

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

**A Legacy of Travelers: Experiences of an Alfred University Student
Studying Abroad in Italy**

A Creative Nonfiction Work by
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Introduction

My thesis is a creative nonfiction piece in the subgenre of travel writing. In this small collection of essays, I have written about my experiences of traveling abroad in Florence, Italy. I am working from true experiences but using language to try to render the more abstract emotions and concepts I received while visiting a different culture. Travel writing is extremely sensitive; it demands personal experiences from the writer. Through it, I learned to write from the inside out. It allowed me insight into my own precious journey, which was at once transformative and peculiar. Travel writing can catch the tender details of human interaction and engage all of the senses. It allowed me to continue my journey. I want to allow my reader to become a part of my journey (which didn't just begin abroad). I hope for them to taste the subtle, earthly flavors of a traditional Italian meal, to feel vulnerable and inspired.

My thesis is about travel literally, but the work also is about legacy and family. It is about mothers and daughters, and the expectations and assumptions we have over each other. It is about family in a broader sense, as well – covering the tracks of generations of ancestors who were in these same places, and seeing their memories through my own eyes. By seeing what they saw, I felt that I could understand more of who they were and, by extension, who I am. For example, I visit the birthplace of my grandmother in rural Italy, who left that home as a frightened, seven-year old child for a life in a new land about which she knew virtually nothing. She kept a portrait of herself at that time – a picture for a passport. Even in the faded passport photo, her eyes showed fear; they were wide and dark, a lot like mine as I started my own journey.

Before I traveled abroad, my grandmother was Italy for me. She represented it through the way she whisked egg and flour into pasta dough in my parents' small kitchen, the way she spoke Italian whenever she was angry or sad. She would sit with me on the steps to my house and read to me in Italian. She was a pillar of knowledge, of history. I joined the dots on an invisible map extending through time and space. I learned about my Italian heritage and became one of the “legacy of travelers.”

As I began my essay, I wrote simply, thinking about each word before I added it into text. I began my essay by trying to write a final draft. Each word had to be perfect. I began my essay by describing Florence, looking in the thesaurus for other alternatives to the word “golden.” It followed the early 19th century concept of “art for art’s sake.” There was no didacticism, no meaning. It read more like a travel guide instead of an insightful essay. I was directed by Professor Morehouse to “stay in the moment.” I closed my eyes, and came back to each experience, writing down every detail I could. This helped expand my essay; I also discovered my themes. Through this process, I realized my legacy theme. I was focusing on packing—what I was bringing physically and emotionally. I connected this to the suitcase I was bringing (the one my mother brought to Paris). This led me to understanding what I was packing emotionally—including in my own trip my mother’s quixotic dream, her affair with Europe. The first essay helped me realize more about myself. There were ideas, thoughts, wants (the wants of myself and generations of women) that rested below the surface of my own consciousness. My mother wanted to use me to relive her idealized view of Paris. Similarly, her mother had wanted her daughter to be worldly and dignified, so she bought her a book with a French title, *Le Petit Prince*. My essay guided me into epiphany. I

knew the apprehension and love I felt for Italy, but I could never pull these emotions from an origin. I was tugging at the stories of my mother and her mother (and so on) in order to find answers. This essay began as a descriptive travel novel and then progressed into an exploratory, self-reflective work.

While connected in name and birth to mother, father, brother, grandparents, and even great grandparents, I had to construct my own map to make this foreign city and foreign culture my own. In adjusting to a different culture, I had to stop making American cultural assumptions, even comparisons. I had to “let go” of cherished aspects of my American life. There was no Midwestern politeness. I could not comfortably speak in a language. Jokes, romantic gestures and personal space had changed. I was nervous at first with how much the essay was going to reveal about myself. Non-fiction writing is always so intimidating, not only because others may discover more about me, but I might discover more about myself. It took a few drafts, but I finally began to allow myself to “open up” to the page.

I wanted so much to portray my character and the Italian character. At times, I felt I was describing the scenery more than the people, who are peculiarly touching. They are at once joyful and sorrowful; they have an innate understanding for the tragic. They are artists and miscreants. While writing the essay, I looked in the journal I carried with me throughout my travels. One line in it said “Italians are soulful.” When I began writing this essay, I skipped past that phrase, but after much editing, I looked back to it. I tried to remember what I had meant. From the rest of the passage, I realized I was sitting on a bench outside the Uffizi. I do not remember why I wrote that phrase, but it was underlined, and in the margin next to it, there was a grease stain from the panino I was

eating. In truth, it hadn't mattered what I meant at that particular moment. The writing process helped me discover a new meaning to what I wrote. The Italians are unpredictable and loving, balanced by a earthly practicality.

What I experienced was a journey into unfamiliar territory. I had funny, strange, and scary moments; I had emotional experiences worthy, I believe, of re-telling. Like in many travel journeys, the trip started with a rush, the arrival -- the delight in the new environment and the thrill of being someplace so romantic and so much a part of history. Everything was touch and taste. I allowed my senses to follow me into my writing. My essay entitled "At the Spada's Table" followed a traditional Italian meal. This sensory essay allowed me to relive (and continually savor) the meal I had with the family. I learned to write for personal pleasure (and the pleasure of my readers), because a word like "rosemary" could take me back to the kitchen where I cut tomatoes with my host.

I write in the work that Florence "appeared to roll out of the sweet hills of Fiesole, like an ancient scroll." Emotionally, I mapped my way from excitement and delight through homesickness, the stress of friend-making, the fear of the unknown and eventual cultural awakening. At times, physically, I was literally hungry, freezing, and tired. I felt really "foreign" for the first time. I also experienced the beauty and magic of the places I visited. All of my senses seemed to be heightened through the experience.

Throughout the entire experience, I skidded around, ran into and traversed barriers caused by problems with communication. Even though I studied Italian in college, communication remained a challenge. I could conjugate a verb with ease, but when Italians speak quickly, well, it is very difficult to follow them. I had to learn to communicate in other ways, using expressions and gestures much more; even food served

as a tool in communication. For example, I write in my work about a trip to the rural town of my ancestors and a dinner with family and their friends. A priest (a guest at the dinner) “looked over to me while I was sipping on the wine,” and he explained:

“Language never seems to be a problem when everyone’s knees are under the table.

That, in itself, is its own language.” I explored what language meant. I also learned how to portray the awkwardness of language through writing. I used the essay *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, by David Sedaris as a touchstone for his accurate and comic representation of an American abroad. He depicts the clumsiness of a second language (especially to an American speaking a romantic, beautiful language).

Finally, this creative work is very much about me pushing myself and consequently stretching my own limitations. My family is Italian-American, and at home we have a map of the Italian “ancestral” region of Abruzzo prominently displayed, along with my great grandfather’s U.S. citizenship papers. My mother and my brother both traveled abroad. I dreamed to be in Europe; I wanted to be the last traveling legacy in the family.

Even knowing that I could not drive to Europe and that my anti-anxiety medicine would hardly stretchx over the Atlantic, I prepared myself. I made plans so that the long and dreaded flight would be inevitable. I thought of this flight as a nasty little means to an end that I so desperately wanted. I studied Italian with Professor Lisa Lantz (three levels), plus an Honors Seminar with her titled, “Viva Italia.” I signed up for the Study Abroad course with Dr. Vicky Westacott and met other students who had studied abroad. I researched study abroad programs, particularly those which offered an array of English courses, so I would keep on track for Alfred’s own graduation. I found a program that

worked for me; it even included a course titled, “The Writing Traveler.” The reality of the trip became clearer to me. I left O’Hare anxious and arrived in Germany exhausted, but I traversed the globe. I was ecstatic.

I am an English major; therefore, I write, I blog, I use Facebook like it’s my own skittish diary. Like many, I believed travel writing started and ended with a description of people and places which would strike me as different and often times mysterious. I began with a single page, containing simple expectations and images laid out through the recollections and memories of others. I was not anchored in a place at first. Eventually, I learned to situate myself. I learned the nuances of the place, of the Italian landscape. I learned by being the traveler and studying travel writing in Florence that travel writing is not about how I view the changing landscape, but how this new view of a landscape changes me. I became comfortable over time in what was such once a foreign place. I write, for example, that “slowly, my Italy began to reveal itself to me.”

I began to understand the many parts of Florence—“how the city thought, spoke and, even, hid from itself.” I came to realize from my experience abroad that it is all about what the travel does to you – how you change as a result of the experience. My thesis describes this change – this evolution.

Geneva, New York 1959

At dawn the girl who will become my mother trudges over pale, naked earth. It is the type of dry earth that does not promise a harvest, just empty shoots that could have been corn, wheat, a row of sunflowers. In the distance, the upstate New York highway hems rolling hills under a dusty yellow sky. She is nine; she wants her hair to be as long as it can be—waist-length, blonde, always loose. My grandmother refers to her hair as “native’s hair.” However, by this, my mother knows that her mother means someone foreign, not a part of this society, but another world. My mother treasures this idea, not wanting to be a part of the world that she was born into, a world already created and regimented. She wants to grow with it, follow some unmarked path to a thick brush, one marked by time and abandoned by man. She imagines that she will pull back shrubbery to reveal a new land like Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*. This will be her new home; she can create a new language, something romantic and beautiful.

She follows a numbered county road, past old, stone houses, wire-fencing, empty cropland. Her house rests at the edge of empty cropland, ten miles off of Route 20. She carries a map, even though she has walked this road a hundred times. Holding a map makes the journey to the unknown world seem more legitimate. She borrows it from other navigators, the ones who knew these roads enough to create detailed drawings of them, thin lines like a complex view of the body beneath the skin.

Thirty years later, she will tell me about the summer with no rain and how she would follow the dry land to a lush meadow, the only place in the county that seemed to sprout something from nothing. She would spend the long summer days in the meadow reading Le Petit Prince, a story about a boy who traveled to other worlds. Her favorite part was when the desert rose told the Prince that there were only a few men on Earth and they were rootless, succumbing to a harsh wind. They were lost.

My mother's father was one of those men. His love shifted quickly, from my grandmother to his second wife, Isabelle. The book was the last gift my grandmother gave to my mother. A few months later, my grandmother would be diagnosed with schizophrenia, a misunderstood disease for the 1950s. It was something newly given a name. Before the 1900s, it was characterized as a mood disorder, where patients were simply described as "manic." When my mother was a nine, she believed that the book was given to her by her mother as a promise for travel, as if my grandmother was Queen Isabella granting Columbus that legendary journey west.

"I believed that my mother wanted me to find something, to discover another world. She even called *Le Petit Prince* a treasure map. 'Find your way, Mary Beth,' she said. She was delusional, obviously. But it gave me something to do."

My mother told me this four years ago in the car before the beginning of my first year at a small university in Alfred, New York, fifty miles from my mother's childhood home in Geneva. We didn't talk much about my grandmother's illness. I saw my

grandmother a few times during my childhood at the psychiatric hospital where she lived. My mother rarely went in with me. When she did, she would listen to her mother, say a few words, kiss her on the cheek, and leave.

Geneva, New York 1995

During the few times I visited my grandmother in the hospital, she told me that she gave my mother the world, placed it in her hand like one would a small bouncy ball. She believed that the world was something that could be given, an idea which she passed onto my mother. She was always a large woman, with a full smile, but now few teeth and black gums. Her thin hair was tied at the back of her neck in a small bun, the size of a chestnut. She would never have me call her grandmother. At first, she had me refer to her as Elizabeth, her birth name, and then any name she wanted to be—Gretchen, Sylvie, Maria.

I'm seven. My grandmother leads me to the screened-in porch of the center. There are a few other residents sitting in wicker rocking chairs. Some are reading; others are knitting with shaky fingers. Most are staring out into the expanse of sky and earth beyond the center. It is sundown. My mother should be arriving soon to pick me up. Heavy clouds seem to build like breaths. With the cool breeze flowing through the screen, it feels as if the sky really has life, regulating some theoretical circulatory system. The sun has not yet sunk beyond the valley floor. Its misty, golden light coaxes small birds into the air.

My grandmother sits next to me on a porch swing. She wraps her arm around me, crushing my tiny body against hers.

“You see this, darling,” my grandmother asked while pointing to the yard beyond the screened porch.

“I gave that to your mother.”

“How did you give it to her, Grandmother? It’s nature. You can’t give someone grass. It’s too heavy.”

She chuckled, her large chest rocking me back and forth. “No, darling, I gave it all to her. I gave her the world. It’s really just a circle after all. If my hands were large enough, I could grab it, wrap it up and place it under the Christmas tree.”

“But we’d all be on it. You would be shaking us back and forth. You’d make us all sick.”

“I’d be careful. I would be as careful as if I were holding an egg. You think Mary Beth would like it, don’t you? She’s turning thirteen this year. I want to get her something special.”

“Grandmother, my mother hasn’t been thirteen for a long time.”

“Well of course she hasn’t,” she said, while removing her arm from around me.

“But she’ll still love it. Maybe once she has this world, she can finally travel to other ones. She’ll love it. Your grandfather cannot give a better gift.”

My grandmother had earned the world, she said. Her ex-husband, my grandfather, had been a lieutenant in the army, traveling Africa and around Europe during the Second World War. Before they were married, he brought her courting gifts from the places he'd been—small ivory boxes and French perfume. “I became fluent in French for him, so he could remember that beautiful city, that Paris.” My mother would later tell me, after we left the hospital, that my grandmother never learned another language. I remember feeling hurt. Why would my mother say this about my grandmother? My mother had so much resentment in her voice; it was as if she was not only angry at my grandmother for lying, but for also not learning a new language. Today, I want so badly to believe that my grandmother gave my mother the world, that she gave her adventures. However, in the way my mother's tone changed, the derision in her voice when she said *she never learned a new language*, made me feel so lost from my grandmother. My mother took my earliest and most pressing memory of my grandmother and turned it into a lie. Some days, I wonder if the visit even happened at all, if I really sat with her on the ward's courtyard, looking at such a simple, yet complex sky.

Western Bound, 1973

In 1973, my parents spent their honeymoon traveling along thick valleys: the deep sky of western Pennsylvania pressed against green hills. Their car jolted over dirt roads—dust the color of old bones—before rolling back onto the cement of Interstate 80. Although this road was not their own, the newlyweds described it to their parents over crackling lines at the pay phone, just off of the main road. It was the farthest west they had been.

Before they left, my mother placed her grandmother's trunk in the back seat, under a dozen boxes carrying their old life. It contained embroidered dresser scarves and pillowcases trimmed in lace, everything a married woman must own. She did not believe this idea. It was the belief of the generations of mothers in her family. She was a college student in the late sixties, embracing the feminist ideals of Judith Brown and Kathie Sarachild. She wore her hair loose, long and blonde. She did not want children, just a career. She told this to my father when he proposed. "I love you, but I love my independence and womanhood too." They would wait six years before they had their first child, my brother, Michael, and another eleven before they had me.

In the distance, the sun slanted against the boulders of western Montana, casting shadows through the pine barrens. After ten days, their honeymoon roads led them to their final destination, their new life in Spokane. Slowly, my mother saw her home, the visions of upstate New York and the familiar landscape that belongs to the East,

diminishing. On that last stretch of road, between Lewiston and Spokane, my mother saw a brushfire on the side of the road. The smoke curled into the air, reminding her of her father's pipe. Tall evergreens, violet-black behind the blaze, kept a watchful eye. I imagine that she thought of my grandmother, sitting in her monitored room in New York, smiling to herself, thinking that my mother was setting out for another adventure.

Sayre, Pennsylvania 1998

My grandmother's old town was the American image. A metal skyline blended with a river, which curled around a bend. The Susquehanna prodded among gray stones and mud: wind ruffled the river's surface, and the scalloped water ridges whitened over rocks as the sun's light spread over it like a great skin. Hills hemmed the Pennsylvania valley. My father's mother, "Nonna," sat with me in the backseat as my dad drove my family's 1989 Toyota Corolla, my birth year car. She clutched her purse, worried about the wind sucking it through the open window.

Her memories had slipped away, into some mythical river of the mind, lost to the deep where other forgotten items rest: The title of her favorite play (it began with a *C*, she thinks), my middle name (Giulia, I told her), what road we drove on. I ask my grandmother if anything changed since she was seventeen in Sayre, the town I looked to from my car window.

"There used to be a bridge there, over the river. My brother jumped off of it when he was eleven. He nearly broke all his ribs."

“Actually,” she continued, “maybe there never was one.”

The bridge she imagined had drifted out of a love poem she used to know by heart. She said that it was either by Keats or Byron. “Is there really a difference, anyway?” she asked. “My father used to read it to me when he was trying to learn English. It was beautiful, maybe because he made it sound Italian with his heavy accent.”

My great-grandfather believed that red wine could heal someone in fifty ways. He and his wife, my great-grandmother, drank it after an accidental fire consumed their house when they still lived in Abruzzo. They drank and watched as flames licked the sides of the house, flapped in the air like moth wings.

“There was nothing they could do,” my Nonna told me. “They just had to watch their life disappear before them.”

The car jolted over a hole in the road. I can see Nonna’s face struggle for the memory. She was just two years old at the time of the fire. It is her only memory of living in Italy. Her mother was pregnant with her brother, Gino. She was playing in the backyard when her mother noticed the fire, which had started in the back of the house.

She called to my grandfather, crying, as she smacked her apron against the flames.

“Basta, Paulina,” my grandfather said, leading his pregnant wife outside. He knew it was over. They believed that there was nothing left for them in Italy, so they took what money they had to travel across the Atlantic to New York City. While in the city, my

grandfather heard that there were many opportunities for work in Sayre, Pennsylvania, a booming locomotive industry.

At nine, I found this story entertaining—fire, travel, a new life. It seemed to fictionalize what happened to the woman sitting next to me. Over the years, the tragedy became more real to me. I could not imagine having something, a home—a small world—and then nothing. I imagined watching scarlet flames marry the air, where there was something and then there wasn't—an absence of laughter, language, just a space.

After my grandfather's first proposal was rejected by my grandmother, my Nonna's father handed him a glass of Chianti. "Va bene, Michael," my great-grandfather said. "Mary's a tough one to catch. She's just like her mother."

Fifteen more times, my grandfather drove Route 13 from Courtland to Sayre. "I can love you," he promised. They met when he and his buddies traveled to Pennsylvania, searching for young Italian brides. My grandfather showed my grandmother his scars from the War, his encounter with death, the thin white lines against his tan skin. He did not mention that the army released him because of his weak heart. She said *yes* after the fifteenth trip.

"It was the fifteenth trip. I know it was," she said.

Chicago, Illinois 2010

In the winter of 2010, after turning twenty-one, I began preparing for my own trip to Europe. I was visiting Florence, a city my grandfather once passed through during the

war. His scout car, whose engine had given up, skidded into town, free-wheeling. They passed through the venerable streets, a civilization they sought for some time, after months of trailing the French wilderness. My parents allowed me to bring two suitcases for my trip. They were both black and mildewed, kept in the basement. My mother gave one, the bigger one, to my father for their anniversary twenty-two years before.

Before I was born, they were planning on traveling more, seeing Paris. My mother imagined that it would be like the movies—crowded cafes, small boulangeries where flakey, doughy pastries seduce passerby's from the window, brown marble tables where couples steal kisses, cigarettes resting in their hands like afterthoughts, thin clouds of grey-blue smoke curling into the air. Outside the café hangs the impossibly blue sky, where the sun heaps layer upon layer of light onto the city's rooftops. She believed that even when it rained, Paris would still be the most lit city in the world.

Maybe, she thought, Paris would bring out another side of my father, a more romantic, untamed side. How could he not feel the passion: ancient and new smells, musical fountains, rhythmic streets. Paris is not like other cities. Even the *l'ouvre* sounds so familiar to love. My father and mother barely shared romantic moments. During the rare times they went out to dinner, they would end up at Red Lobster, cracking crab shells, pouring butter on lobster tail. My father would spend most of his time sitting in front of the television with a coffee-stained mug filled with red wine.

My mother had created her own map of Paris, written in wine instead of ink, she liked to think. “There, above Rue de something, that is the delicate iron balcony clinging to the yellow-rose apartment. One night, I could see two lovers embrace on it. There rests the café with the green and white striped overhang. It has the most heavenly croissants. And there, there is that one park bench. In the spring, it is redolent with heat, sunlight, tranquility and the smell of lavender.”

Paris, 1994

My parents had to wait five years after I was born before they finally made it to Paris. My father had a business trip there, and my mother thought this would be the perfect opportunity to shed her belongings and disappear along the crowded streets, where she imagined that people were folded in like berries into batter. It had bridges and hills and rivers—things to cross, climb and navigate. My mother’s previous journey with my father was spent in 12 hour car rides west. She spent the journey looking at her old life, stacked in boxes throughout the car. This was her chance to become her seven-year-old self again, find a new world, new languages, while carrying nothing but her own map.

My Italian grandmother came to take care of me while my parents were gone for the week in Paris. “I don’t know why your mother is so excited about going to that French town. Italy is much more beautiful and the people actually like you.”

Although I was only five, I remember my parents' return. After returning, my mother spent a couple weeks going over snapshots and watching the blisters on her feet heal and disappear. My mother brought me back a small doll with light eyes and fair hair, too blonde. She looked much more like my mother than I did. It wore an apron that said "Paris, Je t'aime." I named it Alice. I remember that her eyelids were hard, yet smooth. When I placed her on her back, they would fold over her wide blue eyes like a pale curtain. My own were frail, like petals. I wondered if she could still see the light from the world flicker by with closed eyes. I wondered if she was like a baby—needed hands to clutch, heartbeats, whispered lullabies. Every night I would keep her close to me and speak to her in what little French I knew, what my mother had taught me. "Bonjour, Alice. Merci. Paris, J'taime." I would whisper these in her ear, hoping she would understand me.

A few years later, my mother told me stories of Paris. She had thought I was too young before. "The men are not kind. And there's smoke everywhere. There are more small dogs than people." I remember clinging to this truth, as if I was pressing some hard object to my chest, something so painfully real. At night, I would wrap my arms around my Alice and squeeze her hard enough to try to understand the feeling.

A few years later, I placed Alice in the "to be sold" pile for our annual garage sale. My mother asked me if I was sure when a woman and her young daughter, a little younger than me, offered us fifty cents for her. The mother and daughter looked very

similar. They both had short blonde hair cut at the chin. She didn't look at me, just whispered to her mother, who spoke for her, as if she was a ventriloquist doll. I nodded. She was never my doll. She was my mother's idea of Paris. She was beautiful and she had the word "love" stitched on her chest. She was the promise my mother had from her own map—the one that led her lost around the cobbled streets to some invisible café, some hidden overhang, an unmarked bench. I remember feeling minor regret as the pair walked down the street, hand-in-hand. The daughter's other hand clutched Alice upside down by the ankle.

My mother eventually told me that she did not spend her nights savoring split pea soup and Sancerre. Instead, she and my father fought about the cheapest place to eat when they weren't eating with my father's colleagues. They got drunk off wine and struggled over the pickled pork they accidentally ordered while in Les Champs Elysées. I was old enough to know the difference then. I knew what it was like to wish and want, tug at something so seemingly attainable, like the cookie jar on the top shelf. I, like my mother, dreamt of Paris, or maybe it was just the idea of Paris.

I still have the post card my mother sent me from Paris when I was five. It was a picture of the Ile St. Louis. It is Paris's answer to the choked, narrow streets, the babble. It is silence. An island by the circumstantial reason of it being surrounded by water, the Ile St. Louis holds Paris at bridge's length, a breath away. It still expresses the shadow presence of the Notre Dame, which can be seen in the right corner of the postcard. I

imagine the wind from the Seine still caresses ancient buildings, follows the ancient path of counts and courtesans, and serenades their ghosts.

I packed a map for Paris, even though there was a part of me that knew I would never make it there. However, there was a small, living hope that I would get to try to find what my mother had searched for and lost—the idea of Paris as everyone’s home, a home for lovers, writers, philosophers, mothers, and those who just need to be healed.

I folded my blanket into the bigger suitcase. My father laughed at me. “They have blankets in Italy, you know...and shampoo,” he said as I placed two economy-sized bottles of Pantene into the zipper compartment. “It will remind me of home,” I responded as I stuffed four tubes of Crest toothpaste and a bottle of mouthwash into another compartment. As I folded two of my favorite framed pictures of my beagle, Gracie, between two sweaters, I noticed something at the end of the suitcase. It was a crushed ticket stub. It said “Chicago-O’Hare to Paris-Charles De Gaulle,” date stamped as “December 2nd, 1994.” I placed it within my journal. “Something to make you seem even older,” I thought.

I handed back a few things to my dad before leaving, a few pieces to not be packed: house keys, cell phone, driver’s license, things that connected me to America. I would not see this place in over four months: no coupon cards to Regal Cinema, no library card, the same one that has a shaky signature on the back, made by a nervous seven-year-old, writing her name for the first time. I wasn’t sure if I should put *Annie* or

Anne. I was scared I would put too many c's in *Pellicciotti*. I have the same last name (written with the right amount of c's) written on the back of an old picture, one of my great-grandmother coming to America from Italy.

It was as if I was that same seven-year-old, her school schedule placed in her jacket pocket, so she could show someone older, someone who knew the way everything was mapped out. And then they could show her where she needed to be. I placed the picture of my great-grandmother between a page in my journal, so that when I returned to my relatives' village in Perano, Abruzzo—a small mountainous town in central Italy—I would be directed by someone who knew the map, the invisible map.

I felt that without the name written out, even though I knew it by heart, it would somehow disappear from my mind, become unwritten. It was as necessary as writing my own name; it was the first word I learned to write. Without writing it myself, I seemed nameless, just like Alice, who traveled across the Atlantic with my parents before she had a name. It was a word that guided me out of sleep, placed me somewhere, like the small, profound country names on a map—words that countrymen love and curse; words that mean “this is mine.”

When I was four, I learned to let the letters slant themselves, fall into being. I hid my name in treasured books, penciled it underneath tables and traced it into the air with a careful finger. I remember writing it along a rough sidewalk, the white dust from the chalk coating my pink palms. It mimicked paleness, a light, almost transparent skin so

similar to my English mother, so different from my Italian father and me, whose olive-toned skin always reminded me of oak leaves in the fall.

It seemed to me then that a name could vanish as easily as it was written. As I would learn in Italy, every experience was fragile, tentative. Experience would be momentary, like the tenuous moment biting into the last piece of pesto gnocchi, the subtly spiritual shape of dark silhouettes against a polenta-colored sky, the smell of roasted hazelnuts, or the tear briefly trailing down the cheek during a goodbye. These images, scents, thoughts, feelings press against the mind momentarily saying, “catch me before I am gone.”

When I was nine, I walked into the library, stroking my hand across the binds of fat encyclopedias, tall geographic books. I feel as if I could hide in the dark, unopened books, make myself a part of them. At that age, everything seemed possible, even the ability to compact my limbs and somehow submerge into the print, into words I barely knew. There was a large, yellowing globe to the right of the librarian’s desk. The circular globe itself was larger than my torso, my small hand barely spread across Europe. I remember having to use all my weight to spin it, wrapping both arms around it as if we were embracing and then turn my whole body. When I finally let the globe roll on the skeletal metal stand, it was magical.

I would trace by index finger across an expanse of blue, whole continents passed by me in an instant. I admired how easily it seemed I could travel the world. In that

moment, the world seemed so small, so compact. I could walk my fingers in seconds to Africa, another second, I could be in Russia. I measured out miles in fingertips. If I wanted, I could live by an eternal Christmas in the North Pole, the gray husk of winter outside my window. When it got too cold, I would walk hot sand in the Sahara, a scarf wrapped around my head like a fortune teller, predicting a future out of watering holes and rivers, places and moments that seem to disappear with every step. That was the first day I knew I wanted to travel the world, not because it seemed small, but because it never seemed to end; it kept spinning to a new possibility.

I packed maps: two on Florence, just in case, one with sketches of major landmarks in Rome, one that seemed to twist and curve around itself of Venice and one of the five lands of Cinque Terra for good measure. I remember tucking them away with such care. It was almost as if the maps acted as tickets themselves—a promise that I would visit these lands.

My parents and I had barbecue chicken my last night in America. “You won’t find this type of chicken in Florence,” my dad said laughing. Later that night, I caught him stuffing a bottle of barbecue sauce in one of my already full suitcases. When he noticed that I had caught him, he smiled and said, “just in case.” I can’t remember most of what was packed away. It was a joint effort: my mother rolled heavy sweaters and flattened puffy coats with her hands. My father rolled three money belts in the top zipper compartment.

“Just in case one is stolen,” he said.

“Who would want to steal that, Joe?” my mother asked, while rolling heavy socks into tight round balls.

“These things are really handy. Who would *not* want to steal one? If I were a thief...”

“You’d have a large collection of fanny packs,” my mother responded.

My father then looked at me. “You know, Annie, this doesn’t mean I don’t trust the Italians. I don’t think they’re bad people. Actually, they’re the best people you will ever interact with.” My mother, who had been folding until this point, looked up.

“Really, Joe?” Age lines formed like parentheses around her mouth as she smiled. With my mother, this is the only indication that she isn’t serious. Without it, I am just left guessing. “Don’t think I didn’t notice the container of mace you placed in Annie’s suitcase. You’re going to make our daughter an international security risk.”

“She’s joking, Annie.”

“Well, you would have if they hadn’t run out at Walgreens.”

“How dangerous is this world that everyone needs to stock up on mace?” my dad asked, while speaking loud enough, so he could be heard over my mom and my laughter.

“I’m serious!”

I woke up later that night from an inability to sleep, a sort of pre-jet-leg. It was as if my body already knew what was coming. I waited, counted all of the sheep

(something I hadn't done since I was a four and could only count to twenty), even the Italian ones, which I allowed to have Italian numbers. My body knew that it didn't want to go. Somehow, the world would stop if I watched it; its permanence did not exist. The light would never sweep back into morning. Only I could spin it, like some modern-day Hemera, except instead of bathing the earth in morning light, I would hide under the veil of darkness, hoping the morning would never miss me.

I could count on the end of the day. The moon's ash-colored blanket, the islands of gray clouds floated above this side of the world. I didn't know if it would be the same on the other side.

As the night finally settled onto heavy eyelids, I looked at my two suitcases on my bedroom floor, waiting for them to mean something else, mean I was staying, or at least going home. I had two separate generations of mothers. Before, I simply thought about them in terms of my own relationship to them: my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother.... However, I realized that every woman in my life had her own mother, each with her own dream for her daughter. I wondered how they did it, how they would present their dreams to their daughters? Was it from birth—dreams embedded in lullabies, words to sleep to, dreams heaped upon other dreams to where there would be no differentiating the two of them?

En Route

I clutched my passport as I boarded the plane. If I accidentally dropped it, left it wedged between two airport seats, no one would know. I would arrive in Munich and

they would have to send me back. What would happen then? I would return to my school in upstate New York, enroll in the classes that were leftover. It would be fine. It would be what I know.

I handed the flight attendant my passport as I boarded the plane. “Safe journey, madam,” she said in a heavy German accent. I felt already like I was experiencing a different culture, even though the plane I was stepping onto was still safely stationed in Chicago.

I slid into a seat next to an older man, probably in his sixties. He seemed very comfortable, as if this were not his last time traveling. I looked at him and smiled. He didn't return the greeting. Instead, he looked back down at his newspaper. He looked like he might be German. He had long, thin gray hair, which he kept in a ponytail at his neck. He had a large stomach and pants that were way too short, revealing tight gray socks and white legs. I looked at his paper as I sat down. It was the *New York Times*. “Maybe he's not German,” I thought. However, then I remembered what my father often told me about European culture. “They're all damn good at languages. A lot of them know at least five.” This thought terrified me. I knew one for sure, and that was my native language. I had taken Spanish for seven years, so I was nearly fluent. I had taken three semesters of Italian, but I still doubted my conversational skills in that language.

It was December 31st. I brought in the New Year while flying over Iceland. Or, at least, that's what I would like to think. In reality, it probably was over the long stretch

of blue Atlantic, maybe over the last tip of North America, a cold port in Canada. Maybe it became 2011 during the sudden dip into night, while miles pulled away from under the stretched wings of my plane, when my home seemed further and further away, when change was due.

I packed away my new notebook. It was soft, leather bound. It looked so old, so marked. Its empty pages appeared to tell a story, something invisible that with time would appear to me, black letters out of nothing. I wanted it to tell me its secrets. I never knew what attracted me so much to what once was. I was pretending to be an artist, poet, philosopher and lover. In a way, I thought the notebook and my own pretension would help me become a few of these things.

I started writing in the notebook on the airplane. I tried telling it that I was scared, that I missed home, waiting for it to respond, to comfort me. Perhaps my own words, once written, could circumnavigate themselves, could travel within each other, forming a new phrase: "Everything will be alright. Europe is everyone's home." I placed it against my chest, as I once had with Alice, just to wait for the feeling of the weight, the weight of truth. There couldn't just be truth. It had to mean something. I had to feel it, or it wasn't there.

"Are you a writer?" the man sitting next to me asked. This was the first time he spoke to me. I had thought he was sleeping, so it startled me when he spoke.

"Uh, yeah...I guess. I mean, not really. I'm just a student."

He smiled and placed a finger to his mouth. “No, you are. I didn’t ask if you were Ernest Hemingway. I asked if you were a writer.”

“Well, I guess I write. I’m going to Europe for the first time, so I’m documenting my experience.”

He smiled. “Keep on writing. You’re good.”

I looked at him. How did he know I was good? I wrote five lines in my journal, and three of them mentioned how I wish the plane could turn around and take me home. He quickly fell back asleep. At one point, when he was grabbing a cough drop from his carry on, I could see that he had his own journal—leather bound and marked. However, his notebook wasn’t trying to look old like mine. His was actually aged.

Florence, Italy 2011

All my visions of Florence before arriving were misty and golden, like the fleeting image of some unknown, but familiar road at sunset. I walked out of the Florence Airport carrying my two suitcases, exhausted from my journey. Florence did not appear golden, but dirty, the streets were choked with cars and graffiti stretched across the walls of buildings like colorful ribbons. I walked over to a sign that said “Taxi.” I knew how to hail a taxi in Chicago, but Italy was different. I walked up to the first cab in line. “Sei occupato?” I asked. The man looked at me and quickly jumped up to help put my bags in the trunk. “Be careful, they’re heavy,” I said in Italian. He thought of this as a challenge and threw them in the back of the trunk. I told him the address of my pensione—85 Via Cavour—I had been practicing on the plane.

As I rode in the back of my small taxi down the Via Ghibellini towards my pensione, the city began to build itself up before me, take an exact shape. The great dome seemed the city’s own North Star. Everything was bustle and color, but the Duomo and its campanile appeared as a calm, yet domineering force.

There were lines of palaces along the riverbanks and smudges of dark poplars, as if painted there. There were piazzas with ancient statues, a glorious clump of red rooftops and medieval towers. Florence appeared to roll out of the sweet hills of Fiesole, like an ancient scroll. It lay in a contoured embrace between blue hills, like a drawing. The city was the oldest thing I had ever seen. As we skidded at last into the venerable

streets around the Duomo, to Via Cavour, my street, I could have sworn I saw Dante. He was probably imagining his Paradiso as the Tuscan hills on a sunny morning—pure and boundless light, planted hillsides.

Or maybe it was Petrarch, seeing for the first time his Laura. It could have been Brunelleschi admiring the golden red façade of his Duomo. From a tall window on the Riccardi Palace, it could have been Lorenzo de Medici who looked down at me with bright, wide eyes and a long patrician nose. I felt as though I was being told ancient secrets—elegant crimes, all daggers and secret poisons, lurid love affairs, ones that changed history.

We stopped in front of a large wooden door. On the side of the building were two ceramic blocks. In thick, black scroll it said “85 Cavour.” In Italian, the cab driver asked me if this was the right place. I didn’t blame him for being unsure. I had practiced saying “Via Cavour ottantacinque.” However, when I said it to the cab driver, it sounded shaky, uncertain. I felt like a child again, displaying the number on my fingers for him to see.

He helped me lift my two suitcases out of the trunk and I handed him a euro. I had forgotten to ask the man I sat next to on the airplane if it was customary to tip in Europe. However, the cab driver took it willingly, and sped off down the streets. I was alone again, watching the car’s exhaust curl into the cool January air.

I stood in front of two large mahogany doors. “*What next?*” I thought. I didn’t know if my two roommates would be there yet—two girls from Washington State. I only knew them over email. One could only sleep with a fan. The other loved exotic cheese. At least, I thought, we were from the same place. However, if I thought about it, the west was a wholly different place from Chicago.

I waited outside for a few moments, watching small cars careen in and out of among the narrow streets. I wanted to call someone, to let them know I was where I needed to be. But I had no phone, and it was four in the morning in Chicago. My parents would sleep through my call anyway. *I’ll wait a few more minutes.* I sat against my large suitcases, carrying my whole life, something my mother spent her whole life trying to shed. And now that I was in a new country, I brought it all with me. I was traveling between two lands—the new and the old.

At the Spadas' Table

I had romanticized Italian family dinners—a dozen family members laughing and sharing stories around a long wooden table. They would be outside, veiled by chestnut trees changing for the spring season, breaking loaves of warm bread, passing plates of clove-studded pork, dipping into bowls of fettuccini anointed with olive oil. When my professor placed me with an Italian family for dinner, I imagined this crowded and chaotic scene. Instead, I learned I was eating with an older couple, one with one daughter living in Germany, all grown up. I realized that this evening would not be too different from eating dinner with my own family. After my brother graduated from law school and moved to Seattle, dinners consisted of a short meal with my parents and me.

It was my first time meeting the Spadas. I walked up to a tall building with a large “35” by the door, “Trentacinque,” I said to myself. I was training my mind to think in Italian. I pushed the button that was placed next to the word “Spada” on the call box.

“Chi é?” It was an older woman’s voice, the sound was rough, like a long-time smoker’s. It reminded me of the Marlboro butts littering the streets. I said my name, “Anna,” in the best Italian I could. She immediately buzzed me in. I walked up the five flights of stairs to the top floor. The steep line of stones seemed harder and larger than the ones at my pensione.

Frederico and Sylvia were already waiting by the door to their apartment. It was as if we were family—they kissed me on both cheeks and held my hand tightly as they took me throughout the apartment. It was very clean, sparsely adorned with simple

furniture. It boasted a mammoth fire place, a dining table with a white embroidered coverlet. White-washed walls set off the slanted, beamed ceiling. In a large, silver frame there was the *Madonna dal Collo Lungo*, the “Madonna with the Long Neck.” My class had just visited the original with Senora Cararra at the Uffizi. Even though the length of the Madonna’s neck was exaggerated, she reminded me of myself.

I imagined Federico had been handsome once, his aging looks flirtatious in the way of European men. He had a snow, thick mustache, perfectly trimmed, curving around his mouth as he spoke. He had very blue eyes, unusual for an Italian. If I saw him on the streets, without hearing him speak, without seeing his expressive body movements while he spoke, I would assume he was not Italian. He didn’t speak any English, aside from a few phrases, including, “How do you feel about that?” I thought that he must have watched a lot of American dramas. I remember my mother once told me that Italians love those series, especially psychologically-oriented detective series, like *Colombo*, where the rich American murderers are caught in the end.

Sylvia, his wife, was fluent in English. She had tan, leathery skin that hung underneath her chin. She had dark eyes that were magnified by thick glasses. She sat very close to me on the sofa in the living room. She put one hand on mine, and with the other one she pointed to the painting of the Madonna. “Bella, no?”

“Sì, tres bella,” I responded, not realizing I was mixing three languages. She laughed and handed me an Italian book entitled, *L’arte di Firenze*.

“All the art you can see in this book is in Florence. You are living in a magical city.”

I nodded, thanked her, and placed the book on top of my bag. At that point, I didn't realize how rare Florence really was. Like a precious family keepsake, reverently handed down through the generations, the city remained intact and so well preserved. I felt as if I was looking at a 400-year old version of an ancient beauty. In a way, aside from the occasional cable antennae sprouting from the top, many of the buildings had been untouched since medieval times. And the art it produced never left.

“How has Florence treated you?” She used the Italian word “*offrire*,” as if I was the city's honored guest.

I thought back to my first arrival in Italy. How I felt so alone, but felt comfort in a city that never seemed to change. How could change undo me, if the city itself has remained unaltered?

“It seems lost in time,” I said. It was the only logical response. In truth, I had become so raptured with its sunny piazzas and ancient cobbled streets, that I felt lost to it too. When I walked out of the Florence airport (with nothing but 20 American dollars), it seemed as if I was being thrown into another world, as if someone gave me a broken compass and said, “Ok, now go find your way.” After unpacking at my pensione, I walked the cobbled sidewalks, under small trees with leaves the color of China tea, past warm storefronts, rosticcerie of garlic and rosemary potatoes, wood fire, and panetterie

with hazelnut and chocolate pastries. The walls of ancient houses and palaces cradled me. It was formidable and beautiful; it seemed to keep out the noise of the outside world, but it also kept me in.

Sylvia laughed. “This city can haunt you. The ghosts of the past are everywhere. I could have sworn I saw my mother at the market yesterday, buying a cabbage.”

“I know what you mean. I’m pretty sure I saw Dante walking down Via Cavour the first day I got here.”

“You probably did,” she said and then laughed, “or at least a delusional Italian man.” She pointed to the kitchen where Frederico was clanking dishware.

Sylvia poured me another glass from an earthen pitcher of Chianti. The thick red wine fell into my glass with such elegance, such ease, a marriage of wine and crystal. Frederico arrived into the room with a basket of warm bread and a label-less bottle of olive oil. He poured it into a small bowl on the table; it was a bright moss green, the color of an intense sun against a sheet of tender green leaves. We dipped the crusty bread in the olive oil, licked crumbs from our fingertips. The oil looked slick on the velvety bread; it was salty and tart. We finished the bread quickly, which was surprising, considering the rest of the meal would be long.

I went with Sylvia to help her finish her cooking. The kitchen was the most chaotic, yet the loveliest thing I had ever seen: corroding pots and pans hung from the ceiling above the wood-fire oven; flour shrouded the counter in a fine dust; a large sauce

pan trembled and clanked on the stove top; the small apartment window was foggy with steam. It smelled as though the sauce had been cooking for days; it was a lingering, matured sent—butter and rosemary, the most holy of combinations. Sylvia pointed to a crate of bright red tomatoes on the side of the sink.

“Wash those for me, please. We’re cutting them for the gnocchi. You need to cut the tomatoes right before you add it to the pasta, so it’s as fresh as possible, and doesn’t have much time to linger with the air.”

I handed each tomato to Sylvia as I washed it. She cut each one, holding it in her hand as one might grasp something vital and precious, as the horizon cradles a cool, fading sun at dusk. Her inexhaustible hand sliced the tomato, revealing the viscera, tender red inside. She handed me a slice to try; it had a mild sweetness, a purity that seemed impossible. She drizzled the olive oil in an almost spiritual way, her steady hand moved up and down the line of tomatoes—a blessing of heaven and earth. She sprinkled salt and pepper on the two hemispheres.

The last task she had me do was chop garlic for the meal. The Italians are absolute geniuses when it came to adding garlic to just about every dish they prepare. It acts as a memory agent; each bite will linger in the mouth hours later, reminding me of the meal. It convinces the hungry that they are full, because the taste buds are still remaining on that one scent, the sharp, yet soothing taste of garlic. When I told Sylvia this, she laughed and responded: “You truly are an Italian.”

She placed the garlic in a mushroom risotto. I watched as the rice grain accepts the garlic, melting it with its steaming creamy sauce. Sylvia handed me the risotto dish and lead me with it into the dining room. Frederico was already waiting at the table as we arrived with dishes.

“Took you long enough,” he said in Italian.

“Stai zitto,” Sylvia responded, hitting the back of his head lightly with her hand. “You want it faster, you cook. Just don’t feed any of your cooking to us. It’s terrible!” He laughed and kissed her on the cheek.

Unlike the kitchen, the dining room was large, with a long mahogany table in the center. There was a white table cloth placed with plates, knives, forks, spoons, a bottle of olive oil, a jug of Chianti, and linen napkins, nicely folded. There was also a butter dish, with several pieces of butter and a few bitter olives to the side. In the center, there was a ceramic pitcher filled with beautiful golden wildflowers, daisies, and almond blossoms. Sylvia and I placed the dishes on a side table by the double window.

We passed around the salad course, arugula and radicchio flavored with fennel—an Italian specialty from the region. It smelled mild. However, the radicchio was bitter and a little spicy. Between each course, Frederico would walk around the table and refill our wine glasses. By the end of the meal, I was feeling like Michelangelo’s Bacchus, a representation of the Roman god of wine, teetering off his stone world while he clutched a goblet of wine. The continuous amounts of food and conversation canceled out the

excess of wine. However, Federico commented that my face looked like a *pomodoro* and *how's the vino treating you?* I looked to my plate and responded that I had admired the beautiful tomato cut by Sylvia earlier and wanted to imitate its intense red. He laughed and held up his fork speared with arugula.

“Cin Cin,” he said, which in Italian means *drink to that*.

Next came the pasta dish or “secondo corso.” It was sage-scented lasagna braised with rosemary. In addition, there was a yolk-golden gnocchi formed into little pillows covered with cooked cherry tomatoes and olive oil. It reminded me immediately of my Italian grandmother’s gnocchi. As a girl, I would help her roll them out in her small kitchen, and we would fill them with mashed potatoes and cream, cover them with crushed tomatoes, oregano and ground black pepper. Italian immigrant food relied on the richness of heavy ingredients, such as mozzarella and salami, whereas, Italian provincial and regional food relied more on the fresh, core ingredients.

“That’s all you need,” Sylvia said, pointing to the gnocchi dish. “Tomatoes and oil,” she placed her finger to her mouth and moved it away in a kissing motion, “Delizioso.”

The delicate risotto followed the gnocchi. It was made with pungent porcini mushrooms. It seemed almost like a stew in its richness. The steam warmed my face, making me feel drunker. The mushrooms had an earthy taste, which paired well with the

base of the Chianti. I felt as though I could almost taste the exact earth in Italy where the mushrooms were recently picked.

The clinking of silverware against bone china was the closest moment of silence throughout the meal. We spoke about politics, about the civil unrest in Libya in Egypt. We specifically discussed the Libyan protest a few days earlier on Florence's Via Cavour. I watched the street from the window in my room as a large crowd shouted Italian phrases and words—things I knew, but my mind would not translate. I watched as posters and pamphlets littered the ground, drifted from apartment windows like broken clouds or stray linens that became unhooked on the line from window to window.

“The Italians are not violent,” Frederico said in response. “They are artists. They just like to express themselves.”

The third course was a tender chicken, juicy and almost airy, as if it had been from a chicken that could magically take flight. Its skin was gilded by the oven's heat, resembling the dome of Florence's famous *Duomo*. As I cut into it, the smoke drifted out from between the cuts of juicy white meat, purling slowly to mingle with the chandelier.

“How do you like Italian food?” Sylvia asked me as I placed another thick cut of the chicken cacciatore on my plate.

“Delizioso,” I said, pointing to the food around me. “Except breakfast, it's never enough.” I mentioned the small breakfasts at the pensione: almond biscotti and thick, dark coffee with a saucer of heavy cream. How different it was from my breakfast in England: a succulent slice of ham, a few sausage links still sizzling on the hot plate

oozing grease fat, scrambled eggs with parsley and chopped onions, a mountain of sliced and fried potatoes covered in butter and chives. At my hotel when I visited Istanbul, there were the bowls of oatmeal and creamed rice, plates of marmalade and honey, boiled eggs and cold meat, dried and fresh fruit. Copious amount of spices could be added into the porridge or into a hot tea: cinnamon bark, dried rose buds, red peppercorn, pistachios, dried okra and Turkish saffron.

I remembered my American meals, the many nights I sat around the small kitchen table with my family just outside Chicago. My parents coined the term, “hobo night,” where every now and then we would eat a .99 cent box of mac and cheese and homemade beans. We would huddle around a warm pot of baked beans, sizzling with a crisp bit of fat pork in the crumbling brown crust. The warm pot of cheese quivered as it was ladled over the steaming elbow macaroni. My parents thought it important for my brother and me to understand how to eat simply and live frugally.

My father always sat at the head, or foot, of the table, while my mother sat on the other end. There would be a momentary grace, where we would quickly say *thank you* to God before reaching our forks over hot plates. I scraped the salt pork from the sides of the bean pot, placing it in my mouth and holding it there as it melted like cream.

My mother made bread pudding from slices of stale bread, sugar, cinnamon and Granny Smith apples, sliced thin. The pudding baked until the top crisped a light brown; the fruit was a still life, with layered hollows and ridges forming pockets for what was to

come. My mother then melted sugar over the stove top and poured it over the pudding crust. It was such a delight to cut into the piping hot, burnished gold crust, allowing the warm fragrance of cinnamon, butter and apples into the air. I loved sucking the sweet syrup and allowing the warm apples to cool the tip of my tongue.

Memories receded, and I was back in Florence.

“That sounds delicious,” Frederico said in Italian. “Although, I don’t know what a hobo tastes like.”

I laughed and decided it was better to not explain it.

My Italy began and ended around the Spadas’ table. Frederico and Sylvia reminded me of home. At the same time, they taught me about the world. There was not much difference between them and my parents. They laughed, fought and loved each other. They were proud of their Italian culture, yet they wanted to learn more about mine.

My time in Italy was spent living through my senses; it’s something I will always carry with me. Today, I cut a tomato and remember Sylvia, the way she carried it, the way her hands moved over the tomatoes to form the holy trinity. I will order chicken cacciatore from an Italian restaurant, and every time I will be disappointed. It will never have the same taste of warmth and lightness as the one at the Spadas. No dinner party since has captured such formal eating and such informal conversation. Dinner at the Spadas was like living in Italy, revering food and art and relationships with the ageless.

Perano, Abruzzo 2011

The train from Florence to Rome worked well; modern, fast, and clean. I left Florence's Santa Maria Novella Station in the morning and was coasting into Rome approximately two hours later. The scenery from the window as I travelled the 173 miles was familiar. I had seen a similar road on my way to college in rural western New York—sprawling hills, yellow fields, few houses occupying an acre or so of cropland. In Italy, there were rolling, golden fields and quaint farm homes. I imagined my grandfather and his daddy, their legs dangling over the edge of a huffing coal train on their way to the oil wells in western New York. I imagined my great-grandfather with a cigar tipped on the side of his mouth; puffs of smoke rising like the train's own smoke stack—indicators of progress. They were new Italian immigrants, taking what work they could get. As I rode the train into the rural part of Italy, I wondered: "Do I deserve this journey?" My great-grandfather left Italy to make a new, more prosperous life, in America. Here I was, returning to what he left, wanting a piece of Italy.

There was a difference, though—time. While upstate New York's history numbers in the hundreds of years, Italy's history numbers in the thousands. I respected the Italian scenery because it represented this passage of time. While I travelled on a modern train system, I was following the route the ancient Romans might have covered between Rome and the Etruscan north. How many Roman legions marching in shinny

armor and shields and plumed helmets passed this way? How many barbarian tribes travelled in reverse, hoping to plunder the “Imperial City?” The Romans were also my people. My Nonna’s family was the Latinis, the “Latin people.” Although, how much of me was Roman? Over the centuries, Italy had been invaded by numerous tribes and armies. Maybe I was French (my mother’s Parisian daughter could become a reality). My neck would be French—long and elegant. Maybe I had barbarian blood in me. As a young teenager, and hating my body, my father used to comfort me saying my thick ankles were the result of having warrior blood. If nothing, I could always kick a football well, he would conclude. My long fingers and arms would be Spanish, good for a flamenco gesture, or preparing paella. I either belonged to no one or everyone.

I was on my way to visit my grandfather’s side of the family in Abruzzo. I had heard about Abruzzo since I was a child. It was the distant home of my ancestors and a few relatives who still remained. Most had left the area. I knew it was rural and poor – a place that people would want to leave I thought, if, as my dad would tell me, they had the “guts” to leave. Many people had left the region of Italy a century ago; it remains one of the least populated and poorest regions in Italy. My dad told me the area is known as an ancient place of “witches, wizards, and wolves.” “Your great-grandmother was a witch,” he would say. I would shudder at the thought. I imagined her with green skin, a long, drooping nose. The latter part actually was true. My father said she would cure his headaches, and protect him from “il malocchio,” or evil eye. She would mix ointments

and salves. I knew that my great grandfather, as a boy in Abruzzo, had been a shepherd, protecting flocks of sheep from marauding wolves. My great-grandmother was married to another man before she married my great-grandfather. Her husband at the time had gone to fight in World War I. She lived in a small, dilapidated cabin tilting on the side of one of Abruzzo's many mountains. As the story goes, she was plucking peas from a pod when she saw the red eyes of a wolf through her kitchen window. The wolf's scream was almost human; it left its warm breath on the thin glass. She recognized the howl as a sign of death. A week later, she discovered that her husband had died on the same evening as the wolf came to her window. "Wolves would steal our cattle and steal our men," she would tell my young father, who would sit wide-eyed, listening to her tale and looking at his own window.

I looked at my indistinct image in the train's window as the train pulled into Roma's Termini station for my bus connection east to Abruzzo. However, I missed that stop, ending at Roma Termini, the train's final destination and one stop beyond where I needed to be. I had to catch a bus from a large bust station at Tiburtina. Buses to Abruzzo ran infrequently. I was on an especially tight schedule, since I needed to catch the right bus at the right time that would take me to the city of Lanciano in Abruzzo. Lanciano was the closest bus stop to my destination, the Commune of Perano (the town of my relatives). My cousin, Ilaria and her husband, Danilo, would be waiting to meet me in Lanciano.

I rushed off of the bus, swinging a large backpack filled with American gifts, to progress through the crowds. It was only fifteen minutes before the bus was to leave for Lanciano. I ran from the station toward the first taxi stand I saw, weaving through a crowd of gypsies asking for money. I jumped into the first taxi I could – a very small car with a very young driver. In Italian, I conveyed the urgency of my trip to Tiburtina station with words like “rapido.” The driver nodded and pulled the car into drive, weaving in and out Roman traffic. I saw 2500 years in five minutes. We curved around the Coliseum, stole a quick, blurry glance at the Forum. The driver seemed to make his own lane between cars and curbs and sidewalks, getting me to the bus station just before the Lanciano bus left (and leaving a whole range of traffic violations and angry, cursing Roman drivers behind). I wondered, was it worth it for me to risk death in order to see my relatives, in order to fully know my past and myself? My great-grandfather took a similar journey over one hundred years before. I wasn't following a path to a new life, a future; I was going towards my past. I suspected there was nothing cosmopolitan or glamorous about Perano, and I was right. It was rural and ravenous.

I arrived at the right bus just before it was to drive off. I left Rome behind, travelling due east up into the Apennine Mountains. The mountains reminded me a bit of the Rockies, as one leaves Denver heading due west. We travelled higher and higher – the terrain beautiful and a bit wild. Within an hour we reached our first bus stop at a rest station that looked like a U.S. Interstate stop. At least half of the bus passengers and the

bus driver himself literally ran out of the bus and began to smoke cigarettes in a group, inhaling as deeply and quickly as possible. Smoke billowed around the group of new companions joined in their need for nicotine. After about ten minutes, all of the passengers filed back into the bus, and we began travelling again.

We rode for another hour or so and stopped at another station along the highway. Again, about half of the people left the bus—I thought to simply smoke again. I stayed on board listening to the passengers laugh, talk loudly, and have a good time (I didn't understand too much of what they were saying; they were speaking so fast). Part of me felt like a failure for not understanding. "This is a part of me," I thought. Now, I realize, they were speaking in their own dialects—the language of their villages and towns. They, like me, are products of where they grew up, not their culture.

Every train and bus I took went further and further into rural Italy, where English was non-existent. All of a sudden our bus driver came in from outside and began pointing to people directly, saying: "Vasto, Vasto?" with passengers answering, "Si, si."

The bus conductor had a raspy, deep voice, reminding me of the heaps of Marlboro butts littered on Florence's cobbled streets.

"Vasto," he asked, pointing to me.

"No, Lanciano."

He smiled. “Oh, you are American. But why Lacioano, there’s nothing there for a pretty girl like you. Why not Roma or Milano?” His English trailed unsteadily; it was slow and shaky, like an Army tank crawling over rough terrain.

I responded in Italian. “I’m going to visit my relatives in Perano.”

He laughed. “There’s absolutely nothing in Perano. At least Lanciano has a bar.”

I smiled, to show that I understood. However, part of me asked the same question. Why? He directed me toward another bus in the parking lot, the bus to Lanciano. Lucky for me, the bus had been checked, or I would be on my way to Vasto as my relatives waited for me miles away.

As I walked down the bus aisle with Italian passengers eyeing the one foreigner who had held up their departure, I thought of United Airlines flights full of impatient fliers waiting for the lone traveler who would scurry to the last seat, relieved to have a seat, yet very aware a multitude of people had been inconvenienced by her tardiness. However, the difference was that I was an American, which made it so much worse. There was a young Italian woman, about my age, who continued to stare at me throughout the trip. “She knows,” I thought, as if my nationality was an awful secret.

The bus driver drove out of the Apennine Mountains, away from the ashen forests, into high, craggy hills. In the distance, at times, I could see little glimpses of the starkly blue Adriatic Sea. It looked like a mirage, horizon-less and sun-swept. I could barely see the cream shoreline sprinkling forth. We were well into Abruzzo, a land of

mountains, hills, eventually seashore. Homes along the road became more numerous as we drove away from the mountains. They also appeared a bit less well kept this side of the mountains. My father had made the analogy of Abruzzo to Appalachia; it appeared accurate. There was a part of me that felt the journey was unoriginal, not explorative. My brother had visited Perano before when he was in Law School. He was the one who initiated contact with the “long lost relatives.” I was just another Pellicciotti visiting.

Before my brother, no one from the family had been to the region, since my great grandmother had travelled there in the late 1960s, after my great grandfather had passed away. She had brought with her then pictures of the “American family” (including my teenage dad, with a brush cut, and with what, I swear, looked like striped Bermuda shorts) to exchange for pictures of the Italian relatives. I do remember looking at the Italian-family pictures years and years after my great grandmother’s trip – long after my great-grandmother had passed away. One of the young girls in those pictures, named Maria, was now the mother of Ilaria, the young woman who was going to meet me in Lanciano. I also remember my dad telling me that in the 1960s my great grandmother was pleased to find when she visited Perano that the “back-a-house” was no longer outside. For my journey, Perano had advanced to indoor plumbing.

My brother travelled to Abruzzo in 2003, when he was studying for a summer as part of the Gonzaga University Law School summer program in Florence. He found our relatives, using the same pictures that my great grandmother had brought back with her

from Abruzzo, so many decades before. When he entered Perano for the first time, he had had no prior arrangements with anyone. That is something that is fairly typical for my brother; he believes that “everything will work out,” and he tends to act with that mindset. He is so different than I. He was the real explorer, the one who went knowing no Italian.

He arrived in the “new town” section of Perano. Most of Perano, the old town, is set on a high hill – an ancient town that had been built high above the valley floor for protection from marauding evil-doers, seeking to pillage and the like. The new town grew up in the nearby valley much more recently. The buildings in the newer section, which included both businesses and homes, were, of course, much newer – more modern. He told me this on a crackling pay phone. “You’d like it, Annie. It’s not much different from Chicago, just smaller.”

It was getting dark when my brother entered the town, and he did not know how to find our relatives. He stopped at one of the few stores still open – a tailor’s shop. The owner of the shop was about to shut down for the evening, but he was kind and tried to communicate with the confusing American. Communicating with the tailor required use of pictures, as my brother’s knowledge of Italian was limited, and the tailor knew little English. After looking at the pictures, the tailor told my brother that he knew one of the young girls in the picture, now, of course, grown up. In his limited English, he told my brother that the person is a customer. He then made a telephone call. My brother recalls

a conversation that seemed to indicate first disbelief on the part of the person called, reference to the picture by the tailor, description in some detail by the tailor of the picture, and a conclusion ending with, “O.K.”

The person on the phone was coming to the store to meet my brother. Michael met the relatives; they looked at the pictures; the family connection was fully understood; and all was well. As my brother keeps telling me, things worked out (although I do not share his luck). He met more relatives than he thought he would. He even met non-relatives – people who had series of remote connections to the distant past of my great grandfather or great grandmother. “I knew your great-grandmother during the first World War. I was just a boy then. I remember she wore black,” an older man from the village said, shaking my brother’s hand. Even to the townspeople, my brother’s visit was a connection to their past.

The meals seemed endless. My brother said, “They took care of me.” It was a refashioning of a link, long ago severed, but now repaired of a family living apart in distant lands. The family was connected again, and now, I was to continue the link by meeting these wonderful people, who now considered us part of their family.

On the train ride, I was memorizing my conjugations. My father’s voice kept urging me into study: “Remember, Annie, they do not know any English. Know as much as you can before you go.” However, Nonna’s voice would also creep in: “You don’t

need to know the same language. You have the same blood. Speak through that.” I learned over fifty verb conjugations while on the train. I had a past and a future.

I was traveling with an unsure heart. I had fallen so in love with Italy, I had become lost to my boyfriend back home. Peter would write me messages, call me over a shaky connection while I was at internet cafes. I would respond with only half a heart, usually distracted. Our love felt as distant as our physical separation.

Slowly, over time, our relationship would become less tethered due to our separation. I felt like a child again, trying to make a telephone out of two paper cups and a string (over 5,000 miles of string). I had to think of our lack of contact as something tangible—the string, an impossibility, that was to blame. I never looked to myself as the problem; it was never Italy, which kept beckoning me with its language and history. It was difficult to have a future when I was exploring so much of my past. I was a foreigner to every culture I had ever known. I tried so desperately to become a part of Italian culture, I was losing the American Annie, the one who had a boyfriend, who had only known culture from the east to west coast of the United States. Belonging to both cultures seemed like an impossibility.

Ilaria and her husband, Danilo, were waiting when the bus drove into Lanciano. It was strange to actually meet them face to face. Michael had made his closest connection of all the Abruzzo relatives with the two of them. I would soon find out that it was to be the same for me, as well. Ilaria reached me first, almost running to my

location where I had stepped a short distance from the bus, kissing me on both cheeks and also giving me a big hug. Danilo kissed me on both cheeks, as well. We got into their car, with me in the front seat (they insisted, as the guest, that I sit in the front), and we began the twenty minute drive to Perano.

The drive felt warm and friendly, even though I was incredibly nervous. I sat in the seat rubbing my hands together, trying to remember how to conjugate the verb meaning “to speak.” It seemed as though all my Italian had disappeared when I needed it most. Danilo had lived in Argentina for several years, as his family had immigrated there, like many other Italians had over the years. As a result, he spoke Spanish, and we tried to speak in that language as well, since I was most proficient at that, having studied Spanish all through middle and high school. It must have been funny with three people mixing three languages together to attempt to transfer meaning. There also was a great deal of smiling and head shaking, but perhaps not always understanding.

We reached Perano and went directly to Ilaria’s parents’ home. They lived in the new section of Perano, in a nice house. It was very small, but modern by Perano standards. I was greeted by her parents, Maria and Salvatore—again more kisses on both cheeks. I also met Ilaria’s younger sister, Mariana. She is only two years older than I. When my brother was here, he said she looked like me. I could see it—long neck, bony fingers, dark brown eyes against fair skin. A few earlier, she wrote me a letter saying that we were sisters. From then on, I imagined we were traveling parallel paths, even if

they were in different parts of the world. The family offered me a small olive branch as a special gift; I think it was a cultural sign – one of peace. Olives also are a big part of the produce grown in that part of Italy. I had a box of Macy’s “Frango” mints to give to Maria and Salvatore. The box had a picture of the Chicago skyline on it, and my relatives seemed to like that especially.

“Mia Casa,” I said pointing the skyscrapers.

They smiled and pointed to the Sears Tower. “You live there?” They said in broken English.

“No,” I responded in Italian. “My house is like yours.”

Maria smiled and took my hand. “But it is an American house.”

At the time, I had no idea what Maria meant by this comment. I thought she was simply pointing out the differences between old and new. However, now I believe she had her own romanticized view of America. To her, it was bustle, wealth, importance. It was New York City and Los Angeles. She could not imagine rural life, simplicity.

I was almost immediately led off to lunch, set out in the family’s living room. This, I believe, was a great complement to me as a special guest of the family. We had a huge meal, including braised lamb, a big culinary staple in Abruzzo. There was a small slab of pan-fried polenta with an onion and vinegar sauce. On top of the delicious cornmeal mush were pieces zucchini, onion, eggplant and sweet peppers. Salvatore did the barbeque, himself; Maria cooked the rest of the meal. The end of lunch included

almond biscotti and a sweet dessert wine, with Salvatore cutting into the glass of wine large pieces of wonderfully fresh peach.

People – all kinds of relatives and non-relatives from the town – then began to stop by, including my grandfather’s brother’s great grandchildren, Giovanni and Mario, who provided to the group better English translation skills and helped move the conversation forward better. Even the parish priest showed up—for dessert.

The priest looked over to me while I was sipping on the wine. In English he said, “Language never seems to be a problem when everyone’s knees are under the table. That, in itself, is its own language.”

I smiled politely. However, I realized that it was true. I had not been nervous or had a lack of something to say. Mostly, we just talked about the food. At the table, my vocabulary consisted of “delizioso” and “bravo.”

Later, we took a tour of the old section of Perano. I entered the town into a large square, with the Catholic Church at one end and the government center at the other. Children played soccer in the courtyard between the two buildings. As I walked further into town from the square, I entered the area where people have their homes, very old homes—weathered stone and terracotta roofs. It was a warm day, and some homes had their doors opened wide with colorful beads draping down from the top of the door casings and serving as the only barrier to entry. I felt as if I had gone back centuries in time, with the old stone homes and narrow streets. My worn leather boots against the cobblestone. My jeans had an olive oil stain on the knee. Visually, I felt like I belonged.

People strolled about those narrow streets, and many were introduced to me as they approached. I stopped by the home of Maria's brother, Dominick, who I had already met earlier at the family feast. He lived with his wife in the old town section in a small, neatly kept home. He was about the age of my father, but he looked much older. What hair he had was entirely gray, and he had large wrinkles forming punctuation marks around his eyes. Later, I would go into the government center to search ancient town records that compiled town births. After some effort and with the help of local town civil servants, I found a record with a very brief mention of the birth of my father's great grandfather, in the 1850s. In the record, next to the birth child's name was the name of his parents. Next to his father's name was an entry for the father's occupation, "agricoltore." I also toured the local cemetery. So many "Pellicciotta's" tombs were found. The Italians seem to have what was to me a strange habit of placing photographs of the dead on their tombs and stacking tombs one upon the other. It was creepy, yet incredibly fascinating; I had a past and present. The depth of my past was lost to me until now. I saw the inward American view. And, as I stood along rows of tombstones, those of my relatives, I realized there was more to me than just my home culture.

As to the family name, my brother, when he had come to Perano, discovered in his search of town birth records that our family's last name is really spelled with an "a" at the end, not the "i" that we have used in the American side of the family for a century. My relative Mario asked my brother if we planned to correct the error. My dad said later

after hearing of the error, “No; it’s Pellicciotti for us, regardless.” One hundred years is enough to form your name; we have lived that identity. I agreed with my father. It was this part of the American view I would keep. My dad did not know how the error in the spelling of the name had occurred; his father had never mentioned it to him, nor did his grandfather. We have guessed that the error was caused during processing when my great grandfather arrived at Ellis Island in New York, early in the last century. The trip to the old section brought about a remarkable connection for me to my Italian roots. I felt a sense of warmth and an odd intimacy with these people who I had never met before.

I had insisted that I would stay in a hotel, so as not to bother my hosts. I stayed in the Hotel Park Maximo, one of only two small hotels in town. Later, I would regret doing so, not because the hotel was bad—it was simple, but clean—but because the next morning when I went to check out the bill had been paid in full for me by Ilaria. The hotel manager would have none of my insistence that I pay, instead.

“It had been taken care of,” he kept saying in Italian.

The American part of me wanted to argue, wanted to say: “This isn’t right. It’s Ilaria’s money, not mine.” However, the Italian part of me thought of the word “famiglia,” a word that has fewer restrictions, less of a definition in Italy than it does in the United States.

I was going back to Florence that day. However, first my Italian relatives wanted to show me the area castle – a major scenic stop for the Chieti portion of Abruzzo. The

castle, named Castle Roccascalegna, was incredibly old. Its thick stone walls were dusted with dirt, and thick coverings of moss crept into corners. It is set out on top of a very high limestone formation, overlooking the valley. Fields of ochre fell before me, sloping into trees with golden leaves. It was not very large, in itself, but it still looked formidable, with heavy, gray walls and protruding towers. I had to walk up a narrow path to get to the structure, which was built initially in the Eleventh Century. It had been restored in the 1990s by the government, and it provides a very special tourist stop for an area with an economy that needs tourist income, but gets relatively little of it.

After the castle tour, we had time for one more meal before heading off to catch the bus for my return to Florence. We stopped at an area “Agriturismo” to eat. It offered very fresh, locally grown ingredients. We had another huge meal. Eventually, we all had to say our good-byes. Italians do not mind showing their emotions. As I tried to conceal my tears, my sweater was soaked from theirs. As I boarded the bus, Ilaria said to me “Perano é sempre tua casa,” *Perano will always be your home*. For me, Perano was like a warm breath, a distant, isolated place, but full of love and kindness. Both Nonna and my father were right. I needed both languages—the blood and spoken—to communicate with my relatives. It’s my Italy, the map of my heart, a rocky geography that is both history and event. It tells the story of my passion and self-exploration.

Chicago, Illinois 2011

I returned to the United States at the end of April. Almost four months abroad, lost to the streets of Florence, I discovered a new part of myself I had never known. I found my senses. Smell and taste became the focus of my world. Food began to have an origin, a sense of place—lightly floured shrimp fried along the Venetian lagoon, braised leg of lamb passed between lost relatives in the heartland of Abruzzo, risotto con funghi et tartufo, the subtle marriage between mushroom and truffle in Florence. I found my own place in Italy. I arrived in Florence an insecure 21-year-old. I knew the language from years of study, but when it came to using it, I became mute. I listened to the Italian around me, so foreign, so separate from myself. Part of me (the timid me) did not want to make room for the new.

Slowly, my Italy began to reveal itself to me; I began to understand the many parts of Florence—how it thought, spoke and, even, hid from itself. The cobbled streets showed famous exiles and memories of war. Graffiti covered ancient walls. Ancient secrets could be heard between hushed Italian at the Uffizi. “It’s the Duke’s lover,” a young couple whispered while eyeing Titian’s provocative Venus of Urbino.” No matter how lost I got walking Florence’s narrow streets; I always seemed to return to something I recognized. I would be led through the streets for my history class. We would often pass *Il Porcellino*, the bronze-cast statue of a boar. My professor would always stop and place her hand on the boar’s worn snout. “The legend goes, rub the nose once, you will

return to Florence. Rub it twice, you will marry a Florentine.” She smiled and showed us her ring. “It worked for me.” On my last night in Florence, I stumbled upon *Il Porcellino*. I rubbed its nose once, too afraid to rub it twice.

I learned to look at strangers for their own stories. I think to the wide, dark eyes of a young Italian woman watching me on the bus to Perano. Then, I believed she stared because she knew I was a foreigner. But now, I think she wondered why she hadn’t seen me before, why I was a stranger, when I looked so much like she did.

Why Florence, why Tuscany? Why is it the place of lovers, poets—the feast that feeds us all? What fed Byron as he wrote about youth and love? Violet grapes? Terra Cotta roofs? A cerulean sky? It was the past which fed me, Florence’s inherited image. The ghosts of Florence still haunt the city, still savor its ability to inspire. One could almost believe that Jesus lived and died in Florence when viewing the paintings at the Uffizi. Florence’s layering of tragedy and triumph is symphonic. It’s so different from what I knew, but its history, good and bad, makes it so real, tangible.

In Italy, I learned to listen more closely, see more deeply. A month after I returned to the United States, I was taking the subway to the Lincoln Park district of Chicago to meet some friends for lunch. As I entered the subway, I noticed the demeanor and grace of the people—a woman with a pet ferret with painted pink toenails, a man wearing a beret, singing Dylan’s song about “Blowin’ in the Wind,” a mother braiding her daughter’s hair as she recited spelling words. I realized that these people

were all on their own journeys. Some were Americans, some weren't. They all had pasts and presents that were colliding with my own.

It is hard to say when my journey began. Did it begin when I stepped on the plane in Chicago? Or did it begin when I was a girl, trailing a thin finger around a spinning globe? It could have begun with my mother, who followed her own map around the distant streets of Paris. Did it begin with her mother or her great-grandmother, a legacy of travelers? Or did it begin at the Big Bang, when my matter, my DNA, was stardust?