

The Hearth - "Il Focolare"

A few days before Christmas in 1988 I had come to Le Tanelle from the States. I was staying at my friends Alfredo and Rose's house.

The summer before, I had fired the incompetent English contractor. I was on my own now – the house was still open to the weather, no windows. I had put a few old doors in the open doorways on the first floor and wired them shut. Anyone could get in with a pair of wire snips, and they did, taking the few hand tools I had. Later on, when I wandered the countryside and went into the abandoned farmhouses where the Sardinian shepherd Amadeo kept his sheep, I would find my tools, one here, one there, which I had marked so I could identify them. Even though I recovered most of them, it was pretty discouraging.

I had been thinking a great deal about Le Tanelle. What was its essence, what was the heart of the building? Always I was drawn to the old kitchen – "la vecchia cucina." On the upper level, the floor of this room was covered in rectangular terra cotta tile in a herringbone pattern. The floor sagged half a foot and many of the tiles were cracked from the stress and use for over two hundred years.

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I stood there staring at the huge nine-foot wide ruined hood of the fireplace. Here is where they had all huddled to share in the most elemental parts of life - fire, warmth, food and family. Il focolare was loaded with the meanings of warmth, of gathering, of food, of all those different people. People I had never known had lived and loved and worked and died there for over two hundred years. I would be connected to them when I rebuilt this huge fireplace so large that two families could huddle underneath "la cappa", its enveloping hood. But now it was violated, a gaping jagged hole in its canted front. I wanted to make it whole again.

The low winter sun came raking through the two windows behind me, illuminating the worn stone of the hearth and charred bricks of the fireplace back. I had to stoop down to get under the hood. It was dark, coated with soot that charred your hand when you touched it. I felt like I was in a medieval tent. Looking up the flue - the "funaria" - I could see a small rectangle of blue sky. When I closed my eyes, I could sense the presence of a family sitting on the little benches under the canopy, leaning toward the fire of oak and chestnut, a kettle suspended from the iron

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bar above. A hand-wrought hook held the pot above the fire, in it was simple minestrone.

To the left of this grand fireplace was a stove-like structure of stone and plaster. On the top surface were two openings with charred embers in them, and a battered iron pot askew on one of the grilles. This had been a warming stove.

My eyes opened. This was it, right here in front of me. This was the heart and the soul of the house. I had to start here at the hearth to bring Le Tanelle back to life.

The front of the hood of the fireplace was a trapezoid that angled back to the wall twelve feet above the floor. The sides also canted in, so it was like half of a truncated pyramid. But the front of the hood had a gaping hole in it six feet wide where the tile had either fallen in, or more probably had been smashed by vandals.

The work would be hard and difficult because I had only a few hand tools and no electricity. From the masonry supply place I bought several lightweight extruded terra cotta panels. I also got several bags of quick-set cement. I still had my masonry hammer, a masonry chisel, a few buckets and a large masonry brush.

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The "cappa" was made up of thin terra cotta tiles. The holes had jagged edges, so I had to try to cut the panels to fit. I bought four small handsaws with short curved blades to try to crudely cut the terra cotta. It was a little like a rectangular jigsaw puzzle. It was tough going, and the teeth dulled up quickly and wore down to almost nothing after a few cuts. Essentially I was trying to cut stone with a wood saw. Finally I got several panels cut pretty close to the right configuration. That was as far as I got the first day.

After my father died, Christmases were sad. The first Christmas with just my mother and younger brother, we experienced a sense of loss, incompleteness. Often at Christmas I got depressed thinking back to the first Christmas after he died. There were only the three of us when they should have been four.

The next day was Christmas Eve but for once I was not depressed. I was excited to get back to work.

I began by wetting down the panels with the water-laden brush, and wetting the edges of the terra cotta tiles of the hood. I poured half a bag of *cimento prompt* into the bucket. I added water and mixed it quickly, maybe

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thirty seconds, and then I had at most ninety seconds before it began to set up hard as a rock.

A rule of thumb for any good mason is that you never touch the mortar or cement with your hands, only your trowel. If Gerardo, my new mason, saw how I was working, he would have been horrified and disdainful. I would have been the object of a lot of good-natured ridicule.

Because I was alone and I had to work quickly before the cement set up, I grabbed handfuls of it and buttered the corners of the panel, then quickly set it in place, holding it there for a minute or two until the cement set. My fingers were caked with the now-hardened cement which I had to scrape off.

I had started after lunch. I became aware that the light was fading, it was four o'clock. I had another half-hour of light. I measured for another panel, cut it, and mixed up a batch of *cimento*. I was on the last piece. The cement was very caustic, and my hands hurt where it had eaten through the outer layer of the raw skin. One more to go, and it would be all mortared together.

I had to work from underneath the hood. As I stood there measuring the last piece, the weak late afternoon sunlight came through the opening.

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I mixed the last batch and with my raw fingers buttered the final, odd-shaped piece. As I forced it into the opening, the sunlight was suddenly gone and I was momentarily in darkness until my eyes adjusted. The hood was complete. I had done it, crudely, but I had done it.

Earlier I had gathered some dry twigs and some pieces of old chestnut rafters. With my knife I whittled off some shavings from the chestnut. When I had a small handful, I set them against the back of the hearth, and made a teepee of the twigs, and then leaned several of the rafter pieces over them. I was on my knees in front of the wood. I hesitated, wondering if the chimney would still draw.

I took out my matches. I struck one and cupped it in my hands, letting it burn a little. I could see the wrinkled raw skin of my fingers. Then I put the match down in the dry shavings. Smoke slowly drifted upwards. With it a small flame rose, and then I could feel the warmth on my face and hands as the flame spread to the twigs. Licking yellow and red and bluish green, and they crackled and threw little sparks like miniature fireworks. Then I had to move back as the flames and heat spread out and upward. I sat on the bench, my hands outstretched, not so

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much for the warmth, but in reverence for the magic of this elemental force of nature.

The fireplace drew well, the flames licking the back of the hearth, higher and higher. I did not feel lonely or alone. I felt surrounded by other presences.

I had brought the hearth to life once again.

Over time, the flames died down. The wood turned to orange red embers. I realized that darkness had fallen. It was Christmas Eve.