

## Doughtcakes (Focacce)

Tayatsumi Yakamoto, when he was gloomier than usual, made doughcakes.

Usually, it happened in the afternoon, while he was watching the news: especially in winter, at about half past four or in summer, during those eternal afternoons waiting for dinner to come.

Time never elapsed...Tayatsumi, overwhelmed, used to console himself by going into the kitchen. Tayatsumi hated every kind of meat and fish; he could just bear eggs. He ate pasta, soups. He was able to cook vegetables. Nevertheless, nothing existed that could cheer him up so deeply and relieve him of gloom except preparing doughcakes.

His kitchen was as plain as many others: a sink, a washing-machine, a table with four chairs, a grease-proof table-cloth, some shelves, a little piece of furniture, an oven. For the last one, he had a strong feeling of veneration. He used to clean it continuously, by a good amount of elbow-grease, resorting rarely to chemical products. Almost every day his oven was in a turmoil.

Tayatsumi could cook every kind of doughcakes: salty, sweet, bitter-sweet. He owned many recipes-books, ranging from napolitan pizzas to sardinian doughcakes, from stuffed flat doughcakes to crispy bread with salt and rosmarin and flat loaves with raisin. He had also written his greatest accomplishment on a note-book: The heading was. TAYATSUMI YAKAMOTO. DOUGHCAKES. This is the title by which we will remember him.

\* \* \* \* \*

In summer, Tayatsumi tried to cope with distress by cooking doughcakes made up of milk and semolina. He cooked them with intense passion and as soon as he had taken them out of the oven and let them cool down, he thrust them into the fridge. So he was able to bear a long afternoon. But when gloom got stronger, he flavoured his doughcakes with vanilla, nutmeg or cinnamon: all these things together cheered him up. He spent dinnertime with his tiny doughcakes, rather flat and slightly leavened, with heavy showers of liquors and mediteranean wines like "Vin santo, retsina or Lachrima Christi".

Then he used to lean out of his balcony and sip some more sweet wine with an ice-cube inside. As soon as he lacked something else to drink, he went inside and watched television, he watched adventure films, western films without any red indian or he read a soap opera novel. Sometimes, when he fell asleep, lizards came up in the night and tickled his toes. He couldn't really bear it, so he tackled furious fights with lizards: He ended up waking the whole block of flats by throwing empty bottles against these harmless little animals. He couldn't go to sleep at once and sunlight woke him up early: he turned himself again and again on his sort of his camp-bed and he began counting ants. Sometimes he cried.

\* \* \* \* \*

In winter it was even worse than on Sunday afternoons or in summer: it was all hustle and bustle. His electrical fan-oven was wonderful: it switched on and off by a timer and had multiple combinations of HD floppy disk multiprogram, but, instead of cooking everything all together, it cooked one thing at a time.

He knew this very well, because he had tested his HI FI oven from start to finish. He could have cooked, in the meantime, lasagne with sauce, roast-chicken, onion-pie and apple-tart. Anyway he preferred otherwise, the afternoon went by more easily.

Thus, he cooked an onion doughcake at three o'clock, a rosmarin loaf at half past four, a tomato pizza with basil at seven. At last, round about eight o'clock, he heated everything at full blast, speed forty-eight thousand. If it was very cold and he knew that bad news, would be broadcast on TV as

from two o' clock, he decided to make a sweet bun with glaze, almonds, raisin and some honey. Honey flavour flooded vigorously into the air and soaked into towels, sponge-cloth, journal paper, woollen pullover: every thing that was porous smelt of honey.

Oh! What a consolation for his heart, serenity for his mind. The scent of honey, made up of a blending of flowers, was much more important to him than the summary of the goals on a Sunday evening at half past eight.

Even if windows were wide-open, it remained until after midnight, real peace for his soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

The co-owners of his block of flat hardly knew him. They only knew that he was “the doughcakes man”, none of them had ever gone into his house. But one day, a little group of children, while smelling an intense flavour coming from under his door and spreading through the stairwell, grasped his ring-bell and after vigorously ringing for a quarter of an hour, they got the door to be opened. Tayatsumi had opened it showing an apparent dislike (rosmarins' scent perfumes sheets and helps sleeping) but then he had joyfully offered the children some bits of his doughcakes.

Besides, as he had seen the children's enthusiasm, he had finally given them all he had cooked and, as a result, he had nothing left for dinner.

This was one of the most beautiful days of his life: at half past six, the children had gone away with their bellies full of doughcakes and he had still very much to cook over the whole day.

That afternoon went by in a flash, afterdinner all was quiet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometimes, Tayatsumy stuck in front of the ceiling and stared at it intensively, no one could guess whether he was thinking of a new doughcake or he was simply a prey to his own hypochondria.

He came to only late in the afternoon, he even skipped dinner. Then he went to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

One day Tayatsumi turned out to be intensively, thinking of a girl: she wasn't beautiful at all, she was thin, pale, tiny, she couldn't have drawn any man, but, instead, Tayatsumi was always daydreaming upon her . He fancied kissing her, but soon after, he fell asleep like a log. He imagined that making love was like thinking of a pale girl, believing to kiss her until he fell asleep straight away.

He woke up a bit happier, he stuck cloves of garlic into his doughcakes and seasoned them with a sweet wine called “rosolio”. He never brought these cakes to his girl-friend, he ate them up greedily, he smelt them with avidity. They tickled his nostrils and, in his thoughts, even the chimney stack of a factory or the sirens of an ambulance might look more beautiful then ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

One day he was watching terrible news on television: another war was still in progress, Tayatsumi started crying more and more, he wished he could rush and help those poor people, help them to escape the bombs, he wished he could twist all those guns, the murderers' cannons. During some nights he wasn't able to close his eyes thinking of those wretched people waiting in a queue for a miserable portion of bread, those bombs upon harmless people. He wanted to take his doughcakes to those besieged martyrs, he turned in bed again and again, he sniffed, he suddently got up and dashed to knead a doughcake, he was completely upset he went on kneading and cooking day after day. He had learnt to give children his doughcakes as a present, but now he didn't eat them anymore, he fasted, he got thinner and thinner, the children cheered every kind of doughcakes that came out from that door. They also climbed on his balcony from downstairs and they grasped them from his window-sill where he put them to cool down. Tayatsumi took as many other doughcakes out of his oven, ready to be grasped, to be brought down and gobbled up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grief was getting deeper beyond any expectation: images of war upset Tayatsumi. He ate no more, he slept no more, he didn't go to work any more.

He had a full-time engagement with this electrical oven, microwave oven, microwave oven plus grill, portable gas-oven. By now he only went out of his house when he needed new ingredients, he wore a long beard, his eye-sockets had become hollow, he looked like St. John the Baptist.

One night he had a thought, it was three o' clock on Wednesday; he had to make his most important doughcake, the best, the most accomplished one, his masterpiece. Those rows of people waiting for bread tormented him.

He took white flour, maize flour, coconut flour, chestnut flour, potato flour, starch, cane sugar, honey, eggs, milk, oil, butter, cocoa powder, carob, malt, orange juice, lemon juice, hazelnuts, almonds, sesame seeds, poppy seeds, cinnamon, nougat, aniseed, every kind of dried grapes: sultana, currant raisin, yeast-powder, candy-fruit, liquor. For five hours on end he had been kneading, mixing up, whipping the whites, adding ingredients and removing them. He was soaking sweaty he drank – lime flavoured coffee, maraschino - chocolate, barley with vanilla. Next morning, exhausted, he had accomplished that special doughcake. He understood that he had been living for it all his life long. He didn't put it in his multiprogram oven, but instead, showing a sort of maternal attitude, he put it into an aluminium mould inside a traditional portable oven on the cooker.

After about twenty minutes, a sublime scent began to spread out. The mixture, marvellously condensed, melted, thickened, penetrated inside and outside, it gurgled with delight. No human nostrils had ever smelt anything like this: cloves of garlic and nutmeg mixed up with aniseed, bitter cocoa powder with whipped cream, lemon-peel, grated and soaked into liquor, mixed up with orange flavour.

Although windows were thoroughly shut down, people began knocking at his door, telephone started ringing, everyone wanted to eat his new doughcake, not only the children, but also the bank manager with his moustache, the tired and sad housewife, the nervous clerk, the student who was worried about her next written-text, the long-nosed young spinster: all knocked at the door, rang the bell, phoned. Everyone would be pleased with only one little piece of this brand-new doughcake. But Tayatsumi, by now, realized no more, he was stuck in front of his little oven, staring at it with his wide open eyes.

When the doughcake seemed to be completely cooked, the scent broke through the windows, melted wax candles, lubricated the old doors' hinges, Tayatsumi turned off the gas and then turned it on again so that it leaked out without burning. After a few minutes the divine flavour was imbued with the unmistakable sweetish smell of gas: at the door, at the windows, on the balcony people stood by, inquiring and perplexed about it. They ran away just in time; ten minutes later Tayatsumi pressed the light switch.

*Un grazie sincero a Paola Pecorini per l'attenta ed intelligente traduzione.*