



Fall's Flavors

Fall hits like a heavyweight, with a ham-handed knockout punch that drops me on its canvas of fallen russet leaves. My head spins with thoughts of homecomings and harvest moons - of bonfires, blankets, and the warm soft lips of my autumn girl.

With swollen heart I surrender to the 10 count and slip away. Swirling memories of blazing maples, cold crisp cider, and the fellowship of the harvest and the crush follow me as I tumble down the rabbit hole, blessing the season for showing me how deeply a heart can feel . . .

. . . When I took her boy from Italy, Cesarina asked me to watch over him - "attenti i lupi" she told me – "watch for the wolves." Alessandro and I sit at a table just outside the restaurant kitchen, beneath the loggia that overlooks the vineyards and the rolling hills that lead to the Blue Ridge Mountains. A great bowl of ripe Malvasia grapes before us, I watch over Alessandro as he shaves paper-thin ribbons of Parmigiano -Reggiano with his truffle blade. They melt in our mouths around the pungent grapes, and we wash them down with cold Prosecco. Silently, we sit in the slight breeze, watching the ritual of the harvest, warmed by the late morning sun.

We can see Fernando, the vineyard manager, and his worn pick-up truck between rows of shaking vines, as the picking crew with curved blades and weathered hands takes the fruit. A tractor passes pulling a trailer of lug boxes filled with the promise of the coming vintage. We can hear Luca, the winemaker, directing the scene in Italian on the crush-pad, as the fruit is guided into the crusher-stemmer, into the press, and beyond.

We have our duties too. To feed the harvest crew, to prepare for the guests that will arrive at the restaurant, but it is hard to pull away from the table and the moment. I look over to Alessandro,

Stone Soup

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only to see him looking back at me; he is smiling and his glass is raised. I smile back and touch my glass to his, thinking, "e tutto bene, Cesarina" – the wolves are at bay. . .

. . . I reach for my father's hand, unsure about the crowd around the aging cider mill, his touch assures me that everything is okay. We pass the groaning wooden water wheel into the cellar-dark entrance, greeted by the sight of the ancient river-powered press, and the aroma of ripe Michigan apples being reduced to their golden juice. McIntoshes, Braeburns, Pink Ladies - Cameos, Cortlands, Galas... We follow the process to the tasting room and buy our cider. Stepping back out into the September sun we find a spot along the river to share the sweet cold cider and some old- fashioned doughnuts still warm from the fryer, finding shade beneath a brilliant maple, we drink in the fall . . .

. . . As I open the door to my father's house, I carry a gallon of the same cider we first shared 50 years ago in tow. His time on earth is coming to a close and we sit together, everything being said without speaking, and let the sweet apple cider serve as our comfort. This time I find myself reaching for his hand to assure him, but find in his blue eyes, peaceful smile, and loving grip, he is once again assuring me. I am grateful he left with the taste of autumn on his lips.

I come to, with a thousand other autumn memories in my mind, thinking to myself fall hits like a heavyweight . . . and I never see it coming.

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