

## **FALSOMAGRO (Fake-Lean)**

**By  
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"Come sono contenta!" How happy I am! My mother helped me hang my clothes in her closet, made room in her drawers for my underwear.

"This is the greatest mother's day present!" Bending down, rather unsteadily, she put her arms around me, hugging the back of my wheelchair as well. I hugged her and all I felt was bones.

Nicky, the old black and white mutt, raised himself up off the kitchen floor and came to put his front paws on my lap. When there were hugs going around, Nicky demanded his share.

"Come sono contenta!" Her eyes flashing, her face glowing with excitement, my mother looked young. She seemed so genuinely happy I almost wondered whether she fully understood what the gastroenterologist had told us a month before. In the thirty-five years she'd been in this country, my mother never learned English well enough to carry on a flowing conversation, but I knew she had no trouble understanding. And the doctor used plain words. What could be plainer than the word "cancer?" Pancreatic cancer. And the word "nothing," as in "there's nothing to do."

Besides, I was sure my mother had known for months how sick she was. She'd been covering up the symptoms, had not told me about the vomiting, constipation, pain. The day we went to the gastroenterologist's office to talk about her test results, she wore a loose pink sweater with shoulder pads to hide her thinness and her swollen abdomen. Matching pink lipstick and blush-on covered her paleness.

"I don't want the doctor to think I'm afraid," she said when I told her how pretty she looked.

"Afraid of what?"

"Of dying."

On the way home after we got the verdict, I suggested we get a second opinion. "Non c'è bisogno. Tuo padre mi vuole, that's all." No need. Your father wants me, that's all.

She said "that's all" in English. There were some English expressions my mother was particularly fond of. Like many immigrants she spoke a hybrid language. A mixture of the standard Italian she kept from forgetting by reading novels and magazines and watching the Italian TV channel, her native Sicilian dialect, and certain English words and expressions.

"That's all" was one of my mother's favorite English expressions. So curt and final. It meant there was nothing else to do and nothing else to say, no arguments allowed. And what arguments could I have? Always the good Sicilian wife, my mother never went against my father's wishes. What did it matter that my father had been dead for almost a year? She had left her relatives, her friends, her town, to follow him to a far-away land before. She was now ready to follow him again.

I was too stunned and grieved to talk. I kept my eyes on the road.

Three months at the most, the doctor had said.

"I'll move in with her," I told him. "I'll take care of her."

The doctor's eyes narrowed as he looked at me sitting across from his desk in my wheelchair. He obviously didn't think I was the ideal caregiver.

“You’ll need help,” he said.

“I’ll hire help if I need to.”

But I couldn't move to Queens to be with my mother in April. I had to wait until the end of the semester, finish teaching my Italian classes at the New School University.

I’d never graded finals so quickly. Usually I agonized over each point, worried about being fair to each student. But I felt like I was in a race with my mother's cancer. My husband understood my wanting to share the last lap of my mother’s journey on earth. He tried his best to be supportive, helping me prepare for the move, buying me things I needed –an easy-to-use bicycle pump in case my tires needed inflating, more modest nighties, laxative herbs.

That night, when my mother undressed, I noticed how much more weight she’d lost since the last time I’d seen her without clothes at the doctor's office. She was a skeleton, my mother, who though always slim, even at 78 had been quite shapely. She wore a padded bra to hide the emptied out skin sacks that had once been round full breasts. Her belly was that of a woman almost ready to deliver. Its size made her every movement difficult. Her bony legs trembled as she struggled to keep her balance.

I remembered my mother's young supple body, the body I was so close to as a little girl in Sicily that I feared I didn’t exist separate from it. I remembered my mother's strong arms holding me, carrying me. She carried me everywhere, after I contracted polio. From one room to the other or our old sprawling house, out to the sun-drenched courtyard to look at the geraniums in the pots, up the stone stairs to the roof terrace from where you saw the sea, across the road to the elementary school run by the nuns of the convent.

Then I remembered how I envied my mother's body, when as a teen, I compared my scoliosed back and my scrawny polio legs to her straight slender trunk and long shapely limbs. We had come from Sicily to America, where my father believed I could get the medical help I needed to be able to walk. In the American hospital I was undergoing surgery after surgery. But the best I could hope for was ugly metal braces with rough leather straps, and crutches. When what I really wanted was a perfect body – my mother's body. The feelings those memories evoked were overpowering. I wanted to close my eyes, not have to look at my mother, not have to be near her. At the same time I wanted to hug her, I was filled with tenderness. She quickly put on her nightgown, surely sensing my discomfort.

We celebrated Mother's Day with veal parmigiana delivered from a nearby Italian restaurant, and she kept repeating "che buona," how good it is, while delicately spitting into a paper napkin. I made believe I didn't notice. But Nicky let her know by whining that it would be less wasteful to let him have what she couldn't swallow.

May 16<sup>th</sup>, my birthday, was only two days away. My mother decided we'd have no take-out food on my birthday. She was going to cook my favorite Sicilian dish, falsomagro. The literal translation is "fake-lean," which accurately describes the traditional slender-looking beef roll stuffed with fattening delicacies. She made a list of all I needed to buy at the Italian store on Francis Lewis Boulevard. Prosciutto di Parma, Parmigiano Reggiano, Caciocavallo... For the large rectangular slice of beef she sent me to the meat shop on Bell Boulevard. "Your father never bought meat at the supermarket."

We didn't have a very good night. We made repeated unsuccessful trips to the bathroom. Bent over in pain, she held on to my wheelchair, using it as a walker. I carefully maneuvered

around furniture and through doors. All the time we talked, mostly about her beloved hometown – old neighbors I'd long forgotten, the nuns who had been my first teachers, events and places to me now foreign and surreal. To my mother the past was close and palpable. I pretended I remembered more than I did.

In the morning we started preparing the falsomagro. We sat at the kitchen table, side by side. She had me beat the slice of beef down, so it got thinner and tenderer, while she peeled and quartered three hard-boiled eggs. We moistened the beef with olive oil, and sprinkled breadcrumbs and grated parmesan on it. A few sprigs of parsley, a layer of prosciutto, then she placed the quartered eggs and sliced cheese along the middle, together with lots of broken up sausage. Nicky sat at attention between my mother and me, waiting patiently for bits of cheese and sausage. Even with her hands shaking, my mother rolled the beef smoothly not letting any of the inner contents escape. She tied white string all around the falsomagro so it wouldn't come apart while cooking. When it was all done we sat back and admired it.

"Che bello!" How beautiful.

But we had a hard time browning it in the frying pan. My mother couldn't stand at the stove for long. In my chair, I was too low to see what I was doing. Then I remembered my crutches were still in what was now a storage closet, in what had been my room. Post-polio syndrome had made walking increasingly laborious and exhausting. I'd stopped using my crutches several years before. Only at my parents' house, once in a while, I'd stand with the crutches and take a few steps. The last time I'd done that was the year before, when my father was dying of lung cancer. I had wanted his final image of me to be standing straight and tall.

Now, moving out of the way a plastic box full of winter sweaters, I managed to pull my crutches out of the closet. I stood up, very precariously.

"Attenta," careful, my mother kept saying, as I stepped, holding on to the crutches for dear life. When I was in front of the stove, standing with my legs apart for maximum balance, crutches securely under my arms, I let go of my right hand, so I had use of it. My mother sat in my wheelchair and positioned herself right behind me. I felt her trembling hand on my back trying to balance me. "Put the brakes on," I told her.

I lit the burner and started turning the falsomagro with my free hand. From behind, my mother gave me instructions. When the beef roll was all browned, she told me to lift it out of the pan and put it in the pot where the tomato sauce had been cooking.

That's when I ran into trouble. It was so long that, if I stuck the fork in the middle of it and tried to lift it with one hand, I was sure to break it. But I was afraid to let go of the crutch with my other hand. Then my mother, still sitting in my wheelchair, put both her hands around my waist to steady me. Feeling safer now, I freed my left hand, and slid a spatula under the beef roll, while with my right hand I stuck the fork in it. I was able to lift the falsomagro out of the pan and place it all in one piece, into the pot with the sauce.

While the falsomagro cooked in the sauce, we could both relax. I got back in my chair, my mother lay down on her bed.

"Check to make sure it's not sticking to the bottom of the pot," she said from time to time. I obediently wheeled to the stove and, too low in my chair to see what I was doing, with the wooden spoon gave the falsomagro a nudge.

"It moves, so it's not sticking," I reported back.

Then it was time to cook the pasta. My mother made her way into the kitchen, and we chose rotelle out of the rich variety of pastas in her cabinet. While from my chair I stirred the rotelle, my mother set the dining room table. She insisted on an embroidered tablecloth and napkins, put out her prettiest dishes, with the blue trellis border, her crystal glasses, and her best silverware.

She came back to the kitchen carrying a pasta bowl she got out of her china closet. This time, I was the one to position myself behind her and put my hands on the small of her back to steady her, as she strained the pasta over the kitchen sink, then put it in the bowl, mixing in the tomato sauce.

We looked at each other. Who was going to carry the bowl full of hot pasta into the dining room? She handed it to me and I held it with both hands, while she pushed my wheelchair, stopping every few steps to catch her breath.

She placed the bowl on the table and took a serving plate out of the china closet.

"Let's go get the falsomagro," she said. Back in the kitchen, I placed my hands once more against her back as she lifted the falsomagro out of the pot and put it on the plate. She handed me the plate, and we repeated our slow trek into the dining room. Then, she sat down at the table and, in spite of her shaky hands, sliced the falsomagro with surgical precision.

Finally, proud of our joint accomplishment, we were ready to enjoy my birthday meal. The pasta was exactly al dente, the sauce was sweet and tangy. I took a slice of falsomagro and ate it together with my pasta. I just couldn't wait and follow the Italian etiquette of finishing the primo piatto before starting on the secondo. The falsomagro was the best I'd ever eaten. I wanted to remember the taste forever.

My mother couldn't eat. She faked it. Chewed and spit in her napkin, no longer caring whether I noticed. Or dropped piece after piece on the floor for Nicky.

"Ti piace?" Do you like it, she kept asking me. "Sì, sì," yes, I repeated. And wished I could tell her how much I liked it, how much I appreciated the effort she put into making it, and how much I regretted all the times I'd been too busy to come home to her cooking.

I ate so much falsomagro, I was too full for my birthday dessert – cannoli from the pastry shop on Bell. I could only manage to eat half a cannolo. The shell was light and crisp, the ricotta cream so smooth. Bits of candied fruit gave the cream a fresh taste.

My mother smiled, as she picked up the other half of the cannolo and ate it. She really swallowed it. I waited for her to spit it out, but she didn't. She closed her eyes to better enjoy the taste.

"Che buono!" How good it is! When she opened her eyes again, I was surprised to see a look I hadn't seen on her face for a while – a look of mischief.

"We need some amaretto to get this down."

"We sure do!" I gave her a thumbs-up, and wheeled around the table to the credenza where I knew she kept her bottles of liqueur. Then I got two long-stemmed cordial glasses from her china closet. I filled the glasses. She raised hers.

"Buon compleanno!" Happy birthday.

Her face flushed, her eyes glistening, my mother looked as young as when, in Sicily, she carried me in her strong arms. We clinked glasses.

"Grazie, mamma, this is the best birthday present." She laughed as she sipped her amaretto.  
"Come sono contenta!"