

A MEMORABLE DAY

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Italy in autumn is filled with cool breezes which I enjoyed while walking the streets of the ancient city. When I stepped off the plane the day before, the air had an earthy smell and the sun was not as hot as a summer day. It was pleasurable as I rushed outside the Termini station to wave for a taxi to take me to my destination. But as I stood waiting, a familiar smell hit my nostrils. I stopped looking for a taxi and followed the aroma of what I recognized as roasted chestnuts. Instantly I thought of Christmas with my father and how much he took pride in roasting chestnuts on an open fire. The next day I planned to visit his village in the Abruzzo region.

I arrived at Tufo di Carsoli the day of the Sagra delle Castagne / The Chestnut Harvest. It was hard to believe that this old, traditional festival was still being celebrated—although I had been back to Italy many times, this was the first time I was visiting my father's birthplace. The narrow streets were all decorated as for a Saint-Day celebration. People's homes were bedecked with autumn leaves and chestnut foliage; and the "Tricolore" swayed from balconies and poles, giving the town a festive mood. The streets with its ancient arches, doorways, and winding alleys were crowded with vendors selling the latest children's toys and homemade jams. In the piazza, people met their friends and relatives, while a band called "Terre del Sud" played folk music. On the bandstand a young female dancer dressed in a traditional folk costume turned and twirled to the fast rhythm of the "tarantella."

One of the musicians was playing the accordion and I couldn't help thinking of my uncle, whom I had met for the first time when we immigrated to Canada in the winter of 1964—Zio was already in Canada when I was born. He always played the accordion at family functions and celebrations. Fascinated, I would stand and watch him play, his head resting on the heavy instrument, his fingers moving swiftly across the keyboard.

I made my way over to an open space beside the church of Santo Stefano, where a large bonfire was burning. The wood for the cooking of chestnuts had been brought by the villagers, each family donating as much as they could. While the wood burned, the chestnuts were put in a large steel container, ready to be placed on the pit. Everyone was having fun. Church bells rang loudly in festive harmony as people entered the church for the morning Mass. The day had begun with "the blessing" of the huge bags of chestnuts by the town's priest, Don Fulvio Amici; he had prayed with his followers and asked the Lord to protect the sweet autumn fruit and to preserve the plants from the disease that had threatened their existence in the past. For centuries, chestnuts had sustained the people of the village, keeping them from going hungry.

There were many fun activities for both the young and the old. People came from nearby towns, and they were very friendly and kind. Some were eager to tell me about the festivities and the ancient legends of the area. One legend explains that one time the poor inhabitants had nothing to eat, so they asked God to send them food. The good Lord heard their prayers and gave them a plant from which to collect a nutritious fruit: the chestnut. When the devil saw what God had done, he wrapped the chestnut in a prickly shell preventing the people from touching the fruit. Gripped by despair, the poverty-stricken people returned to God with their prayers. Once again their invocations were heard. God came down to earth and made the sign of the cross upon the thorny shells and miraculously the chestnuts opened up enough so the fruit could easily slip out. From then on, the chestnut shell opened with a split resembling the Sign of the Cross.

The day was full of activities. Artists exhibited their work in the beautiful garden adjoining the church. In some corners of the street, townsfolk displayed old memorabilia of tools and pots used to cook chestnuts. All the tools had been hand made by their ancestors.

People were in good spirits and music and laughter was heard all around the piazza. Old friends, who every year came back to the village to celebrate the event, embraced each other with joy in reuniting again.

The women from the village prepared and cooked all of the food for the festival. It was mostly the traditional dishes of polenta with sausages, beans flavoured with pork rind, and homemade egg noodles with lentils. People lined up early to buy these homemade dishes, prepared just like their grandmothers used to. While they waited, they

talked to each other and shared the latest updates on family news.

At the food line up, I found myself making new friends. A man came up to me and smiled; he told me he was Bruno, my cousin's son. I was surprised and happy to meet him. But my biggest surprise came later, when I met a handsome older gentleman with a head full of silver hair and a happy smile—and a nose just like mine. He stood in front of me and said:

"You're the daughter of Emilio."

"Si," I said, "my father was Emilio."

"You live in Roma?" he asked.

"No, I lived in Roma when I was a teen, but now I live in Canada," I replied, contemplating his good looks. He resembled my father so much that I wanted to embrace him.

Suddenly he took hold of my shoulders and shook them with great emotion, and then embraced me with force. I knew then, without a doubt, that he was a relative. He then told me he was a first cousin and had known me when I was a little girl. Later, I met other family members from my father's side. We exchanged email addresses and we promised each other to keep in touch. I was introduced to so many people that I couldn't help feel gratitude and joy for having arrived at Tufo di Carsoli on the day of such a great celebration.

The festivities continued in every corner of the village. The smell of cooked chestnuts lingered in the air and everyone was given a bag full of roasted chestnuts to eat while they strolled and enjoyed the entertainment. The band played, moving from the piazza to the streets, and children danced around it. I was told to be on the alert as something was about to happen, but I didn't know what. People gathered in a circle in the main piazza and danced while others were standing on either side of the square. Suddenly from one of the side streets, a tall, giant puppet resembling a mad woman came running forward, scaring everyone in her path.

Adults and children let out wild shrieks.

The puppet was about four metres high, covered with cloth and paper-mache. People told me she was called La Pantasima. They explained that the structure was made out of bamboo and there was a person underneath it who directed her movements; several people take turns to manage the puppet, making her run the streets, dancing, chasing people, and frightening the children. She entertains people and gets them excited until they're tired of her. Once they've had enough of laughter and joy, they would set her on fire.

She's a witch and witches have to die. Just like the witches in medieval time, she will be burned in public so that everyone can watch. This ritual is well known by people for kilometres around. They say that burning La Pantasima represents the destruction of evil, the *fire* serves as a means of purification; the act of the burning serves to remove the harmful forces and negative influences from the people. Although the Pantasima appears only once a year, her short time on earth also grants the people a fun time.

Near the end of the evening, everyone gathered around to see the death of the tall puppet. As the person underneath it was coming out, someone carrying a burning torch quickly set La Pantasima on fire. There were great cheers from the crowd.

Within a few minutes nothing was left of the Lady, only a few ashes from the bamboo structure that had held her together. The magical moment was over, and the people were happy and satisfied.

Afterwards, I sat in a circle, with my cousins who couldn't fill me in with enough of family stories and of the names of their children. My first cousin was so passionate about the local traditions and continued to explain to me how important the festival was. He pointed out that this special day brought people back to the village—Tufo had been full of people who had come from the cities. Sons and daughters who had moved away many years ago, always came back to their birthplace for the harvest, while those who still owned an orchard in the area, stayed in the village for as long as it took to pick their fruit before the wind and rain came and knocked it down—it would be much more difficult to pick up the chestnuts from a muddy ground covered with leaves. At the same time my cousin bemoaned how some of the orchards are left to rot, because there's no one who can take care of them anymore.

My cousins also filled me in on the history of the village. Years ago, the rich families used to have women workers from the nearby towns come to harvest; they were given lodging until all of the work was done. Once the harvest was over, the landlords would allow the poor people who didn't have any chestnut trees, to pick the leftover nuts. This provided them with food for the winter. Picking the leftover chestnuts was called "*raccastagnare*," which in the local dialect means "to re-pick, or second chestnut picking.

As the evening was coming to and end, brilliant fireworks lit up the sky. People were tired but still excited. When the fireworks began to die down, people who had come from far away started hurrying back to their cars, and those who lived in the village started walking home. Parents carried their sleepy children on their shoulders, as musicians packed up their instruments. The celebration was over, but I didn't go back to Rome that night—I was invited to stay at my cousin's.

The next morning, when it was time for me to return to Rome, the friends and family I had met the day before were in the piazza to see me off. It was overwhelming. There were goodbyes, and hugs and best wishes. *Arrivederci, a presto*, see you soon. I felt so much warmth, and a deep feeling of belonging.

The stories I had learned that day at Tufo resonated with what my father used to tell us children about the chestnut season in the village where he was born. His family was very poor after my grandfather died. He was a woodcutter and died in the woods at a fairly young age. He left my grandmother with five young children to feed. My father would tell my sister, brother and me how tall the chestnut trees were, and how wide they grew. He always reminded us of how he felt around the time of the chestnut harvest. Thinking back, I can still hear his words lingering in the air as he roasted chestnuts for us on a wooden stove. "When I was a young boy," he would say, "I used to go and gather chestnuts so that we would not go hungry. My village was surrounded by the giant chestnut trees, and when it was time for the first burrs to crack open, I used to throw rocks and sticks up to the branches to knock them down. It was hard to make them fall if they were not quite ready to open." He would pause and then look at us and say, "Can you picture a ball full of needles? Well, I would hold the burr and pry it open with my hands—often my hands would bleed. But if there had been strong winds and rain in the night, I knew the ground would be covered with chestnuts in the morning. That's when I would get up early, before the owners of the land did, and go fill my basket with the fallen chestnuts. When I brought them home, my mother scolded me for stealing. I told her that I didn't steal... but that the owners of the land had told me I could pick up all the chestnuts I wanted. It was obvious I was lying, but she didn't punish me. She'd prepare many delicious meals with the nuts I had brought home."

"There is only one way to roast chestnuts... and that is the Tufarolo way," my father would tell us proudly, proceeding to show us how it's done. Chestnuts were cooked slowly on an open flame, gently tossed every minute until they began to open. This could take 45 minutes of constant tossing. When the wood had finished burning, my father flattened the hot ashes and placed the round frying pan on top of them. The frying pan rested there for a while, and then once again he tossed the content. When the chestnuts were fully open, he picked one up and tasted it. If it was cooked, my father's eyes would light up and he would smile. "They're ready," he'd say. Then he would wet a large brown paper bag and cover the chestnuts for a few minutes—they needed to be cooled to be more tender and tasty. Our mouths watered as we waited.

When it was time, he shelled a chestnut, and flattened it like a small pancake—he handed us children each a chestnut before taking one for himself. Then he would remind us of how hard he had to work when he was growing up. "Every year as we got older, before we went into the army, your uncles and I would have to help pick chestnuts," he told us. "It was those chestnuts—the second passing—that helped my mother feed us through the winter."

Among all of my father's stories of when he was growing up in Italy, the one I recall the most is the one about the year his mother didn't make the *caucioni* for Easter. "It was when I was too young to know what being selfish meant," he told us. "I knew there were chestnuts hidden in the wooden bread box for making the traditional Easter chestnut fritters. But one day when I was hungry, I took them and ate them. That afternoon my mother asked all of us *who* had taken the chestnuts. No one admitted to having done the deed. I, of course, lied—it had taken me a while to eat them, but I had eaten every one of them. After a few hours I started having severe cramps and that is when everyone knew who the thief was."

Upon my return to Canada I knew that in the future I'd be roasting chestnuts with more awareness and understanding. My visit to Tufo di Carsoli gave me a new appreciation for the humble hard-shelled fruit of my father's childhood memories.