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## Dessert

In Alba, Italy, rain and a market. In my hands, the white greased paper that once held an entire rotisserie rabbit. Its bones clack together as hooves, a horse in the distance. I clutch this paper coffin to my chest, as if for warmth, and scan the *piazza* for a garbage can. My hunt for refuse carries me into the covered pulse of the marketplace, and I have to blink to focus. Now unburdened by my desire to eat a whole animal, I am able to assimilate this lovely and special chaos. There are hundreds of vendors—fruit stands, fish stands, meats and cheeses; rounds, bricks, entire civilizations of cheese, octopus, persimmon. I toss my trash in a can beneath a string of blood sausage.

“Hey! Hey!” I hear someone shout.

The voice opens like the lid of an ancient hope chest, rides its dusty remnants and long dead dreams on the rain. If I were to look inside this voice I’d expect to find centuries-old taxidermy, owls with shellacked eyes and sawdust in the feathers. I hear it again, this time in triplicate.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!”

I have no reason to think it’s directed at me, but I turn to face a tiny knuckle of a man, dressed all in white, head so perfectly circular it could have been designed with a compass.

“Hey! Viene qua!” the frump calls from behind his fruit stand.

I turn and point behind me, my forehead certainly a mess of wrinkles. People cascade in circles, not one of them standing still. I turn back and touch my chest.

“Io?” I ask.

“Si, si,” he creaks, “Tu.”

I move forward and, as if stepping on a hidden button in the cobblestone, I activate this man to produce a baseball-sized fig from his fruit pile, bust it in half with his thumbs, and shove both bowled sides into his mouth at once. As if a magician waiting for applause, he, less than a second later, waves the cleaned purple fig skins at me as theatre curtains.

“Wow,” is all I can muster.

He holds a fat palm open to me. I freeze into position. He turns and retrieves another intact fig, this one even larger. Again, with his cigar-stub fingers, he breaks the fruit in two, its swampy sweet cilia waving yellow at my nose like a sea anemone. Soon, his hands are in mine, wet with warm rain, rolling the fig halves into my drenched palms.

“Prego,” he offers, but it could easily have been, “Abracadabra.”

I want to match his magic, so I shove both halves into my mouth. The music of the fruit shrieks soprano with cherry and yeast, the texture of limp comb teeth. This is a fig to resurrect the dreams of a great-great-grandmother. This is a fig to make her a little girl again, stretch her hair from stiff gray to blonde braided pigtails. I think of the tango and pull the stripped skins from my mouth. The frump actually applauds, laughing.

“Bravo! Bravo!” he bellows.

I laugh knowingly with him, having shared in his secret bag of wizard’s tricks.

I reach into my pocket, expecting a string of scarves, but produce only my wallet. When I flash a few coins, he shakes his head, a bowling ball on shoulders, and turns to help another customer, a middle-aged woman with a faux-snakeskin umbrella.

I feel large, and somehow filled-out, rounded, fat-handed, aged and neckless. This is a market without illusion. The magic here is real. Over the reptilian umbrella, I watch the man hoist a watermelon into the air.