

Anarchist Bastard

EXCERPT I

‘U Bizz’ di Creanza: A Piece of Politeness

The rules were these: If you are the guest, don’t be *‘Merican*. Never take any food that you are offered. Not at first, even if you are at your aunt’s house. You must refuse any and all food when it is first offered. “Oh, no thank you,” you say, “it looks delicious, but I really couldn’t. We just finished eating.”

Only after the food has been offered over and over, then put on a plate in front of you and the host has insisted repeatedly, “Try some. I just made it this morning,” are you even to consider eating a modest portion and saying, “Well, if you insist.” Then, “Mmmmm, delicious. That’s so good. Thank you so much. I couldn’t possibly eat another morsel, spoonful, bite, sip.” In fact the food always is delicious, scrumptious, delectably sweet, perfectly salted—we like a lot of salt—crisp, fresh. Whatever it should be, it is.

If you are the host you never ask, “Would you like a piece of ‘a bizz?’” That would put your guest in the terrible position of overtly having to announce that, yes, they would like something. It would be a profound embarrassment for both guest and host. Showing desire of any kind reveals that you are wanting. As the host your job is to put as much food on the table as you can, to burden the table with food and drink, far beyond the limit of what actually makes sense for you to offer. As a guest you are to limit yourself to a highly appreciated, small amount.

These rules and customs are based on a culture of scarcity of the very old world in southern Italy and Sicily, where it would have been terribly shameful to show any hint of actual scarcity in your household. These rules helped everything keep a balance. The host would offer and save face and the guest would partake of their offerings and reveal nothing.

Lucia was in the home of our dearly beloved Comma Maria and Compa Frank who were our close friends and paesans and who lived downstairs from us. Comma offered my sister, a tiny two year old, “Lucia, have a piece of cake.”

“No thank you,” my sister already knew to answer. “I really wanted that piece of cake. It looked so delicious, but I knew I was supposed to say no.” Over sixty years later she remembers how delicious that piece of cake looked and that she was obliged to say no.

After Lucia and I left home for “America,” when we left Waterbury to go to college, we were very surprised to learn that these rules did not apply in the wider world.

Over a long period of time our new people (friends, then husbands and their families) pointed out that the food offered at our tables, it really was too much—more than people could or would want. That it involved too much work and excess and that maybe it wasn’t necessary, that it might even be a burden to guest as well as the host. You could just offer something, say, “Would you like to have some?” At first this seemed ridiculous, *ridickle*, as my grandmother used to say and we laughed as we smuggled ourselves back and forth across this border—with pride and shame and confusion about both, uncertain which country we belonged to. Over time we confided in each other that our own ways were changing under the influence of our new people.

When my mother was staying with my sister long years after the two of us had more or less adjusted to American culture, a world of plenty, Lucia had some friends over. She put out some cheese and olives and bread, she offered wine and poured it for those who said yes. “Then I sat down at the table to talk to them.”

“After they left Mom said, ‘Uh, you’re becoming pretty *‘Merican* now aren’t you? You don’t ask,.....just give it. That’s so embarrassing’ Mom was pretty upset with me.”

Another time when Lucia and her husband were renting a house in Italy Lucia became friends with an Italian woman living nearby and they were comparing Italian and American customs. Lucia, knowing the Italian customs around hospitality and the ritual offering and refusals that preceded anyone partaking, explained to her friend, Paola, how different these rules are in America.

In America we *offer* food and we ask our guests, “Would you like a piece of cake.”

Paola hid her face in her hands and giggling completed confused, asked, “But how would they know what to do? What would they say?” She was completely nonplused, by even the explanation of this, especially since it was coming from a woman of Italian heritage.

Lucia said, “Oh they might say, ‘That looks very good. Yes, I’d love some.’”

Paola thought this was even more hilarious and it sent her into further giggles at the very thought of the baldness of this exchange, so completely naked of ritual grace. Lucia knew what these giggles meant. Even saying this out loud was embarrassing. You have to *offer, insist* and *never* put the guest into the position of having to expose the fact that indeed you would *like a piece of cake*.

How could you do it that way and not humiliate your guests? The American way can reveal desire, and so expose a position of shame.

II

Of course my husband, Bill, not an Italian, experiences shame too. It’s just different in his private universe. Maybe, because he was the golden child joining two distinct families. His father a widower with five children, his mother a widow with three children. Bill was the adored only child of this often disjointed combination. He was the last child of both his parents, the child of his father’s later years. And he was the golden baby that briefly bridged the terrible gulf between these two very broken families. Then he lost his father and the gold burned dark and his family was torn apart by mistreatment and mistrust.

So Bill is made of sun and burn, light and dark, which combined into a wicked wit, an artificer, a singer and dance man, a bit of the flim flam man, one of wild humor, a beguiler, sending his audience into paroxysms of delight, then disappearing off stage into deep shadows: there he is a man of indifference to all but his darkness. But he will have his way. His are the rules of theater, of the magician more than of society so that if he wants something and he can flick a hand and get it, he does. Then he disappears. These are his own rules, the rules of the golden, then betrayed child.

Stories, humor, charm are his guides. Clannish shame doesn’t pertain to him much. They didn’t hold him together for long enough so he has rebelled against clan demands.

One long sultry summer afternoon Bill and I were staying at my sister’s country farm house in a small valley in upstate New York. There was a creek running through the valley and only one way in or out—a wood bridge over the creek. I wanted to go to town. He was wearing a three day beard, cut offs and a tank top and had no intention of leaving the hammock on the back porch or the book he was reading. He would read and doze until I got back. When I came to the bridge five county road workers wearing, dark bronzed tans and baseball caps with undulating white sweat rings around the crowns of their John Deere or Agway Agricultural were pulling up the thick boards to do some repairs on the struts. When I leaned out of the window to ask if I could go through, “Road closed,” one of the men said, without looking at me.

“When will it be open?” I asked.

“Not until late this afternoon.” I drove back to the house the heat of the sun pouring through the windshield—a long hot, desultory afternoon ahead, “Can’t go,” I said to Bill when I got back, “the men are working on the bridge.”

“Do you want to go to town?” Bill said chomping on his small cigar, swinging his legs out of the hammock? “I’ll get you out if you want to go.”

When we got to the bridge there were no boards left across the struts. Bill got out of the passenger’s seat and walked up to one of the men, “Who’s in charge here?”

One burly guy flicked his thumb to another and Bill walked up to him, hitched up the waist of his cut-offs, “I’m Doctor William Herman. I’m a brain surgeon and there’s a man lying on the table in the operating room waiting for me to do surgery on him in twenty minutes at Fox Memorial Hospital in Oneonta. Put those boards back down. I have to get into town immediately.”

The head guy turned away and said, “Put ‘em back.” Bill and I waited in the car while they did, then I drove across the bridge. As soon as we were just on the other side Bill said, “Now pull over.”

“What?” I looked in the rear view mirror. They hadn’t pulled up all the boards yet. There were five or six men on this road crew.

“I’m not going to town,” he said and got out of the car.

I watched as he walked back across the bridge, nodding to the head man and going up the road. The men kept blank faces as they watched him walk by.

III

Early in our courtship, before I knew his rules were those of his own defiant making and before he knew mine were embedded in the importance of reputation among your people, early in our courtship I brought him to meet my father.

Bill is 17 years older than I am. When I met him he was a somewhat overweight, middle-aged bachelor college professor who wore long hair, a bushy mustache, blue jeans and a blue work shirt, full of charm and intellect, more concerned with bedazzling his audience with his brain and wit than worrying about his appearance. My mother, the ruler of rules, had already met him and disapproved. I was an unmarried daughter, but I was *her* unmarried daughter. Still. “A man of his profession, dressing like that,” she said crisply.

I had been out in the world for ten years by then, but I was still in the relatively early part of the journey of crossing over to America. Still.

Because my mother had made her complete disapproval clear we decided that the way to deal with this first meeting of my father and Bill was to appease my mother by going to Barney’s on 17th Street and 7th Avenue and buying Bill an expensive wardrobe (that he couldn’t afford) to wear for a weekend in the country. To go to this very rural dairy valley upstate we bought two suits, one a three piece Pierre Cardin, three dress shirts, silk ties and new shoes. I think he may have packed one pair of jeans and a work shirt. We arrived at my sister’s house with Bill dressed in his three piece suit.

“Well, he looks very nice,” my mother said as he showed up for breakfast in the new three piece suit. The rest of us were barely dressed in bathrobes and pajamas. But he was passing the border check. That was the way the weekend went. Bill at his most lovely and kind. My mother ameliorated.

One of Bill’s chameleon forms is to agree with everyone, “We don’t need another pot of coffee, do we?”

“Oh no,” Bill says smiling at everyone.

When another member of the family arrives late to the kitchen, “I’m going to make a fresh pot of coffee. I’ll make the large pot so there will be more for everyone.”

“That would be great,” Bill agrees. “I’d love another cup.”

He played with my sister’s little son. He helped wash the dishes in his suits and ties with his sleeves rolled up and wore an apron. He talked politics and current events with Lucia’s husband. He talked about literature and scenery with my father. All due respect to everyone. And all went beautifully under this change of costume.

My parents always arrived at our homes with so many grocery bags one couldn’t help but protest—where was all this food going to be stored? As my parents took over every crevice of pantries and all the counter tops my father always quoted his Mammanonna, “We should all have this much room in paradise.” We were down to millimeters apiece, but the paucity, parsimony, the necessary frugality of our ancestors was appeased by the plenty the Italian family able to provide here in the land of plenty. We all love to cook and everyone cooked more upstate. We had breakfast of pancakes and bacon, platters of *macaroni* and immense soup pans full of lima bean soup with sausage—my father’s specialty. We all ate until we were uncomfortably full and then went for long country walks to undo what we had just eaten. Then we came back and had coffee and dessert.

So I’m not quite sure how this actually happened. It may have been a couple of days after Thanksgiving so that we had been over eating for days and decided to be a bit more modest that night. One night my parents cooked a dinner of chicken cutlets, roasted potatoes, zucchini, and salad. There were at least three desserts waiting on the counter. Bill had passed the clothing test. He had passed the good guy test. His age was non-negotiable. Things were going well. As the meal wound his down and we were all happily over eating there wound up on the platter sitting in the middle of the table—one last chicken cutlet. My mother offered it to everyone, but we all knew how this was to go. This rule of the host guest rules is so basic, so important that it has its own name, *‘u pizz’ di creanze*. The piece of politeness. If the last piece of anything is eaten, all the customs of politeness have been violated. It means that the host hasn’t provided enough for all their guests to have as much as they wanted. It means that the guest is demonstrating this fact publicly.

No matter how much the host presses her guests *no one* is to take it. If it is accepted and taken off the platter, emptied space is left where there should always be *more*. You are never to shame your host that way. There is however one exception to this rule. After each person has said no in turn several times, there is one person and only one person who has the right to claim it and that is the oldest male in the room. In this case my father—the man whose approval Bill had come to receive.

On what should have been the final round of refusals—my mother once again said, “Bill wouldn’t you like to finish this last piece. Don’t leave it. It’s just sitting there.” As an honored guest Bill could have the right to claim it, but Bill was in the petitioner’s position.

“Okay, Rose I’d love to have it,” he said smiling all around to everyone at the table.

I sat frozen in my seat as Bill reached his fork out to spear that last piece. My eyes passed across my father’s face where I saw suppressed surprise. I quickly looked away. Time slowed and stretched. Should I reach out and stop that fork? As the daughter of the host I couldn’t violate giving our guest anything he wanted. As Bill’s girlfriend I was stunned into a realization that this smart, savvy, sophisticated, free spirit didn’t know even the basic rules about food and hospitality. He had broken the most important rule—but worse, he didn’t *know* that he had.

As I looked down and away from the table. The kitchen floor boards became intensely interesting I realized I had no recourse.

I couldn’t speak on his behalf to my family. I couldn’t say anything to Bill on my family’s behalf. I certainly had nothing to say on my own behalf. So I didn’t say anything and waited for the appalling moment to pass.

I was going to have to take him on a long trip through Italy and eventually he would get me to settle in America, but I have to say it’s been an awful lot of packing. And I hate packing.