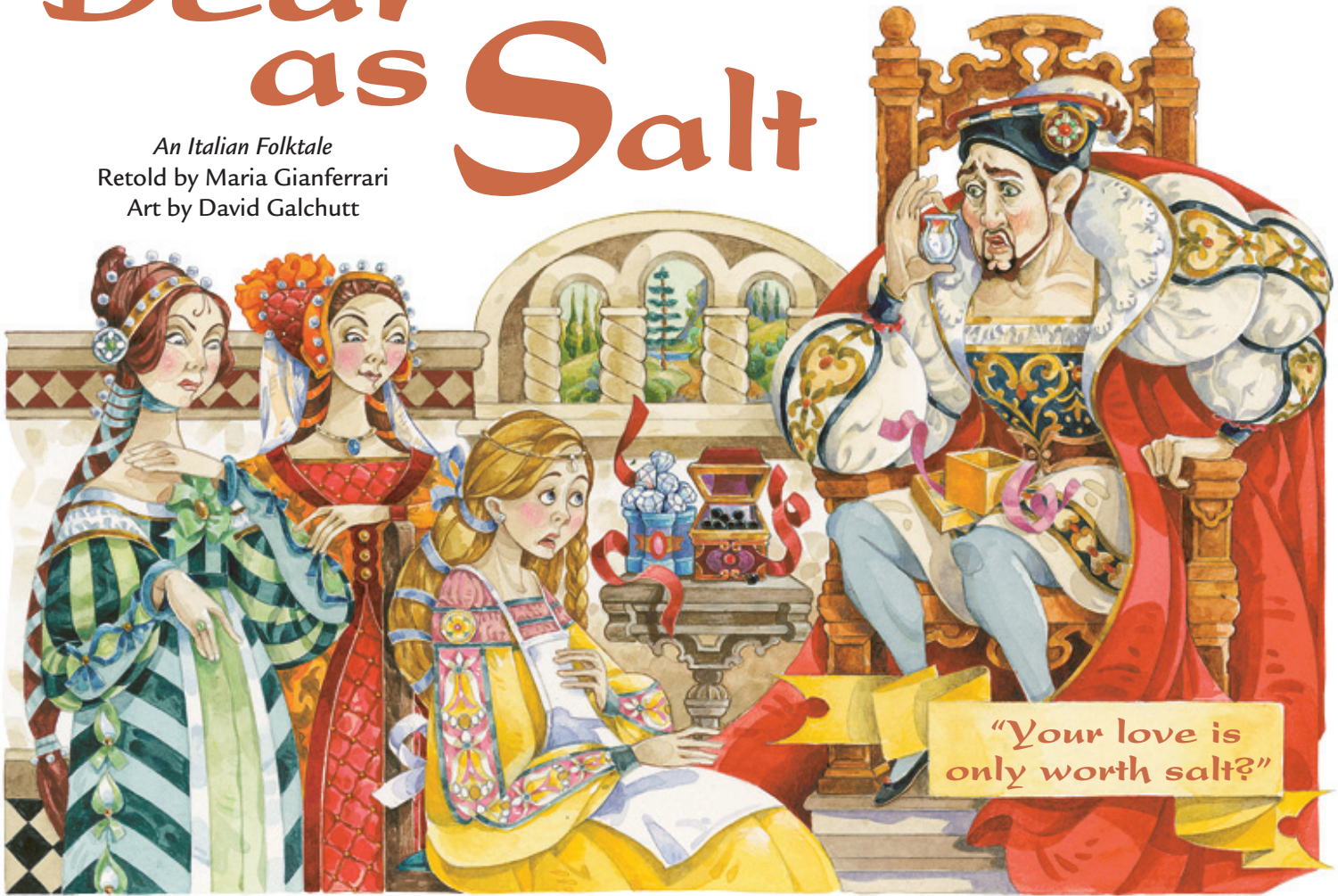


Dear as Salt

An Italian Folktale
Retold by Maria Gianferrari
Art by David Galchutt



King Primo sat on his throne, awaiting birthday gifts from his three daughters. First came Bianca, the eldest, smiling lovingly at her reflection in the mirror. Then came Bruna, fingering the gold coins always hidden in her skirts. Finally, in danced Zizola, the youngest. Covered in flour and smelling of spices, Zizola had been helping Perina, the cook, prepare the king's birthday feast.

"Happy birthday, sire," said Bianca, offering the king her gift. Diamonds glistened inside.

"Sire, you are as dear to me as diamonds," said Bianca. "These diamonds are mined from caverns deep in the sea."

Precious undersea diamonds. King Primo was pleased.

Then Bruna approached the throne. "Happy birthday, dearest Father," she said with a bow. "You are far more valuable to me than mere diamonds." She handed her father a gift.

As King Primo opened the box, his eyes sparkled.

"Father, my love for you is as rare as black pearls. Found only in Tahiti, my gift proves my extraordinary love for you." Bruna glanced sideways at her sisters.

King Primo was impressed. And now it was Zizola's turn.

"Ciao, Papà! Happy birthday!" said Zizola.

"Are there rubies in that box of

yours?" inquired the king.

"No, Papà," said Zizola.

"Are there emeralds?"

"No, Papà."

The king frowned. "Sapphires?"

"No, Papà."

Slowly, King Primo lifted the cover. Inside was a simple glass jar filled with salt.

"Salt?" asked the king.

"You're as dear as salt," said Zizola.

"Dear as salt? Your sisters' love is as priceless as diamonds, precious as pearls, and your love is only worth salt? If you must give me something edible, I expect caviar, truffles—not salt."

"But salt is—"

"Commonplace," finished the

king. "Now go to your room."

"But I hoped to help Perina—"

"Enough! I believe you need some time to consider what this gift says about your love for me. Here, take your *precious* salt with you."

Zizola went to her room and plopped on her bed. As she lay there, a servant knocked on the door.

"Come in!" Zizola called.

It was Perina. "Ciao, Zizola," she said.

Zizola had an idea. "Perina, I need your help. My gift to my father will be to prepare a special dinner—fit for a king! And I'm going to serve it to him."

"Zizola, what are you up to?"

"You'll see!"

Disguised in a servant's clothing, Zizola stood in the kitchen preparing the dough for the *torta frita*. She rolled it thick like a rope, then flat like a rectangle. She cut half the dough into squares and placed them in crackling oil.

The remaining dough Zizola cut into triangles for *cappelletti*. Stuffing them with ground pork and Parmesan cheese, she pinched the corners to form little hats. She placed them in boiling broth to make a savory soup.

Zizola seasoned the *arista*, roasted loin of pork, with rosemary and juniper berries.

For every dish, Zizola prepared a separate portion for her father, without salt. Zizola joined the other servants in the dining hall when she had finished preparing the meal.

Heralded by a trumpet, King Primo entered the dining hall, which was filled with guests for his birthday dinner. At the sight of one empty seat, he felt sad.

"Is someone missing?" asked a visiting queen.

"Zizola, my youngest," said King Primo.

Bruna sneered. "She offered our father salt as a gift."

"My father is as dear as diamonds to me," boasted Bianca.

"My father is as dear as black pearls to me," bragged Brunna.

Out came the *torta frita*.

"*Buon appetito!* Eat! Eat!"

commanded King Primo.

King Primo bit into the tasteless bread, then secretly spit it into his napkin. Everyone else ate heartily.

Then came the *cappelletti*. Zizola watched as King Primo took only one sip of his soup while the other guests gulped theirs down.

The *arista* was King Primo's favorite delicacy. He placed a small piece on his tongue. Slowly he began to chew the bland meat. But as before, all his guests feasted contentedly on their meals. King Primo was confused.

Then he tasted a piece from Bianca's plate.

"What's wrong with *my* food?" he asked. "It . . . it is missing something!"

The disguised Zizola stepped forward and curtsied. "My father is as dear as salt."

Everyone stared.

"Zizola, is that you?"

"Sì, Papà."

"Salt! How could I have been so blind?"

Zizola withdrew the jar of salt from her pocket and sprinkled just a bit of salt on her father's food.

King Primo took a bite and laughed. "Clever girl! Thank you for such a worthy birthday present. I suppose it's true that the simplest gifts can turn out to be the most precious."

From that day forward, King Primo was happy to be as dear as salt to his beloved Zizola. ♣

