn't have—she was as inflexible as just. We had to do what she asked for, which was reasonable though it didn't admit excuse. We should comply, period. Once done we were done.

NONFICTION

I liked her right away. A fact of chemistry... is it possible between kids and old nuns? I think so. She had come back from Spain where she was sent during the Civil War, then allowed to indefinitely stay. Did they summon her for our sake? She liked it best there, she admitted. During the Civil War, paradoxically, she had become a Communist. She had seen enough social injustice, and too closely—she explained—not to take a definite stance.

We believed voting Communist was forbidden to Catholic nuns. It was perfectly fine—she affirmed—her mustache, pearly with minuscule beads of sweat, fiercely quivering.

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I was a troubled girl at the time. After elementary, I was switched from the bad-pasta-school to a more snobbish institute, and I hadn't been able to adjust. Disconnected from my schoolmates—all belonging to higher social ranks—I resented my difference, was bored by study, eager for something I missed without figuring what it might be.

Sister Mia sensed my unrest. She perfectly framed each student, firmly holding the group on her palm. She proposed me a deal: she would spare me a few hours of class each time I'd bring her extra work in the morning. I was quick to accept. She exacted a translation from Latin or into Latin: a full page she delivered as soon as she saw me. For six months I daily complied. It was hard, but I managed. I ended up completing my work in less than an hour. Then I started to enjoy it like a puzzle, a mystery I craved unspooling. And I never missed once.

Afterwards I had changed. Afterwards I was someone else. I'm aware of it now, though I still can't explain it.

My reward: at mid-morning, when language courses were over and the class switched to lighter instruction, I was out. Sister Mia rode in her small Fiat with me on the passenger side, having loaded the vehicle with all sort of stuff: food, books, toys, shoes, clothes. We crossed town, headed to far and dilapidated outskirts—to an area so poor it seemed stuck centuries behind. Also in absence of rain the terrain was muddy, probably for some sour system fault, confirmed by the nasty smells. Vegetation was scanty and sad in spite of excess humidity. Housing consisted in huts and barracks, too sparse to be called a slum. In a cube of concrete of uncertain function Mia had made her own alternative school. Obviously an only room, though we built dividers to allow various activities. I said we built, for I helped at any task my boss indicated.

As you guessed I couldn't ask better than sauntering from this to that, discovering a fun skill per hour: masonry to plumbing, to carpentry, to electricity. But my duties weren't limited to construction. Sister Mia put my literacy at fruition—she would not waste a drop of any resource available. She dispatched me from this to that table in order to instruct chosen students, in whatever a subject I could even barely fake.

I was suddenly exposed to an unsuspected model of functioning: everyone was in charge, offering the level of skill she currently owned. All the way, from elders to babies...always present in the room, doubling of course as a nursery. Doubling is a limited word for the multi-functionality of what now would be called a cultural center, perhaps. Then such term didn't exist. We just went with 'school.'

But how different was this school from where I was sent in the morning—Latin version in hand. I loved this just as much as I loathed that. I am not sure of what my busy afternoons fulfilled: many things, I suspect, and all paramount. Such as flexibility. Imagination. Purpose. Usefulness. Exchange. Fairness.

Freedom.

Before hopping in the Fiat I changed in the restrooms, tossing in a plastic bag the blue uniform I hated. I wore what I believed most suited me, of course forbidden clothes: a tight fitting blouse, emerald green, and my favorite black miniskirt. I wore hose instead of socks, and a pair of ballerina shoes. After all I might meet boys by leaving the convent, diving into the real world Sister Mia opened for me. She didn't care how I dressed. I looked pretty much like the girls I taught, like the sweet teen-mothers whose babies I pampered, while they learned their algebra and grammar.

Mia could teach it all, any level. I wouldn't have been capable of judging the extent of her knowledge, and I certainly didn't try. I was busy doing, busy enjoying. But I clearly recall she could explain anything to anyone. I do not remember a time when she was at loss, were the problem a broken faucet or a calculus test. I don't know where she had acquired her diplomas, what she had studied or when—she was not in her prime, as proved by her whitening mustache. Though her face, a small rosy apple, didn't bear many signs of wear. I knew nothing of her but the present tense—that wholly sufficed me. For I was in it, having fun.

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NONFICTION

In the morning I had packed lunch, simply doubling my snack—making it more abundant, then halving it. Thus mom wouldn't suspect I skipped cafeteria, being instead in a car, gladly riding with my beloved mentor. Almost every day I made my favorite sandwich: thickly buttered bread with a couple of anchovies. I adored the taste, almost guilty of biting into that scrumptious delicacy, being spared both family table and refectory. I relished the salty tanginess, the smell of fish, my morsel of ocean.

Freedom: did I call your name?

I never told my parents, or anybody, a thing. I'm not sure if the principal or other teachers knew. While arrangements must have been made for my missing courses, they were never addressed in my presence. Grades on my report simply remained the same...besides Latin, popped to a brave A+. For a dead language, it brought quite a life to my lousy teens.

June arrived, alas. We got our diplomas and quite brilliantly, as our sub had promised. Then we left for vacations, while our folks chose the appropriate high schools. I remained in the same institute two more years, for gymnasium—at my great discontent. All my disquiet resumed.

Teachers obviously had changed. Worse... in the fall Mia was nowhere around. Or, I guess, we would have struck a deal, though I was no more of her students. But she was nowhere to be found—rumors said she was sent back to Spain. Did she ask to? It would have been cruel, but could not be ruled out. She had been honest: she disliked our snobbish little society, even only part time. Did she obey orders? Nuns have to, even when they possess a mind of their own. Was she punished for something she did?

Was she, god forbid?