

THE OTHER BREAD

My mother does not eat the bread my grandmother bakes. My mother eats the bread that she buys a few times a week from the Dugan's man, who comes round in his truck to our suburban neighborhood in Ridgely, New Jersey, where we move after my grandfather dies. This bread, unlike my grandmother's, has preservatives, a long shelf life, my mother says. You can keep this bread for a long, long time without it becoming green-molded. To my mother, this bread is everything that a good bread should be.

The bread my mother buys is white bread, sliced bread, American bread. A bread that my father, my sister, and I eat only under protest or when it is transformed into something else. A bread that my grandmother would never eat, even if she were starving, and she told my mother so the one time she tasted this bread, and she told my mother, too, that she knows what it is to starve, what it is not to have enough food, and that even if she did not have enough food, she would not eat this bread.

My mother thinks that eating this bread will change her, that eating this bread will erase this embarrassment of a stepmother—all black dresses and headscarves and scavenging for dandelions on the neighbors' lawns, and superstitions, and tentacle things screwing in pots, and flurries of flour that ruin my mother's sportless kitchen, and infrequently washed Old World long woolen undergarments—this embarrassment of a stepmother who, my mother swears, never bathes, who treats water as if it is something to pray to, not something to

wash in. (When my grandmother sees the amount of water my mother puts into the bathtub when my sister and I bathe, she mutters "Mare Adriatico" in disgust, clucks her tongue, and walks into her darkened bedroom to say the rosary.)

Maybe my mother thinks that if she eats enough of this other bread, she will stop being Italian American and she will become American American. Maybe my mother thinks that if she eats enough of this other bread, people will stop thinking that a relative of my father's, who comes to visit us from Brooklyn once in a while, is a Mafioso, because he's Italian American and has New York license plates on his new black car, and sports a black tie and pointy shoes and a shiny suit and a Borsalino hat ripped way down over his forehead so you can hardly see his eyes. And if you can hardly see his eyes, my mother says, what kind of a man must the neighbors think he is? Maybe my mother remembers the incarcerations, deportations, and lynchings of Italians, the invasion of Italian neighborhoods in Hoboken, New Jersey, during the war when we lived there. Maybe my mother thinks eating this bread will keep us safe.

This bread that my mother buys from the Dugan's man is whiter than my grandmother's bread. It is as white, as soft and as spongy, as the cotton balls I use to take off my nail polish when I am a teenager, as white as the Kotex pads I shove into my underpants.

My mother eats this bread all the time, morning, noon, and night, and she uses it to make us roasted-cheese sandwiches. Two slices of American cheese pulled in shreds from their cellophane wrappers, slapped between two slices of buttered American bread (torn when buttered, because it is so soft) fried in a too hot frying pan while my mother, distracted, walks away to do something else until she smells the butter burning, says "Oh my goodness," returns to the stove, flips the sandwiches, gets distracted again, walks away again, smells the butter burning again, says "Oh my goodness" again, and serves the sandwich to us with lots of catsup on the side to disguise the filthy taste.

After Thanksgiving, my mother uses this bread to make turkey