

Sausages

by Igiaba Scego

Vivir con miedo es como vivir a medias (1)

Today, Wednesday August 14, 2002, at 9:30 am, something odd happened to me. For reasons of my own that are still unclear to me, I bought a large quantity of sausages. The odd thing about this is not in the buying of the sausages; anyone can do that, anyone can go into any old shop on any godforsaken street and say:

"Hey, ma'am, wouldya gimme 12 pounds of sausages? The very best, ma'am, the kind that melts like butter in your mouth."

Anyone can come up with such a request. It's not even odd that I should buy the sausages today, on the eve of Ferragosto, the biggest summer holiday in Italy. These days, Rome is the capital of a country that considers itself part of the global network, a modern city inhabited by modern people, therefore open – better still, WIDE open!

It was to be expected, then, that in a global world setting, this typically Italian holiday could be considered a thing of the past. As could empty streets, shuttered shops and the silence of a summer's day. Finding sausages no longer called for a superhuman effort. So, you must be asking yourself, what was so odd about it? What had upset the normal order of things? Me, of course! What was odd about it, in fact, was not the object bought, but the subject buying the sausages:

I, me, myself in person.

Me, a Sunni Muslim.

I don't know what came over me, I swear I don't. No rude awakening, nobody shaking me, no splitting headache, no abnormally low blood pressure – nothing, absolutely nothing! It was a morning just like any other, or, at least, that's what I thought. Some little birds (don't ask me what kind, for God's sake, to me they're all the same) were chirping, my neighbors were cursing as usual, cars were belching out exhaust fumes and my bladder was launching distress signals warning of impending disaster. It was just another morning with the usual people about (nobody had gone away on holiday; in this age of the euro, vacations were almost prohibitive). In other words, it was the same old routine! I don't remember if I had a happy or sad expression on my face when I woke up, but I am sure that the urge to sin was the last thing on my mind – in fact, not even remotely present in my thoughts. So, why those damned sausages?

I went to buy them at Rosetta's, the one who has the store round the corner. Rosetta is a big, likeable lady. Perhaps her tits are too large and too droopy, but she has a smile that knocks you flat, I swear, a smile worth millions. Add to that the fact that she gives me a break on the price of cheese, the lip-smackin' kind; well, you'll understand that Rosetta is a keeper. So, where was I? Oh, yes, I went to buy these sausages at Rosetta's and I lied to her through my teeth. And I hate lying! Naturally, Rosetta was a bit taken aback when I asked for sausages – and that early in the morning, too. She looked right at me with those wily little eyes of hers, cracking one of the smiles for which she is famous throughout the neighborhood, and then said, in a syrupy voice so

dense you could swim in it, "What's this, sweetie, have you converted? Wasn't it a sin for you to eat sausages?"

I stiffened a bit, it must have been the word "sin" that did it. Recalling the seriousness of what I was doing didn't make it easy for me – quite the opposite! So, after stiffening a bit (but not too much), I lied, saying "They're for my neighbor, Rosetta, my dear."

She wrapped them up nicely, Rosetta did, no complaints there, but I kissed my discount goodbye as soon as I mentioned my neighbor. Rosetta has hated her ever since she dared criticize Rosetta's Christmas decorations in 1999.

My beautiful full-priced parcel and I went trotting back home.

So, here I am shut up in my kitchen with my parcel full of unclean sausages and I don't know what to do. Why the hell did I buy them? And now, what the hell am I going to do with them? One idea would be to cook them, but then, who's going to deal with Mom?

I remember once, when I was small, by mistake Mom bought a bottle of pickled vegetables with pieces of hot dog in it. The problem was that my mother didn't know that there was unclean pork in it, and she used it to make rice salad. But then somebody picked up on that sly, old hot dog, and we were forced to throw up the entire rice salad right down to the very last grain. The pan in which Mom had mixed the unclean salad was doomed to the worst fate. Alas, the pan had a default judgment entered against her: a death sentence! The real tragedy was that the poor pan could not appeal the verdict, not even to the Supreme Court; she was poor, and she just didn't have the dough to hire billionaire lawyers (oops, millionaire lawyers, I am still thinking in old Italian lire.)

But how do you cook sausages in a pan? Do you fry them? Or, perhaps, you boil them? And what if I were to use the oven? But then, will I really eat them? Or when push comes to shove, will I chicken out and throw them away?

I look at the shameless parcel and I ask myself: Is it really worth it? If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am Italian just like them? Exactly the same as them? Or will it all have been a useless act of bravado?

My worries all began with the announcement of the Bossi-Fini Law: "All non-EEC immigrants who wish to renew their permits must be fingerprinted as a preventive measure."

Where did I stand in all of this? Would I be considered a non-EEC immigrant, and therefore a potential criminal, to be fingerprinted by the government to prevent a crime that had not yet been committed (but which they supposed I might, sooner or later, commit)? Or would I be considered a revered, cosseted Italian, given the benefit of the doubt by the government, even if it showed up that I had a long police record?

Italy or Somalia?

Doubt.

Fingerprints or no fingerprints?

Horrendous doubt.

My beautiful passport is burgundy red, and it proclaims, to all intents and purposes, my Italian

nationality, but does that passport speak the truth? Deep down, am I truly Italian? Or am I supposed to line up to be fingerprinted like so many others?

This whole fingerprinting drive seemed to me like a big mistake, the senseless scribbling of an angry child. Why humiliate people like this? And why create confusion in others, unsure of their own identity? Those damned fingerprints had aroused in me a demon that had lain dormant from time immemorial. I had hoped this demon would never be aroused.

But then they arrived: Those fingerprints - those damned, freaking fingerprints.

At age eight, every child is assailed by a never ending slew of idiotic questions: "Whom do you love more, mom or dad?" is indicative. Naturally, children, who are intelligent beings (alas, they'll turn into idiots once they grow up), roll their eyes and do not answer. No child wants to hurt the two human beings he or she loves best in the whole wide world, so children clam up and pretend they don't understand. The same thing happened to me at age eight! The moronic question was: "Which do you love more, Somalia or Italy?" Another favorite variation on the theme was: "Do you feel more Italian, or more Somali?"

Well, if it is true that, by shifting the order of operations, the question remains the same, the question, whatever way it was put, was (and still is) inadmissible. Luckily, being a child, you can ignore it, play dumb, play the global village idiot, the naughty child, act superior. Being a child, it's always easier to find a way out. The older you get, though, the harder it gets to wriggle free – a move that is virtually impossible when you're in the hot seat at a civil service exam.

Civil service exams are modern-day torture machines: If you don't have a saint on your side, it becomes a race reserved for the chosen few. I remember a line in a movie featuring that grand old man of Italian cinema, Vittorio De Sica. He was answering a newly hired traffic cop, played by Alberto Sordi, who was thanking him for "using his connections" to get him the job. De Sica gives the beloved Italian actor a surly look, and then in an icy voice says: "The word is not connections, it is 'mention,'" spelling it out clearly: "M-E-N-T-I-O-N."

Two hundred twenty-nine poor souls – including a good number of seasoned "mentioned" candidates – and I had survived an extenuating tour de force: 60 preliminary questions plus two written exams – eight- and four hours long, respectively. If I think that, at the start, there were 5,000 of us, and then just 300 at the finish... Well, just thinking about this makes my knees shake. And if I think that only 38 of us will get a job, I begin to hyperventilate. If I think that 30 of them will be "mentioned candidates," I feel like throwing up. But then, when I think of my oral exam, I begin to feel ashamed (whether more for myself or for the person who asked me that question, I really don't know).

I have no recollection of that exam. My only recollection is of an enormous pocked face sitting in front of me. I also remember the dyed, golden hair pulled up in a high bun. And I remember that raspy female voice, that for some reason reminded me of a mix between the actors Giancarlo Giannini and Jean Gabin (not very flattering for a woman). Now that I think about it, the examiner looked like a cross-dresser, but without those super boobs I have always envied in those lovely ladies.

That said, she wasn't an unpleasant person, and the exam was going rather well. I was playing my part very honorably. And then disaster struck: that vile question on my damned identity! More Somali? More Italian? Perhaps you are three-quarters Somali and one-quarter Italian? Or, perhaps, just the exact opposite?

I don't know what to answer! I had never "fractioned" myself before – and, besides, in school I always hated fractions (they were unpleasant and inconclusive).

Naturally, I lied. I don't like doing it, but I had no choice. I looked right into those bulging eyes of hers and said: "Italian." And then, even if I'm as black as coal, I turned as red as a beet. I would have felt like an idiot even if I had said "Somali." I am not a 100% anything. I never have been, and I don't think I can be now.

I think I am a woman with no identity.

Better yet, a woman with several identities.

Just think how beautiful my fingerprints will be! Anonymous fingerprints, unattached to an identity, as neutral as plastic.

Let's see: I feel Somali when 1) I drink tea with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon; 2) I pray five times a day facing Mecca; 3) I wear my *dirah* (2); 4) I burn incense and *unsi* (3) in my house; 5) I go to weddings where men sit on one side and get bored, while on the opposite side, women dance, have fun, eat...in short, enjoy life; 6) I eat bananas with rice (I mean in the same dish); 7) we cook up all that meat with rice or *angeelo* (4) ; 8) relatives come to visit, from Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Holland, Sweden, Germany, the Arab Emirates, and from a long list of places that for reasons of space I cannot list here – all relatives uprooted, like us, from our country of origin; 9) I speak Somali and add my two cents worth in loud, shrill tones whenever there's an animated conversation; 10) I look at my nose in the mirror and I think it's perfect; 11) I suffer the pangs of love; 12) I cry for my country ravaged by civil war; 13) Plus 100 other things I just can't remember right now!

I feel Italian when: 1) I eat something sweet for breakfast; 2) I go to art exhibitions, museums and historic buildings; 3) I talk about sex, men and depression with my girlfriends; 4) I watch movies with the following actors: Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, Monica Vitti, Totò, Anna Magnani, Giancarlo Giannini, Ugo Tognazzi, Roberto Benigni and Massimo Troisi; 5) I eat a 1.80 euro ice cream: chocolate chip, pistachio, coconut without whipped cream; 6) I know all the words of Alessandro Manzoni's poem, *Il cinque maggio*, like any other Italian; 7) I hear Gianni Morandi singing on the radio or on TV; 8) I choke up when I look into the eyes of the man I love, hear him talk in his cheerful southern accent and know there is no future for us; 9) I rant and rave for the most disparate reasons against the prime minister, the mayor, the alderman or whomever happens to be the president; 10) I talk with my hands; 11) I weep for the partisans, all too often forgotten; 12) I sing snatches of Mina's "Un anno d'amore" in the shower; 13) plus 100 other things I can't keep track of!

It's a big problem, identity is. And what if we got rid of it altogether?

And fingerprints? Let's get rid of those, too!

I feel like everything, but sometimes I feel like nothing. For instance, I am nothing when, on the bus, I hear the phrase, "These foreigners are ruining Italy," and I feel people's eyes stuck to me like bubble gum. Or, for instance, when a Somali woman (usually some distant relative) notices that my pee makes more noise than hers, thanks to a more powerful flow. I come out of the bathroom quite unaware that my pee had been monitored, but then feel a malicious stare directed at my left shoulder, followed by the venomous comment, "But you are a *nijas* (5); you still have your *kintir* (6). You'll never find a husband." No use explaining to this lady that infibulation has nothing to do with religion, and that it is nothing less than a form of violence against women. Unfortunately, it is precisely such ignorant women who perpetuate violent practices against other women. They just don't realize that they are sexual instruments in the hands of black slave masters.

So, must I thank Italy that I still have my clitoris? And Somalia? Don't I owe my respect for others and for the world around me to the beautiful land of Punt? (7) What am I?

Hell, I've made up my mind! I am going to boil these freaking sausages!

I wonder if they will affect my fingerprints. Perhaps, by eating a sausage, I might go from neutral fingertips to real "Made in Italy" fingerprints, but is this what I really want?

The water starts to boil. I throw the sausages in and watch them change color. They were red, and now they're a pale pink. Phew, they really stink! I don't know if I'll be able to swallow them. I'm already losing my nerve.

I get a dish I really like for this great occasion. It has some blue swirls on the side and a butterfly, blue too, in the middle. I adore this dish because it is the last survivor of a dinner set that had a short, hard life. I also chose it because it will be more difficult for me to throw it away. I want something to keep forever to commemorate my feat. The blue dish will be my Rhapsody in Blue. Not sure I've cooked them the right way. I'm starting to have serious doubts. What if they weren't meant to be cooked? Perhaps you eat them raw, like caviar? But I've already boiled them, so I'm going to eat them this way.

Looking the other way, I put them on the blue dish. The beauty of the dish has highlighted the ugliness of these badly boiled sausages. I sit down. I get up to fetch a glass of water. I sit down again. My legs won't stop trembling, and my wrist shakes. I stick my fork in the smaller sausage. I raise it to my nose – yuck, it stinks!

I shut my eyes and bring the filthy sausage to my lips. I am conscious of an acid, vomit-like taste in my mouth. So this is what sausages taste like – vomit? Then I feel something wet on my chest, so I open my eyes. I'm shocked to see that I've thrown up my breakfast: A bowl of cereal with cold milk and an apple. And the sausage? Where's the sausage? There it is, still whole, stuck on the fork. I didn't have time to put it in my mouth before I threw up. This is a sign!

I am not meant to eat this sausage. For the first time my head begins to form conscious thoughts. "What if it was all a mistake?"

Sure, if I eat this pseudo-sausage covered with canary yellow scales of vomit I might (possibly) be Italian, but then, what about Somalia? What am I going to do with Somalia – trash it?

And my fingerprints, what am I going to do with my fingerprints?

I need a break; I put down the fork with the poor thing stuck on the end of it. I take a deep breath and stretch my legs. I grab the newspaper that was just tossed aside on the table next to the vomit (I didn't have the heart to clean up; I want to forget about everything, just for a moment) and I idly leaf through it.

Nothing interesting – the usual baloney, the same old crap. Terrorists threaten to blow up half the civilized world, the civilized world not wasting any time and doing it already. Kids are killing each other in Brooklyn. A guy rolling in money rips his girlfriend open and throws her liver into the backyard. Political parties fight each other for no apparent reason. The starlet of the day is screwing the new rising star of the global-billionaire soccer world that is perpetually in a state of crisis. The same old rehashed stuff with a syrupy cherry on top. The world is coming to an end in fifty years' time! Wow! Now that really has me worried!

I go on reading, and what do my eyes see? A short article: "African-American community in uproar over beating of black youth by white policemen." I am fed up with news like this! Why the heck are they always beating us up? And besides, this is not helping me forget about the sausages! And most of all, it isn't helping me forget about the fingerprinting of people who are different! I feel like a good candidate for a beating. I would be perfect – no one at my side to defend me. A perfect victim, the perfect "black woman" to beat up. Funny that no one has thought of it yet. I am black, and I think that if you are black you are screwed. There's no way out. You are already condemned to be the object of nasty, dirty looks in the best of cases – or of beatings, burnings, stoning, rapes, crucifixions, and murders.

And there is no way out, not even if you are born in a country where everyone is the same color as you. In that case, it might be even worse. Because, first of all, you run the risk of dying of hardship after indescribable suffering, and then you have a 90% chance of getting AIDS – and dream on about getting HIV drugs! Actually, that's probably the only way you'll get them – in your dreams. If, by pure chance, you manage to escape these two scourges, well, you can be sure that some civil war will soon get you. And if all this is not enough, you can always count on some natural disaster that will surely strike the country of blacks, where you, screwed "black" that you are, have decided to go to live, tired of white people's insults. Besides, my friend, you must know that we black people have to live with the doubt that everyone judges us by our color. In reality, this is true, but we live under the illusion that it isn't so. People say we are oversensitive; they claim we scream racism for every little thing, but do you know what? Racism, unfortunately, is no joke. Hell, I'd love for it to be a super global joke, an Internet farce, but the truth is, if you are black, you must live with this constant doubt.

Often, though, we are in fact too contentious. I think that living in constant doubt has made us overly sensitive on certain issues. Everything pisses us off, and if you try to insult us, well, then we accuse the world of racism, even if we were arguing over something completely different, like a major car accident that was entirely our own fault!

And, yet, we are not the only super-contentious people; what about Arabs, Jews, Australian

Aboriginals, native Americans, Kurds, all the tribes and nations of the entire globe?

So what should I do? Should I eat the sausage and vomit to prove that I am not oversensitive? To prove that I, too, am a fully-anointed Italian citizen? That my fingerprints are "Made in Italy" with documented denomination of origin? I turn on the TV. I want to forget about the sausages. I haven't yet decided what I am going to do with them. I haven't yet decided whether I am going to eat them or not. I don't know what to do. "Sin" tempts me. But will it really be worth it?

I do a little channel surfing. I want to forget about that smell that is corrupting my nostrils. My vomit smells nauseating – could it be the cereal? A scene in the movie on TV sucks me in. I know the movie well: It is Ettore Scola's, *Will our heroes be able to find their friend who has mysteriously disappeared in Africa?* It's a great movie, and it tells us a lot about Italians. The plot is riveting: Alberto Sordi and his accountant set off on a search for Sordi's brother-in-law that takes them halfway across Africa. Eventually, after surviving all kinds of adventures, they find him. The brother-in-law, played by Nino Manfredi (with fake Rastafarian braids), has become a holy-man, a kind of shaman of a primitive tribe. Manfredi, albeit reluctantly, decides (for reasons of his own) to abandon his tribe and follow the bourgeois Sordi to Rome. It is at this point in the movie that my channel surfing lands me. Manfredi is overwhelmed when he hears the passionate call of his tribe: "Titì, don't leave us," they all shout in Roman dialect, and he just cannot resist!

I am moved, too, when I see him climb onto the ship's railing and dive in to swim back to those who are, at this point, his own people. But I get even more emotional when I see Sordi's face registering a strange feeling – a mixture of bitterness, surprise and envy. He is about to dive in after his brother-in-law when the accountant does the right thing, stopping him and reminding him of his duty. Sordi has no choice. He isn't free like his brother-in-law: He is condemned to be a bourgeois, forever relegated to the confines of an alienating life. He has no choice. This scene really gets to me, and I begin to cry. Looking at those two men, I realize that I still have a choice. I still have myself. I can still dive into the sea like Manfredi-Titì.

I look at the sausages and I throw them into the garbage. How could I have even thought of eating them?

Why do I want to deny my very self only to appease a pock faced woman with the voice of a cross-dresser? Or to appease those sadists who thought up that humiliating procedure of fingerprinting? Would I be more Italian with a sausage in my stomach? Would I be less Somali? Or the complete opposite? No, I would be the same – the same mix – and if this bothers someone, I won't give a damn in the future!

The phone rings. It's my friend Valentina. "Hey," she shouts. "Hey, did you see the official gazette?"

"No, I answer"

"You made it!"

I don't understand. I ask her to repeat it twice, and then again a third and a fourth time. And, finally, a fifth time. I have passed the civil service exam, and without anyone "mentioning" my name! And with no oversensitivity, and with no fingerprinting!

I am starting to like fractions. I look around me for the first time on this hot August morning and, aghast, I think, "What a pigsty!"

I roll up my sleeves. I must clean up the vomit in the kitchen.

Endnotes

- (1) To live with fear is only half living
- (2) Somali woman's dress
- (3) Mixture of incense and other perfumes
- (4) Somali flat bread
- (5) Unclean
- (6) Clitoris
- (7) Ancient Egyptian name for Somalia

***Igiaba Scego** was born in 1974 in Rome. Her parents left Somalia and came to Italy after Siad Barre's military junta took over. Scego's father had been a well known politician in Somalia and had held posts such as Ambassador and Foreign Minister. With the coup, the family lost their possessions, positions and connections. She inherited a love of stories from her parents. After graduating in Foreign Literature at the First University of Rome (La Sapienza), she obtained her doctorate in Pedagogy at the Third University of Rome. Her narrative "Salsiccia" ("Sausage") was awarded the Eks & Tra prize in 2003. The children's book *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* (*The Nomad who Loved Hitchcock*) followed that same year. In 2004, she published her second novel, *Rhoda* and In 2008 *Oltre Babilonia* (*Beyond Babylon*). Her most recent novel is *L'albero in Nessuna Pietà*. She also writes for newspapers and magazines such as "L'Unità" and "Internazionale" and is the editor of several anthologies. The author lives in Rome. *Sausages* is translated by **Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto**. This translation first appeared in *Metamorphoses* 13.2 (Fall 2005.)*

<http://www.warscapes.com/retrospectives/food/sausages>

See more at: <http://www.warscapes.com/retrospectives/food/sausages#sthash.PanFBXRf.dpuf>