

***A Forgotten Fear:
Unpacking the “Dark Evil” of Milk in Keeping House by Clara Sereni***

*Britta Gigliotti
New York University*

Clara Sereni’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Keeping House: A Novel in Recipes*, weaves a complicated narrative of love and heartache through 105 nostalgia-rich recipes. While the corresponding vignettes of the narrator’s life are connected to personal events and political progressions, they simultaneously carry a wistful, dream-like timelessness. The narrator’s struggles are felt with a heavy heart because her feelings, challenges, and desire to escape the pressures of societal expectations are relatable. One vignette in particular, however, stands out—not for what it says, but for what it leaves unexplained. It reads differently from all of the others because it carries an expectation of shared experience. Under her recipe for “Apple Cake,” Sereni writes, “For a dinner together she asks me to contribute a dessert without milk. Once viewed as the supreme antidote, milk has been transformed into a dark evil, one of the many unexploded mines that threatens the unborn child.”¹ Readers of a different generation are left to only wonder at her meaning. Since when has milk been dangerous?

This quote is perplexing for a few reasons. To be asked to contribute a dessert without milk would not be so strange had the explanation been lactose intolerance or veganism—or, indeed, had there been an explanation at all. As it stands, Aldo’s partner, who requests the milk-free dessert, seems to be abstaining from the consumption of milk because of imminent health risks. The request seems both jarring and sensational. The previous paragraph states, “His partner continues to cook in grand style. By now we have gotten to know each other and she spares me the hot peppers: we know almost everything about each other’s intolerances and have learned to

¹ Clara Sereni, *Keeping House*, trans. Giovanna Miceli Jeffries and Susan Briziarelli (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 118.

be careful,” which suggest that had she been simply intolerant to milk, Clara would have already known to omit it.² In addition, had intolerance been the rationale, milk would have presented a danger just to Aldo’s partner, rather than transformed into a “dark evil” entirely. That is not even considering the twelve tablespoons of butter—3/4 of a cup—which also has potential to upset the stomach of the severely lactose intolerant. Furthermore, the language “threatens the unborn child” also points towards a generality; she does not say “their” or “her” unborn child. Sereni is talking about something that happened to milk itself which then transformed it into a perilous substance.

Further amplifying the strangeness of this quote, Sereni’s narrator, Clara,³ only comments on milk’s transformation from remedy to poison in this single, off-handed sentence. Out of 104 recipes, 16 include some quantity of milk, and an additional 42 include some type of milk product. Why is milk only now a “dark evil?” How does it threaten “the unborn child?” What exactly happened—and when—to earn that fear? Why does this evil only apply to milk and not to the many products made from milk—béchamel sauce, cheese, cream, butter, whipped cream—which are used in nearly half of Sereni’s recipes? The casual tone of the narrator suggests the assumption of an informed Italian reader, since to an outside audience this undisclosed event proves mystifying.

Before it was a harbinger of hazard to the Italian people, milk was a comforting presence, a reminder of childhood. Through breastfeeding, milk is inextricably linked to both motherhood and infancy, carrying echoes of gentleness, care, comfort, and security. But the comfort of milk in an Italian context extends past those formative years. In her First Courses Section, Sereni

² Ibid.

³ While seemingly autobiographical, the novel is not explicitly packaged as such and therefore this paper refrains from referring to the narrator as Sereni herself.

includes a recipe for milk soup. The ingredients are basic: milk, rice, butter, Parmesan, and salt. The instructions are likewise simple, if vague, “I cook the rice in the milk with salt and then dress it with butter and cheese.”⁴ Variations of this recipe reveal a cloud of nostalgia in the Italian cultural memory. For example, one cooking blog writes, “Ricordo che spesso la mia nonna materna la preparava e a tutta la famiglia piaceva tanto! Per la mia mamma poi, la minestra di riso e latte della mia nonna fu la sua colazione fino a che si sposò.”⁵ Milk soup is laced with memories of mothers and grandmothers, of warmth and routine. Milk soup was the means of transliterating milk—and the corresponding attachment to the mother—from the language of infancy into the context of everyday life. *La Stampa*, an Italian newspaper, also appeals to this hazy memory of nearly forgotten days, using the headline, “C’era una volta la zuppa di latte,” to describe a time when children were healthier because mothers prepared food from scratch instead of relying on packaged commodities.⁶ Milk soup was once a formative dish, but for one reason or another has since been confined to history.

Carlo Petrini, the founder of the Slow Food movement, was likewise taken with the phenomenon of milk soup and its fade into obscurity. In *Zuppa di Latte*, Petrini chronicles a youth spent in the *latterie* of his hometown and the disappearance of milk soup from the tables of Italian households as milk became increasingly industrialized and effectually tasteless. Petrini bemoans this transformation, “Anche il suo sapore cambia e con esso il suo simbolismo: al latte si affianca l’immagine industriale, arriva confezionato e sterilizzato sulle nostre tavole, si

⁴ Sereni, *Keeping House*, 51-52.

⁵ Cinzia Ceccolin, “Minestra di latte, soupe au lait,” published January 20, 2014, <http://cinziaaifornelli.blogspot.com/2014/01/minestra-di-latte-soupe-au-lait.html>.

⁶ “C’era una volta la zuppa di latte: Quando si faceva la pasta in casa, e c’erano meno bambini obesi,” *La Stampa*, published January 30, 2015, <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/01/30/societa/mamme/salute/pediatria/cera-una-volta-la-zuppa-di-latte-X074AWI4VBCg5HbSMHpYOL/pagina.html>.

mantiene per mesi nei nuovi contenitori in tetrapak o di plastica e, dal 1950 in poi, trova persino nuova consistenza, trasformandosi in pasta o in polvere.”⁷ What was once comforting is now sterilized; a symbol of growing life is now unnaturally suspended in time. Negative changes in the taste profile of milk could be reason enough to quell the popularity of milk soup. Could Clara thus be likewise pointing to the extended shelf life and mutated forms of milk as the reason why she was asked to bring a dessert that does not contain the supposedly lethal substance?

It is possible, but also unlikely. The industrialization of milk changed its appearance, and as Petrini points out, its taste and symbolism as well. Yet those alterations did not contaminate its substance (although Petrini might argue otherwise). The industrialization of milk did not make it a “unexploded mine,” waiting for the chance to wreak havoc on babies in utero. Something bigger must have occurred—something sudden. *Casalinghitudine*, the original title of *Keeping House*, was published in 1987. Therefore, whatever happened to strip milk of its elixir-like reputation had to have occurred prior to that year, and there is a very compelling reason to believe that the event capable of abruptly overturning the traditional meaning of milk in Italian society happened just one year prior.

On April 26, 1986 the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant released 5% of its radioactive core into the atmosphere.⁸ The threat was invisible and only vaguely comprehensible, yet the Italian government responded incredibly swiftly. On May 2nd, less than a week later, they announced a two-week ban on the sale of nearly all green vegetables and the consumption of milk by pregnant women and children under ten. The rationale being that Iodine 131, the

⁷ Carlo Petrini, *Zuppa di Latte* (Bra: Slow Food Editore, 2015), Kindle edition, locations 309-312.

⁸ “Chernobyl Accident 1986,” World Nuclear Association, last updated November 2016, accessed December 19, 2016, “<http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/chernobyl-accident.aspx>.”

principle radioactive component of nuclear reactor leaks, is easily absorbed by green plants, and consequentially also appears in the milk of grass-eating mammals.⁹ The English-language sources on this occurrence are remarkably scarce; after the explosion stopped echoing those covering the disaster seemed to have lost interest.

Mary Jo Salter, an American author and poet, was living in Rome at the time of the explosion with her husband and two-year-old daughter, and in January of 1987, *The Atlantic* published her account of the ensuing events, titled, “Living with Fallout.”¹⁰ She describes a time clouded with secrecy, conflicting reports, and sensationalized fear. Earlier in April, just a few weeks before the explosion, Italy was rocked by a poisoned wine scandal in which “eight Italians died and some 30 were hospitalized after drinking red Odore Barbera, a northern Italian wine that was contaminated by as much as 5.7% methyl alcohol, a deadly dose way above the legally permitted limit of .3%,” which is perhaps why the Italian government was so quick to respond to this new threat.¹¹ Despite suffering lower radiation figures than many other places in Europe, the precautionary restrictions in Italy were stronger.¹² Journalists explained that the government “[did] not want to be caught looking negligent again,”¹³ so they acted quickly, even if it meant sensationalizing fear by releasing uninformed figures.

Official reports on the levels of radioactive materials in the air, earth, and produce were inconclusive and varied drastically across governmental bodies. As *The New York Times* reported, “Since the beginning of the crisis, television stations, radio broadcasts and newspaper articles [had] quoted different sources using different and often difficult terminology to report

⁹ Mary Jo Salter, “Living with Fallout,” in *The Atlantic*, January 1987.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Poison Plonk: A Deadly Wine Scandal in Italy,” *Time* 127, no. 14 (April 7, 1986), 50.

¹² Mary Davis Suro, “Chernobyl Cloud Passes, But Chill in Italy Lingers,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1986.

¹³ Ibid.

the radiation threat. People were inundated by statistics measured in millirems, microrentgens, rads and picocuries with little idea what they meant. Some said the government was issuing any and all information without taking the proper measures to present it in a uniform format that a layman could comprehend.”¹⁴ The reports were unintelligible, but the message was loud: danger. As Evonne Violetta, a mother of two, explained, “I am not willing to put my faith in the reports if they cannot get their facts and figures straight.”¹⁵ This created what was termed “nuclear psychosis,” as the public was overcome with fear based on uncertainty.¹⁶

According to Salter, “The most reliable index of how fearful—or at least uncertain—most people remained was provided at the marketplace: the wholesale prices of produce, including fruits and vegetables that had never been banned, were on some days down by as much as 50 percent.”¹⁷ Italians were suddenly afraid of the food they had always loved. “The list of banned foods changed daily, and no one was sure what was wrong with the stuff anyway. It all looked great.”¹⁸ Even after all vegetables were declared safe to eat on May 17th, “sales remained so low that wholesalers [were] in despair.”¹⁹ The Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA) reported:

The damage wreaked on Italian agriculture by the Health Ministry’s ban on the sale of leaf vegetables for a fortnight starting Saturday has cost 3.3 million dollars so far... In the southern region of Calabria, strawberry growers are handing out scores of tons of strawberries free in protest against the Health Ministry’s measures, which they claim have set off a psychosis leading Italians to shun many vegetables and fruits not included in the ban.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Suro, “Chernobyl Cloud Passes, But Chill in Italy Lingers.”

¹⁶ Salter, “Living with Fallout.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *The Washington Post*, “Chernobyl Fallout: Parental Paranoia,” September 14, 1986.

¹⁹ Suro, “Chernobyl Cloud Passes, But Chill in Italy Lingers.”

²⁰ Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, “Agricultural Losses Costly; Protest March Planned,” *Rome ANSA in English*,”

The \$3.3 million in losses was accrued in just five days. Customers shunned virtually all fresh produce and fought over bags of frozen food—items that had not been tainted by the fallout.²¹ Shortages of conserved foods were widespread.²² Lombardy even decreed an “emergency slaughter of all rabbits” in the Province of Como.²³ While technically only green vegetables were banned, fresh food as a whole was distrusted. Umberto Colombo, president of the National Nuclear and Alternative Energy Agency (ENEA) said that he felt “that the special measures adopted in some regions were unjustified and were psychological reactions to past dangers.”²⁴ Whether real or only perceived, fresh food was marked dangerous by the Italian public.

The panic surrounding fresh vegetables was intense, but shorter lived than the uncertainty surrounding milk. While the Italian government declared all vegetables safe on May 17th, they also decided to extend the milk ban. Unlike the vegetable ban, the milk ban only applied to pregnant women and children under ten—even though at least one news source reported that “even adult milk consumers have given up drinking milk completely, leaving thousands upon thousands of liters unsold and unsaleable.”²⁵ The government recommended only drinking powdered or UHT milk that was sealed and dated before May 2, 1986.²⁶ Adding to the panic, one of the country’s largest long-life milk manufacturer came under fire for allegedly altering the package date on milk cartons to reflect a time before the disaster.²⁷ Suddenly, the only milk that

²¹ Suro, “Chernobyl Cloud Passes, But Chill in Italy Lingers.”

²² H. Otway, P.Haastруп, W. Cannell, G. Gianitsopoulos, and M. Paruccini, *Nuclear Science and Technology: An Analysis of the Print Media in Europe Following the Chernobyl Accident* (Luxemburg City, Luxemburg: Commission of the European Communities, 1987).

²³ FBIS Daily Reports, “Agricultural Losses Costly.”

²⁴ Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, “Radiation Report from Health Department,” *Rome ANSA in English*, June 11, 1986.

²⁵ FBIS Daily Reports, “Agricultural Losses Costly.”

²⁶ Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, “Precautionary Measures Noted,” *Rome International Service in Italian*, May 2, 1986.

²⁷ Salter, “Living with Fallout.”

people could be sure of was likewise thrown into the hysteria of presumed threat. Nearly a month after the disaster, the then prime minister, Bettino Craxi, lifted the ban on milk, but a week later, on June 3rd, four Lombard towns announced that they were reinstating the ban due to dangerously high levels of ground radiation. Furthermore, “researchers at the University of Milan found that the powdered milk in various baby formulas being sold in Italy was so ‘significantly contaminated’ by cesium as to require an ‘urgent intervention by health authorities.’”²⁸ Milk was tainted in all of its forms, yet no one knew how badly—it was transformed virtually overnight into Clara’s alleged “unexploded mine.” However, the extent to which Italy’s milk was truly affected by radioactive materials following the nuclear explosion remains unclear.

Everyone in Italy was affected by the bans, but the panic felt by parents was notably more intense. “Will this baby arrive with 11 toes, nine fingers and three eyes? Mutations aside, will the radioactivity bounce around my child’s system for 15 years and show up as cancer? Or are we merely talking about twisted chromosomes that will deform my grandchildren?” asks one expecting father who termed his condition “Parental Nuclear Paranoia.”²⁹ In an interview, Roman pediatrician, Dr. Roberto Ibani, reported, “In the first three or four days after the nuclear disaster I got at least 100 calls a day from anxious parents. They wanted to know what foods were safe to eat and whether children should be allowed outdoors.”³⁰ Since the milk ban specifically pertained to pregnant women and children, the threat to children seemed exponentially greater than to the larger population.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *The Washington Post*, “Chernobyl Fallout: Parental Paranoia.”

³⁰ Suro, “Chernobyl Cloud Passes, But Chill in Italy Lingers.”

Milk, indeed, had been transformed into a “dark evil.” Suddenly, with this information, the request by Aldo’s partner to bring a dessert without milk seems like a small thing to ask. It is hard to discern the exact age of Clara’s son, Tomasso, but even if he was above the age of the ban, Clara would be uniquely sensitive to the effect of food on the wellbeing of children. Chapter one, “For a Baby,” tells of her desperate search to find the cause of her son’s incessant cries. After trips to many doctors’ offices, defeated, Clara tries a homeopathic practitioner. After “three or four days” of an entirely new diet, “Tomaso began to be placated.”³¹ Diet completely transformed her young son. That is to say, Clara’s lack of commentary on this food-born “dark evil” suggests that the rationale for the request was so obvious that it went without saying.

The cataclysmic nature of Chernobyl Disaster and the chaos of an invisible threat formed a large enough disturbance to be capable of abruptly upending the customary associations of milk in a country where time otherwise tends to move slowly. That being said, cultural food associations are fluid, and at some point milk shed its dangerous connotations and the public forgot that they had ever been afraid of it. Yet, while the whiteness of milk may have since returned to a symbol of purity, this hysteria seems to have nonetheless caused at least one casualty: milk soup.

³¹ Sereni, *Keeping House*, 24.

Works Cited

- Ceccolin, Cinzia. "Minestra di latte, soupe au lait." Published January 20, 2014, <http://cinziaaifornelli.blogspot.com/2014/01/minestra-di-latte-soupe-au-lait.html>.
- Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports. "Agricultural Losses Costly; Protest March Planned." *Rome ANSA in English*, May 8, 1986.
- . "Radiation Report from Health Department." *Rome ANSA in English*, June 11, 1986.
- . "Precautionary Measures Noted." *Rome International Service in Italian*, May 2, 1986.
- La Stampa*. "C'era una volta la zuppa di latte: Quando si faceva la pasta in casa, e c'erano meno bambini obesi." Published January 30, 2015, <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/01/30/societa/mamme/salute/pediatria/cera-una-volta-la-zuppa-di-latte-X074AWI4VBCg5HbSMHpYOL/pagina.html>.
- Otway, H, P. Haastrup, W. Cannell, G. Gianitsopoulos, and M. Paruccini. *Nuclear Science and Technology: An Analysis of the Print Media in Europe Following the Chernobyl Accident*. Luxemburg City, Luxemburg: Commission of the European Communities, 1987.
- Salter, Mary Jo. "Living with Fallout." *The Atlantic*, January 1987.
- Sereni, Clara. *Keeping House*. Translated by Giovanna Miceli Jeffries and Susan Briziarelli. New York: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- Suro, Mary Davis. "Chernobyl Cloud Passes, But Chill in Italy Lingers." *The New York Times*, May 27, 1986.
- The Washington Post*. "Chernobyl Fallout: Parental Paranoia." September 14, 1986.
- Time*. "Poison Plonk: A Deadly Wine Scandal in Italy." Volume 127, issue no. 14. April 7, 1986, 50.
- World Nuclear Association. "Chernobyl Accident 1986." Last updated November 2016, accessed December 19, 2016, "<http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/chernobyl-accident.aspx>."