

See news section for details of **Farmhouse Writers**, the new Ledbury writing group.

### EGGS

My second autumn in Palermo, the city slow to come to life again. We have been away ourselves, of course, but, returning in September, many streets are empty and bars peopled by unfamiliar tourist faces.

It is still blisteringly hot, a dry heat with the sun beating down throughout the daylight hours on the market traders in Ballero. The children with their pathetic bunches of herbs laid out on fraying plastic sacks branded like cattle with faded red and blue dye, oregano and parsley arranged in neat rows, gathered at dawn on some mountainside overshadowing the outskirts of this ancient place which is still growing new limbs and heads like an uncontrollable young hydra.

The baker's where they sell cheap pizza in slabs from a metal tray the size of a small table, weighing it before wrapping it in waxed paper and declaring it worth two or three hundred lire. This pizza dough: only a nodding acquaintance with tomatoes and cheese, the briefest of kisses from an onion mouth, a stumpy tree of a mushroom slice planted every half metre or so, and yet it could satisfy the sharpest pangs of hunger from dusk until at least the following lunchtime.

The egg woman, her single item of trade resting in tray after tray: white fawn, small, brown, beige, speckled, medium, large duck eggs strategically placed by her left hand, away from empty stomachs and thieving fingers, yesterday's newspaper, Giornale di Sicilia, hanging from a string ready to be deftly folded up to make an astonishingly neat container into which she places the eggs, two or three or five or six, however many are required, even one. When I - naively - questioned her packaging, she roundly informed me my eggs would be as safe in there as they could be anywhere, for they were encased in newspaper which, she implied with a backward toss of her head, any fool knew to be the strongest of protectors.

'Buongiorno, signora. So you're back again. Welcome. And how was England? Plenty of rain, eh? Not like beautiful Sicily, where the sun is always shining. Guiseppe, look, the English

signora is back.'

Guiseppe comes out from behind his grocer's counter, grinning, hands in the pockets of his grey overall, his sachetti he calls them, and stands between two tubs, one filled with plastic bottles of vegetable oil, the other with packets of rigatone.

'Welcome back signora. At your service.'

And he bows to me slightly, with deference and formality, and is a little shocked when I offer him my hand to shake, but takes it anyway in the spirit it is offered.

'So, has anything interesting happened since I've been away?' I ask.

I catch the faintest of glances exchanged between them; the shortest of silences elapses before the egg woman assured me,

'No signora. Nothing interesting ever happens here. Your husband, the professor, is he well?'

I am surprised they don't mention it. Everyone's talking about it. The young lads in Bar Vittorio on the corner, the couple queuing at the bank, even the contessa and her daughter-with-the-glorious-hair from upstairs. 'Dalla Chiesa' is what I hear in snatched whispers everywhere, but I can't decipher the rest. However hard I listen I never hear the words 'La mafia'. I glance at the newspaper and the headline screams 'Ammazzato'.

- Killed. Murdered.

Two days ago, dalla Chiesa, newly arrived from Rome to crack down on the activities of the mafia, was shot dead in Piazza Bellini. I read it myself in Giornale, in l'Ora, in La Repubblica. I

point to the newspaper and say,

'Dalla Chiesa?'

'Ah signora, I don't know how to read what it says. Perhaps you could teach me to read'.

I persist.

'Dalla Chiesa was assassinated, just down the road.'

'Ah, it's a bad business, signora. But they had o right to bring in an outsider, a foreigner. Let Sicilians deal with their own'.

'He wasn't a foreigner. He was from Rome'.

'Exactly, signora. A foreigner, from up north.'

It occurs to me they - the egg woman, Giuseppe, the barmen watching us from the Devil's Den, all of them - see dalla Chiesa as no more like them than I am. They attempt to speak Italian with me, but among themselves they use only Sicilian with its harsh vowels, it mocking shushing sounds and its crude gestures.

A man on a tired Vespa pulls up and begins to finger the eggs. He talks to the egg woman. I don't understand what he's saying but I know he's not here to buy eggs. She looks frightened, although she's trying to hide it. Guiseppe beckons me into his shop and offers me a sliver of salami. I hear the sound of eggs dropping on the cobbles one by one and the egg woman pleading softly.

## Farmhouse Writers - Eggs

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'No. No. Please. Tomorrow. I promise. Tomorrow'.