

The Grape Peddler

by Cammie Corlas Quinn

When I was a child, an elderly Italian widower ambled around my hometown giving away homegrown grapes. Dominic was hunchbacked, unshaven, and spoke with an accent. He lived alone in a small house with a yard just big enough for a grape arbor. My parents told me that he “longed for the old country.” Every few years he saved enough money to go home to Italy.

Each year around Labor Day he toted his ripened grapes in a paper sack, cutting across yards in the accepted small-town ways of the ‘60s, giving the grapes away in grand, purple clumps. It became an annual tradition among those who knew him, like Girl Scout cookies. “There goes old Dominic,” everyone would say. When he crossed the schoolyard where I played at recess, some of my schoolmates made fun of him in the way that immature children poke fun at anyone different.

I was privileged to see his grape arbor on numerous occasions. His house was only a couple blocks away from ours, situated in the home-run zone of the little league baseball field. It was a nondescript gray, stone house that looked crumbly to me. A rickety wooden arbor stood over his back porch. Strands of big green leaves twined around the beams and hung down the sides like draperies. As stuffy as it seemed to me, I knew it was special because my parents told me so.

Dominic’s grapes were the best gift he had to offer, tended with skill he’d honed in his beloved Italy. He offered them freely whether they were appreciated or not, often to the same people every year. I suspect Dominic’s grapes were his way of bringing his beloved Italy to the United States. Whenever he gave away a clump of grapes, he gave away Italy. If you could tear one of his grapes apart and see beyond the obvious, I imagine you would see his grape arbor in Italy, his parents, his immigration, and his tears. To me, his grapes were a juicy purple fruit, but to him, they were a representation of himself.

Dominic gave away his home-grown grapes until he was too crippled to walk. I never knew what he believed spiritually, but he seemed to exemplify Christian giving at its finest. He gave the best he had to give even when the gift seemed insignificant to the recipient. My childhood and my hometown were all the richer for it.

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4 ESV)