

# **24 Hours in San Giorgio Albanese**

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# Getting There

I KNEW IT WOULD BE HARD TO GET THERE, I just didn't know how hard. Nearly a week earlier I had sat at a table at the Atlantis restaurant in Tartu, Estonia, celebrating my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, explaining to friends that it wouldn't be possible for me to bring the wife and kids to San Giorgio, at least not this time.

"Of course, it's possible," said a friend. "This is Europe."

At the time, I feared she might be right. Maybe it was possible. Maybe I was being selfish by going to Italy alone. I felt guilty for not taking my wife, Marta, and little Anna along for the ride. But here in Corigliano I understood how out of the way this little mountain village was and I was extremely thankful that I didn't have to drag my poor family through the arduous, time-consuming process of getting to San Giorgio Albanese, the small hilltop Calabrian village where my great grandparents were born.

I took the train from Bari that morning, changed at Taranto, skirting the Ionian Coast. Then I spent the night in Corigliano Scalo, a strip of gas stations, car shops, cafes, supermarkets, apartment blocks, and other manifestations of soulless overdevelopment, hoping to sleep off a case of intestinal distress that had me running to the nearest toilet at least every half an hour. I figured that some rest and relaxation would give me the strength to do San Giorgio and nearby Acri in a few days, but even a night in the Hotel de Gallo, a hot shower, and long hours of slumber, could not sate my illness or feelings of severe lethargy. The next day I waited patiently for the bus to come and take me to San Giorgio. I figured I would walk around San Giorgio and then take a late afternoon bus to Acri where there were several hotels.

Only now do I realize how naïve I was.

I waited at the bus stop with my huge black backpack, my documents tucked inside my coat pocket, the bag always hooked to my shoulders. I hadn't gotten ripped off in Italy yet, but Corigliano seemed like just the kind of hole where people wouldn't blink about robbing you blind. Inside, I began to feel proud that I was San Giorgese and not a damn Coriglianese. I had a hunch that all the low life, dirt bag, no good, two faced, filthy lying bastard *paesans* I had ever met in my life were actually Coriglianese. In fact, I knew they were. As I stood waiting for my bus, I noticed two men sizing me up, watching me, waiting for me to let down my guard, to get distracted, looking for the opportunity to make off with my computer, my copy of *Tropic of Capricorn*, my changes of socks and underpants. I looked them in the eyes, and they had the nerve to smile at me, only to continue glaring at my backpack a second later. No good Coriglianese. When would my bus to San Giorgio come? When would it come? I asked the two kids at the bus stop but they didn't know. Then I asked the bus driver of the bus they got on, and he pointed at a nearby gas station and yelled "A jeep! A jeep!"

"A jeep?" I walked to the gas station, and saw from the sign that it was called the AGIP gas station, and while I was walking I passed a woman with freckles and light brown hair. That was the thing about the Coriglianese. They were the darkest of the dark, the swarthiest of the swarthy. They were Greeks if not Middle Eastern. I am not embarrassed to say that I felt safer in that moment when I saw the woman, the one woman in Corigliano whose skin color was the same tone as mine, instantly safer, a feeling of belonging. I guess it's not comfortable to look different, even a little different, especially in a place like Corigliano.

I waited at the AGIP parking lot breathing in the hot exhaust from multiple buses, none of them to San Giorgio. Italian girls, dressed identically in blue jeans, their arms hooked together, walked down the sidewalk, singing aloud to a pop song. Old ladies in headscarves cluttered up the benches with their bags and belongings. I stood beside a telephone booth and noticed two posters for parties in the city on a billboard. Both featured blondes in suggestive poses, as if you went to the party, you might have a chance of going home with one of the girls. But there were no blondes in Corigliano. Everyone was brown and sweating, like me.

But San Giorgio. Why San Giorgio? Or rather, how San Giorgio? It's not like Jerry, my grandfather, told me about San Giorgio. Jerry told me that his grandfather, Gennaro, had left Italy for Buenos Aires around the turn of the century. From Buenos Aires he somehow wound up in the salt mines of Rochester, New York. After that, he moved to Long Island. Then – poof! – he disappeared from all memory, all family history. Vanished.

Jerry's father, Salvatore, was born in Italy, but came to New York as a young man, following his father. He met and married Rosaria Petrellis. They had eight children, the second was Gennaro, "Jerry," my grandfather. And that's all I knew. Grandpa would sit at the end of the dinner table, his dark black hair slicked back, and he would pound his hand against the wood and tell us that Rose was Greek. *Greek!* It sounded so much more civilized, more impressive than just being an average Italian. Italians were known for blood and circus and fascism. But Greeks? They were among the greatest thinkers of the world. Who didn't want to be Greek? And they had such good food. Loretta, grandpa's younger sister, disputed this story though. She always thought that Rose's family was Albanian. But who really wanted to be an Albanian? Besides, weren't they Muslims? Or Communists? Or Both?

"They were all Italians," another relative confided in me. "But Italians were so poorly thought of back then, that if you had some distant ancestry from some other place, you said you were that thing. Greek. Albanian. Yugoslavian. We're not Italians! We are anything but!"

Such questions intrigued me. It's odd not to know your family history, to just know you descend from some shady Mediterranean characters who are dead and who no one really remembers. This wasn't just family, though, this was the family that gave me my name and I was busy passing it on. I now had two daughters called Petrone. Where did we come from? How did we get here? Where did I fit into this narrative that had Petrones flung far and wide from Italy to Argentina to New York to Estonia?

Doing some research one day, I happened upon Salvatore's World War I draft card. Of course, he didn't fight in that war or any war. Most Petrones never wound up fighting for one reason or another. Some do, but most scallywags like us don't fight, we just sort of drift on through. There were a few heroic exceptions, of course, but big world events had a habit of passing us by. The archetypal Petrone sat in the corner shade sipping his wine as the world burned. We were fatalistic, self-interested characters. We believed in nothing other than the sun would bring us another day.

We just had to survive to see it.

Or, as my cousin Peter Petrone told my father about how he managed to avoid going to Vietnam. "I managed to bullshit my way out of it."

Well, Mr. Salvatore, styled in the US as "Sam," had to fill out a draft card in 1917, and on it he said that he was born in San Giorgio Albanese, in the province of Cosenza on February 11, 1894. I also found the Ellis Island registration records of great-grandma Rose, whose real name was Rosaria. She and her entire family had entered New York together in November 1900. They too were from San Giorgio! Now it began to make sense. Salvatore and Rose had come from the same village. They had known each other as children. Now their young marriage in 1914 – she was 21 and he was 20 — made sense. It was probably arranged through the family.

But what kind of place was this San Giorgio? I knew it was a small village of about 1,800 people at the top of a mountain in the Sila Greca. And to get there from Corigliano, you had to take a bus from the AGIP gas station. I stood there surrounded by Calabrians in the November heat, sweating in the exhaust, waiting for the bus to come. First a bus to Rossano came, then a bus to San Cosmo Albanese. At last my bus arrived, a bus to San Giorgio. I got on with about a dozen teenagers.

I was a stranger on this bus. I sat in silence, taking in the scenery as the caravan stole away up a mountainside, twisting and rolling past orchards and cliffs and creeks, all of it sloping down behind us until Corigliano was but a blue and white haze in the distance. And the whole trip, from Corigliano to San Giorgio, the kids on the bus did not shut up. They just talked and yelled and screamed at one another. One poor kid with a cigarette behind his ear hid in the front seat while a throng of rowdy teens taunted him from the back. Even the bus driver was wading into the fray, tossing out insults and jokes. And everyone was laughing. They laughed all the way up the mountain, past the cemetery into the streets of San Giorgio Albanese.

Picture if you will an ice cream sundae. At the top of the sundae is the whipped cream, curling and rolling towards a crest. So it is with San Giorgio. Its winding streets and colorful houses are strung around the cliffs of a mountain top, like tinsel on a Christmas tree. The rowdy teenagers got off at the first stop. I waited until the second, probably because I wanted to get off alone, because I was a stranger, an outsider, and I felt even now as if people were watching me here.

Once I got off though, I realized I had no idea what to do next. So I stood there, looked out at the Mare Ionio in the distance, and thought and kicked at the dust. There were no hotels in San Giorgio, at least none listed online. I figured there might be some local room for rent, or at least a late bus to Acri, where there were several hotels. But the streets of San Giorgio were quiet. Too quiet. There wasn't a soul around. And it began to dawn on me that nobody in San Giorgio would be doing anything at all for the rest of the afternoon. So I decided to head to the cemetery. Why not? What better place for a drifter like me than to be among the dead?

I was supposed to hook up with relatives in San Giorgio but it didn't work out. My online research had put me in touch with a woman named Jae, a distant cousin of mine via the Petrellis family who lived in Florida and had researched the inhabitants of San Giorgio Albanese. She in turn had put me in touch with a woman in Philadelphia named Lucrezia, but who used the name "Grace" in America. Grace was from San Giorgio, but Grace hadn't returned my phone calls. In the weeks before my trip, I got desperate to identify relatives who might be able to show me around. I even emailed two Petrellises through Facebook. Giorgio Petrellis of San Giorgio wrote back, but told me that he didn't understand my message. I didn't understand his profile photo. It was of a man with a shaved head screaming. Giorgio must have been a heavy metal fan, I figured. I had used an online English-Italian translator, anyway, and so heavy metal Giorgio couldn't help me. So I was here on my own in San Giorgio. Nobody was waiting for me. There would be no family dinners. No kisses on the cheek. It would just be me and the silence and the dead.

From the bus stop, I set out in the direction of the church. I could see its bell tower poking out from the rooftops. The church was dedicated to San Giorgio, San Giorgio Megalomartire. San Giorgio looked like a Catholic church. The people of San Giorgio were not Catholics, though. They were so-called Eastern Catholics and this was, in essence, a Greek Orthodox Church. Long ago, the Orthodox inhabitants of San Giorgio had come under the control of Rome but retained their ancient rite as part of the deal. Rome's takeover of the Greek churches of Italy had been one reason for the Great Schism that had at last split Rome from Constantinople.

The white building and its surrounding piazza were situated on a flat plateau on the mountain top. Looking down, you could see far into the distance. You could see other mountaintop villages like San Demetrio or down to Corigliano and beyond it the sea. Seven hundred years ago, tough mercenaries from northern Greece who spoke an archaic form of Albanian settled these isolated, peaceful mountains, integrating into Italian life, rearing their children bilingual in both Italian and the ancient tongue, as close to modern Albanian as Shakespearean English to the American vernacular. And the oddest things about these peculiar Italian mountain folk, called Arbereshe, is that I was one of them, and I had always been one of them, even if I didn't know it for the first two and a half decades of my life.

From the church's piazza, I spotted the cemetery and I began to wind down the road towards the cemetery gates. Along the way I came upon an old woman who was returning from a trip to lay flowers to some lost loved one if I was heading in the right direction. This was the first person with whom I communicated in San Giorgio. The old woman gave me a curious look

and then said two words. "*Avanti. Avanti.*" So forward I went, forward along the road, which ran along the side of a cliff. The rock of the cliff was covered with dry shrubs and cactus and here and there I heard the rustling of quick moving rock lizards up and down the walls.

The cemetery was under construction. Workers were busy building a new honeycomb-like, above-ground burial chamber for the soon to be deceased. Because we were on a mountain in Italy, the dead were all interred above ground, either in stacked on top of one another into walls or in private crypts. I searched the names on the wall for the familiar.

There were Canade's and Chinigos and Scuras and Toccis, but no Petrones and no Petrellises. After looking up and down walls and inside crypts for 20 minutes, I came upon *Damiano Petrellis, 1912-2006*, and *Teodora Petrellis, 1898-1992*. I took photos of each marker, as the markers each carried a picture of the deceased. I figured I'd show the photos to my father. He'd get a kick out of it. He was interested in our family origins, origins that were, like every immigrant family's, somewhat shrouded in mystery, misunderstandings, incorrect translations, and outright lies.

As I snapped my last photo of Teodora, I heard footsteps behind me. I looked for a way out, maybe down a corridor of above-ground graves, somehow I could get away from these people who were probably offended by me taking snapshots of their dead relatives. It was no use.

I turned to meet my first San Giorgesi.

"What are you doing?" two women approached me. They spoke in Italian, but I understood them well. I could never understand how it was I intuited Italian, even if I had never been educated in the language. Something just felt right. I felt as if I knew this language or had known it. "Are you doing some kind of research?" the women asked.

One woman was slight and in her 40s. She had a short dark hair, glasses, and wore a shirt and jeans. The other was round and in her 60s. She was darker with big brown eyes, thick black curly hair, and wore a dark dress.

"My family is from San Giorgio," I said. "My great grandfather and great grandmother were born here."

I undid my coat and pulled out the birth certificates for Salvatore Petrone and Rosaria Petrellis.

"*Petrellis?*" said the younger one. "But my grandma Teodora was a Petrellis."

"Petrone?" said the older one. "My husband's grandmother was a Petrone."

"What was her name?"

"Maria Carmina."

"Maria Carmina was the sister of my great grandfather Salvatore."

"No!" the older one stepped back, mouth open. "You are my husband's cousin!"

"Come with us, come with us," the younger one gestured to me. "We will find you your Petrones and Petrellises."

I followed the slight one and the round one deeper into the cemetery to a wall. And there I saw a name on a wall, my own name.

"Maria Carmina!" said the round one. "There she is."

It was her, born in 1897, three years after my great grandfather. There was a small portrait of her too, her old plump peasant face captured for eternity in black and white. And she died in 1991. 1991! I could have known her, if I had known anything back then.

"Where are you from?" asked the slight one.

"America."

"And how old are you? 28? 30?"

"30." I looked down away from the cemetery towards Corigliano and the sea.

"And you are doing research?"

"I wanted to visit the villages where my family's from."

"Where are you from?"

"New York. But I live in Estonia. My wife is Estonian."

"Yes, Estonia," she nodded to show she had heard of the country before. "And your name is?"

"Justin, uh, Giustino."

"Giustino, I am Anna Maria," the slight one said. "My grandma is Petrellis. We must be cousins."

Anna Maria introduced me to the older, rounder one, Giovanna. The duo went to visit more graves. Anna Maria led me to a small crypt with the name De Cicco. A photo of a charming old man and the years 1922 – 2003 were engraved on the stone. In the photo, the man was looking up and smiling, as if he had been just interrupted reading the Sunday papers.

"This is my papa," she said. She pulled the flowers away from a flower pot on the crypt wall, took them to a nearby fountain, and rinsed them out.

"I do this every day," Anna Maria said. "These are mine too," she pointed at blossoming clumps of colorful flowers planted nearby her papa's crypt. Then she put the flowers in the pot again and leaned forward to kiss the portrait of her father.

"Ciao Papa," she said.

The dead man's portrait smiled back.

"He looks like a nice man," I said.

"He was," said Anna Maria. "He was the very best."

## Mbuzati

*SAN GIORGIO ALBANESE Mbuzati Benvenuti a San Giorgio Albanese comunità  
Italo-Albanese Mirë se erdhëtit Mbuzat bashkësi arbëreshë*

So read the sign on the road back into the village. I tried my best to read out the Albanian words, but Anna Maria read it aloud more gracefully. The two languages sounded similar, as if it wasn't Albanian she was speaking, but some Italian dialect.

"We all speak Italian and Albanian in San Giorgio," Anna Maria said. "It's a bilingual city."

"Do you work here?" I asked.

"No, I work in Corigliano. I'm a professor of art history. I teach Greek, Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, all of it. I teach all of it. And you?"

"I'm a journalist."

"Ah, a journalist," Anna Maria sounded impressed.

"Very good," said Giovanna.

"How did you get here?" asked Anna Maria.

"First I flew to Rome then I went by train to Bari, from Bari to Corigliano, from Corigliano here."

"Corigliano? Where did you stay in Corigliano?" Anna Maria asked.

"Hotel Gallo d'Oro."

"Ah, yes, Hotel Gallo d'Oro."

"I didn't like Corigliano too much," I confessed.

"No, no," Anna Maria shook her head. "The Coriglianesi are not good people." She wrinkled her nose as if in contact with a foul odor. "Not good people. Not ours. Watch your stuff down there. Like your backpack."

"I know," I said, laughing, remembering the men who tried to steal mine. "I know."

"So where are you going?"

"San Giorgio Albanese."

"But you are in San Giorgio Albanese."

"Then I will stay."

"But for the night?"

"Isn't there a hotel nearby? Or a room for rent?"

"*Hotel?*" Anna Maria's eyes bulged. "In San Giorgio?"

"Yeah."

"No, no, no, no, no," she shook her head. "You better come with me. Maybe there are some beds available at the church."

We bid Giovanna goodbye at the gate to her home which was one of the first houses into town. Anna Maria led me to her small white car.

"Isn't there a bus to Acri or to Corigliano?" I asked.

"At this time?" she didn't even consider the question.

I checked my watch. It was 3 pm.

"You'll have to sleep here tonight," she said. "And you must sleep indoors. You can't stay on the piazza or in the cemetery. It's too cold, it's too cold."

"But where?"

"We'll find a place," she started her car. "We have to find a place."

Anna Maria's tiny car climbed the steep hill into the village, and with a few quick turns down narrow streets we rolled into the central piazza, beside the municipal office

"Damn it," she hit her steering wheel. "The office and the church are already closed."

We got out the car and walked across the piazza, past groups of old men with canes who were sitting around telling stories until they took an interest in us. Some of them even looked like grandpa. He could have been there with them, leaning on his cane with an old blazer with elbow patches draped around him, if he had been born here, and if he had never smoked.

Anna Maria led me into a bar where she began to haggle with a gray haired proprietor behind the counter. The bar was empty but for one or two old men drinking beer and watching a football game on TV. Anna Maria tried to convince him in Italian, but the owner, a little man

with a sharp nose who bore an uncanny relationship to a rooster, folded his arms and made his response clear: No. No, no, no, no, no. Under no conditions would this stranger be spending the night.

"But his family is from San Giorgio, Carmine!" Anna Maria pleaded with the man. "Show him the documents!"

I unsheathed the two birth certificates, my passports to San Giorgio. The cafe owner Carmine stepped forward and studied the documents. Then he handed them to a woman behind the counter, probably his wife, who looked them over and handed them back.

"Petrone Salvatore," Carmine read aloud. "Petrellis Rosaria."

I wondered if Salvatore was looking down on me from heaven, rolling on his back, slapping on his knees, torn by laughter at his idiot great grandson who had gone looking for him 100 years after the fact. Sam. He was a builder, a trolley driver, a restaurant owner, a bootlegger, a jack of all trades. He had eight children, and when they got out of hand, Sam took off his belt. Grandpa Jerry had told me so. That's how it was back then. For these and other reasons Sam was an immigrant legend, a ghost of prewar Italy and America, a specter of an earlier age of globalization.

Carmine took hold of the documents and walked out into the piazza. he sniffed at the papers, ran his hands over his tracksuit. The silver crucifix around his neck glinted in a late afternoon sun. It was getting later and I still had no place to stay. Anna Maria began to look frustrated. Why did God decide to drop this young fool on her of all people? And you know she couldn't just leave me there because she was a nice person. And we were relatives, don't forget! A group of old men sat around the piazza, their canes between their legs. Some of the old men gathered around Carmine as he waved around the documents and read off the names, Petrone, Petrellis. One old man was gesturing around. Perhaps there was a Petrellis nearby they could pawn me off for the night, he said. But no such luck, he was out of town, gone to Cosenza for the week.

"Carmine can't help you," Anna Maria frowned, tugging on my arm. "Come with me."

We got back in the car and pulled out of the piazza. Nobody knew my relatives here, I understood as we sped away. Anyone who had known them was dead. Anna Maria even pulled up alongside an old lady named Petrellis for a moment to introduce us with the hope that she had heard the names of my great grandparents. The old Petrellis had white hair, blue eyes, and wrinkled as a raisin. I barely understood a word she said but understood enough that she had never heard of my Rosaria or Salvatore. It was if they had never existed.

Minutes later Anna Maria's white car pulled in front of a restaurant on the edge of the city. The two-story building was surrounded by asphalt on all sides. It was the last house in San Giorgio. A mountain road led away to the green hills, a steep cliff on one side and the edge of the mountain on the other. It was the way out. The way to Aciri was through those bends.

"I'm sure they'll help you here," Anna Maria said, pulling her keys from the ignition. "They've got to."

The proprietor was playing an arcade game in the entrance when we arrived. Bald, portly, with a moustache and an apron, he seemed indifferent to my predicament.

"Please," Anna Maria begged him. "Please *signore*. He has nowhere to stay. You have documents, right? A passport?"

I pulled my passport from my jacket pocket and handed it to the bald proprietor.

"See, it says Petrone, he's from here," Anna Maria said. "Will you please put him up for the night? Please, please."

The proprietor looked at us both, folded his arms, and bit his lip.

"No," he said, shaking his head once.

"Please," Anna Maria asked again.

"No."

Defeated, we returned to Anna Maria's car. "San Giorgio is a very small place, very, very small," she said. "People don't trust outsiders here. Understand?"

This was also the South, and people were perhaps suspicious of an American who had just shown up out of nowhere. Everyone had heard of the so-called "zip killers," mafia assassins from New York who would roll into the Old Country, take out the target in question, and be back on the plane to the US before anyone noticed the victim was even a corpse.

Anna Maria didn't even look me in the eye anymore.

Any moment now, I expected her to dump me on the side of the road.

"You can't stay with me," she said. "No, no. No, no, no, no, no. My place is just not ready for visitors. If you have to you could go hitchhike back to Corigliano."

*Hitchhike?* I thought about walking. Sure, it was dark and dangerous. But at least I knew the way. Or I could sleep under a tree in one of the orange orchards we passed on the way up the mountain. Hopefully, I wouldn't wake up with a lizard up my nose. Anna Maria pulled her car up to a building. From the furniture in the windows, I could see it was a store.

"This is our last chance," she said as she hopped out. Inside, Anna Maria asked for Eugenio, the proprietor, but he was not at home. Instead there was his bored-looking teenage daughter.

She had raven dark hair and was clad in the Italian teenager's uniform of puffy black jacket and jeans. I must admit she was a beautiful woman, with a touch of something exotic, unknowable about her. This thought troubled me though, for I knew we were related, perhaps

many times over. The young woman looked me up and down, squinted at me, and then called her mother, who arrived, a slightly older copy of the daughter.

"If he's American," the mother asked while offering me a faint smile. "Then what's he doing here?"

"He's a journalist!" Anna Maria said, the timbre of her voice rising in frustration as she plead my case once more. "Don't you get it? He's from New York, but he lives in Latvia."

"Estonia," I interjected.

"Latvia! Estonia! He's been to Rome, Bari, Corigliano, now San Giorgio. He's a traveler, an adventurer!"

The mother looked at me again, this time with pity. "Oh, ok," she said and sighed. "He can stay the night."

I would spend the night in the furniture store, Anna Maria explained while the mother and daughter made a copy of my passport, but first I would go eat at the restaurant while they made up a bed for me. First *mangiare*. Then *dormire*. My stomach still ached from my illness, but maybe they would set me up with something simple, spaghetti *aglio e olio*, I thought.

"Oh one more thing," Anna Maria asked. "Do you have a *zensuolo*?" The entire conversation had gone on Italian, but this was one word that meant nothing to me.

"A what?"

"Zensuolo. *Zensuolo*." She seemed frustrated again.

I flipped through my Italian-English dictionary. *Zensuolo*. Sheet.

"No," I answered. "No *zensuolo*."

"You really need to learn some more Italian," Anna Maria said. Then she relayed the news to the mother and daughter.

We walked out to her car and I got my backpack from the backseat.

"Ok," Anna Maria said, "you can go."

"Wait," I pulled a box of chocolates from my bag. I had taken a box for the relatives in San Giorgio I hoped to meet. Anna Maria more than qualified as one.

"Chocolates?" she said. "From Estonia?"

"They are Kalev chocolates," I said. "Kalev is the God of the Estonians."

"I love chocolates," Anna Maria blushed. "Thank you." She kissed both of my cheeks and hugged me. Then she got in her car and drove off. The first part of my adventure in San Giorgio was over. I had only been there for a few hours, but at least I now had a place to stay.

## **Siamo Parenti! We Are Related!**

I SAT IN THE OASE DI PACE RESTAURANT waiting to be served but nobody looked at me. Instead the proprietor and his associates crowded around video game casino amusing themselves. The front of the restaurant gave way to a cavernous dance hall, where I imagined most important events in San Giorgio were held. Had my family stayed in this village, I imagined that I would have had my wedding reception in such a place.

It was now night and I was staring out the restaurant window when a car pulled up and two men jumped out. One of them I recognized immediately. It was Carmine from the cafe downtown. He was still wearing his blue track suit and noticed me through the window. Our eyes met and Carmine smiled and waved his hand before running it through his gray hair. I walked outside to greet them.

"This is Piero," Carmine introduced me to the other man. Piero was tall, almost as tall as me, with brown hair, light blue eyes that made him look a bit like Frank Sinatra, and two cocoa puff-sized moles on his cheek, each with black hairs growing out of them.

"Show him the documents, show him the documents," Carmine touched my arm.

Once again I unsheathed my great grandfather's birth certificate and handed it to the men. Piero took a glass case from his pocket and pushed the spectacles on his nose, holding the papers far from his face.

"Aha, my grandfather, Petrone Salvatore who went to America," he tapped the paper with his finger. "And how old are you?" he studied me with his blue eyes.

"30."

"And I'm 50. Petrone Salvatore was your great grandfather and my grandfather. Tell me, cousin, where are you sleeping tonight?"

"At Eugenio's?"

"In the furniture store!?"

"Yes, there."

"No, no, cousin. You'll stay here tonight. In the restaurant. First you'll eat," he motioned as if he was shoveling pasta into his mouth. "And then you'll sleep," he rested his head on his hands.

"But they said no before."

"Don't worry about that. Come with me, cousin."

Piero and Carmine had some quick words with the bald proprietor who finally drew his eyes away from the video game. "He's my cousin," I heard Piero explain. Was I? How could that be? I knew all of Salvatore's children, and I was familiar with his grandchildren, my father's cousins. I didn't recall ever hearing about cousin Piero in San Giorgio. Something was not right. But who was I to argue at this point? I was being promised a real room -- not a bed in some display furniture -- and meal. I was legitimate!

While the proprietor had turned down Anna Maria just an hour before, soon he was leading us a back flight of stairs to a fully furnished empty room. The three-room apartment had everything: a full bed, kitchenette, TV, shower, and – most important for me — a working toilet.

It had been here all along, but the proprietor just hadn't trusted me enough to rent it out. Maybe I was one of those New York assassins.

"Thank you," I told the bald proprietor. "Thank you."

"It's nothing," he frowned, handing me the keys. "*Di nulla.*"

Moments later we were zooming through the dark streets of San Giorgio in Piero's red truck. Piero dropped Carmine and me off on the main piazza. He said he would be back later to dine with me, but that he had to attend to some personal affairs.

"Don't worry about Eugenio," Carmine told me as we walked to his bar. "I'll explain everything."

"You know Anna Maria tried at *Oase di pace* before Piero and he said 'no'."

"You're a stranger," Carmine shrugged. "But Anna Maria is very kind, no?"

"She is. *Gentile.*"

"Mmm," he nodded. "*Si. Gentile.*"

In the bar I was given a beer, some pretzels, and a seat in the backroom in front of a big screen TV to watch the evening news again in Italian. They were still talking about the mayor of Lazio and his transsexual lover. It was the story that would not die. Berlusconi must be very happy, I thought. For once, a politician had done something even worse than him.

As I drank my beer a new pack of men came into the backroom of the bar, taking up the other seats around the table. I studied their faces, all dark with long noses, bushy eyebrows and black hair, and curious expressions, like a pack of dogs sniffing me: who is this stranger? Is it true what they said, that he's from here?

At the center was a face that looked familiar. The older gentleman had thick black hair with gray at the temples, a sharp nose, square jaw, and thick eyebrows that reminded me of my grandfather's.

"This is Mario, chief of police," Carmine introduced me to the man who stood directly across from me. I stood and shook his hand and Mario smiled and it was the smile of a man who is kind to all but would have his revenge if you should so ever question his authority.

"Show him the documents, show him the documents," Carmine said as Mario took his seat facing me. I pulled the certificates from my inside pocket once again and handed them over to Mario who laid them flat on the table and began to read.

"Zanfini!" he read off the name of the clerk who had signed Salvatore's birth certificate as if he knew him and maybe he did. Maybe this Zanfini had lived to be very old and Mario had known him as a child. It was not impossible.

"My name is Zanfini, too," he said to me and grinned. So that explained it. Mario eyebrows went up and down as he read through the documents, just like my grandfather's would when he read something of interest in the paper. "Yes, yes," Mario turned to the other men at the table. "He's definitely from here. But let me ask you something, young man, where did you get these?"

"From a library," I said. "In America."

"Aha," Mario handed the documents back to me. "You should come down to the station tomorrow."

"The station? What time?" I asked.

"I will pick you up at 9," Carmine said.

"Don't worry," Mario flashed his crocodile smile. "We'll get you all sorted out."

Mario stood to leave and the group of men followed him out the door. I stood too, but Carmine motioned back to the seat with his hands.

"No, no. Sit. Finish your beer," he said.

"But how much do I owe you for this?" I asked.

"Owe me?" Carmine shook his head, tremendously confused. "But it's free. You're from here. It's all free. *Gratis*."

"It is?" I said and sat down to finish my beer.

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"This is Giorgio Petrellis," Carmine introduced me to an old man in a beat up brown suit who sat smoking a cigarette on the main piazza. There was now a small crowd of villagers in the piazza who had gathered to talk and tell jokes.

Giorgio had a curly mustache and wild gray hair that covered his ears. And he was different, with a long face and an eastern stretch to his eyes. This was the side of the family that was supposed to be Greek. Maybe.

"I'm Justin, eh, Giustino." I shook Giorgio's hand. "From America."

"Wait, didn't you try to contact me on Facebook," someone tapped me on the shoulder. This second man was shorter and thinner, with shoulder-length curly black hair and skin so dark he could easily be North African or Persian. He wore a leather jacket and had an intense look on his face. I knew instantly that we were related. I can't describe why, but there was something in that look that reminded me of my grandfather.

"I'm Giorgio Petrellis too," he said. "This is my father," he motioned to the old man who took another drag of his cigarette. "Didn't you send me a message?"

"Yeah," I said. "That was me."

"I'm sorry, I wanted to answer but I couldn't understand what you wrote."

"My Italian is not so good."

"But is it really true, that we are cousins?"

I nodded.

"Show me that paper again," Giorgio senior said. "Petrellis Rosaria. Hmm. I have a cousin in America. Lucrezia. But I have never heard of a Rosaria," he scratched his temple with the same hand that held his stubby cigarette.

"Eh, this is so old," I took the document back. "I am just happy to be here. To look around."

Giorgio junior bit his lip as if he was thinking of something to say. I also looked away, not knowing exactly what to tell these newfound relatives.

"Ah, there you are!" Piero strode across the piazza. His truck was parked in front of Carmine's bar, right where he had left us just an hour before. "I just had to take care of a few things, but now I'm free," he said. "Come."

\*\*\*

Piero was an engineer. His brightly lit office was populated by large writing desks and books I suppose engineers used to design things. It was the first room in his house, which was built

into the side of a hill. I took a seat at his desk and met his wife who came into see the person her husband dragged home.

"This is Justin," Piero said proudly to her, explaining how his grandpa Salvatore and my great-grandfather Salvatore were one in the same.

"And where did you say you were from?" the wife, a pleasant and plump lady said.

"New York."

"Aha."

I wanted to believe that Piero was a relative, but something was not right. There was something about the way he looked that was different and I couldn't tell what it was. But just as I had known that Giorgio Petrellis junior and senior were long-lost cousins, I knew in my heart that Piero was not. Maybe he had taken after his mother's side? And how could his grandfather be my great grandfather if I had never heard of him before?

Still, he had come in handy. If it wasn't for his interference, I might be sleeping in that furniture shop. If he wanted to be my cousin, I would be. A Petrone I was, after all. If it required pretending to be someone's relative, I was game, so long as there was a meal involved and a warm bed.

Piero's wife left us, and he picked up the phone to call his aunt Giorgetta, but she apparently had never heard of me. Then he picked up the phone and dialed another number.

"Uncle Vincenzo," he leaned back in his chair. "It's your nephew Piero in San Giorgio," he smiled. "Yes, I am fine. Uncle Vincenzo, I have an American here with me. What was your name? Jenny?"

"Justin."

"Jenny. He is the great-grandson of Salvatore." Piero's face lit up with excitement as he recounted the tale of how he saved me from Eugenio's furniture store and got me a place to sleep at Oase di pace. But the longer he spoke with Vincenzo, the more his excitement dissipated. "Mmmhmm," I heard him mumble and glance at me. "I see." He jotted some notes down on a sheet of paper. Then he ended the phone call.

"Tell me, Jenny," Piero leaned forward, placing both elbows on the table. "Where did your great grandfather Salvatore die?"

"In New York," I said.

"That's impossible! I knew him."

"But Salvatore died in New York," I said. "In 1949."

"No, he didn't," Piero shook his head. "He died in 1977. It was right after I graduated high school."

"No," I said. "Give me a pen." I quickly sketched my family tree, showing myself, my father John, my grandfather Jerry, his father Salvatore, and, at the top, Gennaro Petrone, born in Acri in 1859.

"Aha," Piero shook his head again. "Aha," he frowned. "See, my Petrones, they are all from San Giorgio. But your Petrones, they are from Acri."

"But Salvatore was born here! Didn't you see the birth certificate?"

"No," he took the pen back and drew a dot and wrote San Giorgio Albanese, then another dot and wrote Acri. He drew a big circle around the two dots and then a line down the middle.

"You see, the parish of San Giorgio used to be much bigger," he said. "All this land was San Giorgio's," he pointed at San Giorgio's half of the circle. "Later, there was a reform," he drew another line, closer to San Giorgio, giving San Giorgio about a third of the circle and Acri two thirds. "Acri got bigger, San Giorgio smaller. Your Petrones are probably from this area that used to be San Giorgio but is now Acri," he tapped at the middle of the circle, "but the documents are still kept here because this is still San Giorgio Albanese."

Piero tossed the pen on the table and leaned back in his chair again, a look of borderline disgust on his face. "Your Salvatore is not my Salvatore," he sighed and stared at the ceiling. "We are not related."

"We probably are," I said. "Just more distant."

"No!" a dramatic gesture. "You're Acrese," and the way he said it, it sounded like he was telling me I was crazy. "You are Acrese, not San Giorgese."

Poor Piero. If it wasn't for him I would be spending the night at Eugenio's sleeping on some couch. He had figured me out. I was an imposter.

"But I am San Giorgese," I protested. "Petrellis!"

"I don't know anything about Petrellis," Piero grumbled. "Where are you going tomorrow?"

"Acri."

"Acri?" he shrugged. "Why do you want to go there?"

"It's like you said. I'm Acrese."

"But from Acri?"

"To Rome. My flight leaves on Sunday morning."

"And how are you going to get from Acri to Rome?"

"I don't know. Bus to Cosenza. Train to Rome?"

"No, no. Everything in Acri closes at 2 pm on the dot. You'll have the same problem there that you had here. By the time you get to Acri, the last bus will have left for Cosenza. And by the time you get there, the last train will have left for Rome. You will have missed your flight," he shook his head.

He was right. Transportation in southern Italy just did not function like it did in the rest of Europe. This place was off the map, beyond the margins.

"Besides, where are you going to sleep in Acri?"

That was another good point. I hadn't booked a hotel. I probably would wind up walking around there like I had in San Giorgio, waiting for some distant cousin to save me. Piero was right. Acri would have to wait. I wanted to go there, but I wanted to get on my flight from Rome more. Italy was becoming exhausting.

"You have to go to Corigliano tomorrow. Get a Pullman to Rome."

"A what?"

"A Pullman. Yes, yes," he seemed slightly friendlier now that he was getting rid of me. "You spend tomorrow with Carmine and then get a Pullman to Rome."

I actually found the idea comforting. Back to Rome. Rome! The Colosseum! Save Acri for another adventure. And next time I would avoid Italy's dysfunctional transportation system altogether. I would bring a car.

"I'll take you back to the restaurant now," Piero said. "But I don't have time to eat with you anymore. I have to go to Catanzaro in the morning."

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"*Mangia mangia.*" If I had my way, I would have gone straight to sleep. There was no need to eat because I was pretty sure I was going to throw it all up anyway. But that's not how things worked at the *Oase di pace*. First you ate, and then you slept. First *mangiare*, then *dormire*.

"*Mangia ...*"

"What would you like?" asked the waiter, a wiry young man with glasses.

I sat alone in a small room at the front of the restaurant. It was just me and the Italian news again and, yes, they were still talking about the mayor of Lazio and his transsexual lover. I still felt incredibly ill. On the other hand, I had yet to try Calabria's famous spicy pepperoncino.

"Just spaghetti," I told the waiter. "Calabrese."

"Ah," the waiter smiled. "Something *piccante*."

"Yes, *piccante*."

"And for a second?"

There had to be a second dish didn't there.

"*Carne* or *pesce*?" the waiter asked.

"*Pesce*."

"Very good," the waiter said. "Spaghetti calabrese and pesce calabrese."

As the waiter left the small room where I dined alone, two other men entered. I was used to it now though, the intrusions. That's how things were in Italy; every moment flowed into the next. There was constant movement, change. People thought Fellini's films were absurd for the way in which scenes changed and characters darted in and out. But here, I realized that Italian life really was like that. It was disjointed. It made no sense. Things just happened and they kept happening all the time.

It was relentless.

I recognized one of the two men instantly. It was Giorgio Petrellis from the square. Even in the light, he still seemed a little shadowy, with his eastern eyes and long, curly gray greasy hair. The other man was younger, stout and bearlike with black hair and a scruffy chin.

"You say you are a Petrellis," Giorgio approached me. "But I don't know how we are related."

"We are likely distant cousins," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"I don't worry," Giorgio said.

"You do look like you are from around here," said Giorgio's scruffy friend. "Just a bit blonder."

"Blonder, eh?" No one had ever said I was blonde before. "I have one question for you, Giorgio," I said. "Petrellis. Is it a Greek name?"

"No, Albanian," the scruffy man answered almost immediately.

"No," Giorgio slapped his hands together. "You're not Petrellis, so you don't know. My mother was a Scura. Scura is Albanian for sure. But Petrellis is not Albanian," his eyes fixed on me, "Petrellis is Greek. Greek!"

It was like watching my grandfather at the dinner table all those years before. Giorgio said it with the same authority. Petrellis was Greek" No one could question this fact. How old was

this story? When did they come from Greece? I didn't bother to ask. Grandpa said we were Greek and Giorgio confirmed it all. The story was true. If he wasn't right, who was?

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All I wanted to do was sleep. But, no, I had to mangia. Mangia, mangia. Mangia, mangia. The pepperoncino was spicy. I finished my beer after two bites of spaghetti. But it wasn't Mexican hot or Indian hot. It was mild and pleasant compared to those cuisines And I all I wanted to do was to go upstairs and collapse. But, no, I was a good Italian boy deep down. I finished my spaghetti and they brought me the fish. I tried to eat that all, too, but after making it through half, plus three trips to the toilet in between, I gave up. I had done my mangia. Now it was time for dormire.

"You liked?" the waiter said, suspiciously eyeing my half-finished plate.

"Oh yes. I'm very full. And it's been a long time. I'm ready to sleep."

"Ok. Just give me a minute. Then I'll show you to your room."

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I collapsed into bed and turned on the TV. There looking back at me was a face I knew well. It was Matthew Broderick. But what movie? Not *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Not *Project X*. This was *Godzilla*. Not his best but, still, it was Matthew Broderick. He was like an old friend, a familiar face in the crowd. And I realized that I was an American, at least in part. Who else in San Giorgio cared about Matthew Broderick? But he was my life preserver, my oasis of peace. And even if *Godzilla* had been dubbed into Italian, it was still him. I left the TV on and slowly drifted off to sleep.

*Godzilla* was a movie about a giant lizard destroying a city. To me though, because it had Matthew Broderick in it, it was as soothing as a lullaby.

## Rosario

I SET THE ALARM on my phone for 8 am. Even if Piero had disowned me, Carmine had still agreed to pick me up at 9 to take me into town. I had a date with Mario the police chief. He had promised to get me "all sorted out," whatever that meant. I woke up even before 8. Anna Maria was right. It got cold in the mountains at night. I tried to get the radiator in my room at the Oase di pace to work, but settled for a few extra blankets instead. I turned the alarm off on my phone and tried to send a text message to my wife to let her know I was all right.

Instead the message came back: no service.

I dressed quickly, packed my belongings, finally turned off the TV, brushed my teeth, made myself look presentable and left the key on the table in the room, just as the proprietor had instructed me the night before. Downstairs we met again and I paid him for dinner and the bed. 40 euros. He seemed satisfied with the sum, and I was happy to part with it. It had all probably cost him very little, but I would have probably paid anything for a place to sleep and a few extra blankets by that time.

I strode outside and waited across from the restaurant for Carmine to arrive. From there I could look down the highway into the blue-colored mountains. Five minutes past. I surveyed the road too. Even here there was garbage strewn everywhere, old plastic bottles and bags of chips. Italy.

Another five minutes passed. Where was Carmine? Did he mean 9 AM real time or Italian time? Just then I saw his little red car speed down the road and park in front of the Oase di pace.

"Get in," Carmine motioned to me. I approached the car and got in. A second later we were roaring around tight mountain curves at alarming speeds, me gripping the roof of the car to steady myself, hoping that Carmine was a good driver, that he knew what he was doing. The windows were half rolled down, and Carmine's rooster-like plume of gray hair flapped in the breeze.

"Did you sleep well?" Carmine yelled as we sped into town. He was still wearing his blue tracksuit. Maybe he wore it everyday.

"Really good," I yelled back clinging to the roof, still thinking of Matthew Broderick.

"What did you eat last night?" The car rocketed on.

"Spaghetti calabrese."

"Ah, something local," he yelled, his foot never easing from the gas pedal. "Piccante!"

"Yes," I screamed back. "Piccante!"

"Here we are," he slammed his feet in the breaks as the car entered the piazza and we all lunged forward, restrained only by our seatbelts. Carmine unbuckled his and jumped out and I followed him into a cream-colored, two-storey building marked in Italian "Municipale" and in Arbereshe "Bashkia." The second floor bore iron balconies, the flags of Italy and the municipality and, at the top, a clock and above it a bell, to remind everyone to stop working at 2 pm.

At the arched entrance to the building stood chief of police Mario Zanfini, grinning like a crocodile, holding his hat in his hands. "Did you get a good night's sleep?" asked Mario.

"I did," I told him. "I feel much better."

"Ok, I will see you later," said Carmine. "Good luck." Carmine turned and headed back across the piazza towards his bar.

Mario led me into the building, through a poorly-lit foyer to a brightly lit back office filled with copy machines and computers and walls and walls of folders and books. There were several desks in this office and two clerks sat at different corners of the room, their round faces illuminated by computer screens.

"That's Cosimo," Mario introduced me to the clerk at the back, a bald, round man.

"Piacere," I said extending my hand.

"Piacere," Cosimo said, smiling.

"And that's Angelo," Mario motioned to the second clerk. Angelo — who looked just like Cosimo with the exception that he still had hair — grunted in my direction and continued to stare at the computer screen, pausing from time to time to take a drag from a cigarette.

"*Buon giorno*," a small slight man entered the office, making eye contact with Mario, Cosimo, and Angelo. He was dressed in a red sweater and brown jacket, his face unshaven, his hair short and prickly in a way that reminded me of a hedgehog.

"This is the man who can help you," Mario said. "I'll see you fellows later," he looked around the office and headed out the door towards a back staircase across the hall.

"Buon giorno," I held out my hand to the man in the red sweater.

"And what did you say your name was?" he looked up at me.

"Justin."

"Eh?" He moved in closer, as if he couldn't hear me.

"Um, Giustino."

"Giustino!" the man threw both his arms into the air as if struck by unseen lightning. "And the documents?" he gestured towards me with an open palm.

Once again I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out the birth certificates for Salvatore Petrone and Rosaria Petrellis. Both print outs were now quite wrinkled.

"Petrone Salvatore," he announced to the room. "And Petrellis Rosaria. Yes," he put on a pair of spectacles. "Yes, they were born here," he nodded.

"I know," I said. "That's why I —"

"Wait! Wait!" the man tossed his arms again into the air. "*Calma! Calma! Aspetta!*"

I studied the small man again. He looked like no Petrellis or Petrone I had ever met and yet I knew he was local. He didn't look dark like the Coriglianesi down the mountain. Something was different about him, but what was it? Maybe it was his blue eyes. No one in Corigliano had blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, what was your name again?" I asked the man.

"Wait! Calma!" he said, still studying the certificates.

"But your name?"

"Rosario, Rosario," he ruffled the papers. "Aha! 1894" he pointed at the birth year on Salvatore's birth certificate. He walked across the room to a metal bookcase, which he unlocked with a small key, sliding its doors open. Inside sat slender volume after slender volume of births and marriages and deaths for hundreds of years.

It was a genealogist's dream to see such a thing and yet, what a peculiar hobby, for we were all related weren't we? Who cared about how closely? But it did matter in some ways. Had Piero gone on believing we were second cousins, he might have dined with me the night before. When he found out that we weren't, he left me at the Oase di Pace to dine alone.

Rosario looked at the volumes, pulling one clearly marked **1904** from the shelf. He laid the book on the top of a nearby filing cabinet and began to flip roughly through its pages.

"Petrone Salvatore," he said as he flipped through the book, titled *Atti di nascita*. "Is your?"

"Great grandfather."

He continued to flip through the book. As he did, I saw one paper from the volume float into the air and settle behind the filing cabinet. I decided it was best not to bring it to his attention.

"And Salvatore was the son of?" he asked aloud.

"Gennaro."

"Aspetta! I told you to wait!" the man tossed his arms in the air again.

"I am waiting," I stood back.

"No, but your vibes, your vibes are making me nervous. Do you have somewhere you are going?" Rosario asked.

"No."

"Good. Then you will have to wait. Calma!"

"Ok." I gave the man plenty of room to look at the 1904 volume. Why he was looking at it, I didn't know.

"Son of Petrone Gennaro and, wait, wait, Prete Lauretta."

"Yes."

"Wait! Petrone Gennaro and Prete Lauretta," he mumbled under his breath. Then his light blue eyes brightened up. "Why ... There is a painting in the church devoted to Petrone Gennaro and Prete Lauretta!" Both of his arms exploded sideways.

"There is? Can we go see it?"

"I told you to wait!"

"I'm waiting."

I stood back and looked at Cosimo and Angelo and held my breath. Angelo was smoking. From behind his desk, Cosimo grinned at me.

"And what did you say your name was again?" the man asked me.

"Justin."

"*Come?*"

"Giustino."

"Ah, Petrone Giustino. But your father?" he tapped me on the arm.

"John."

"Huh?"

"John."

"Eh?" he squinted at me.

"Uh ... *Giovanni.*"

"Ah, Petrone Giovanni!" the man tossed an arm out. "Of course. Giustino son of Giovanni. But who is Petrone Salvatore?"

"My great grandfather."

"And your grandfather?"

"Gennaro."

"No, no, oh my God," the man rubbed his forehead and shot glances at Cosimo and Angelo. "This document says that Gennaro is the father of your great grandfather, not the son."

"I know, but they had the same —"

"Wait! Wait! *Calma!*"

"Here," I sketched out a small family tree. Giustino – Giovanni – Gennaro – Salvatore – Gennaro. The names John and Jerry were useless here.

"Aha, two *different* Gennaros," the man cocked his head and looked up. "Why didn't you say so?"

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It went on like that for an hour and a half. The man — whose full name I still did not know — flipped through page after page of old documents and as he did, I learned more about great grandpa Salvatore. He had three siblings that were born here: Giorgio, Maria Carmina, and Annunziata. In 1905 their mother Laretta had died, leaving the young children — Salvatore was nine — alone. Salvatore had named his first daughter Loretta upon her birth in 1922 and now, all these years later and she was still alive, living in a little house in Northport. I wanted to go there over the holidays to tell her this story, how she bore her grandmother's name.

"But why did she die so young?" I asked Rosario as we examined Laretta's death certificate. "It's so sad."

"Who knows?" the man tossed an arm in the air. "Maybe tuberculosis, maybe influenza. Nobody knows. It's not written here."

Salvatore must have had a rough youth. He lost his mother at nine, and at 16 he went to work with his father in New York. It was almost as if he had no childhood at all. He was just a survivor. And nobody remembered him as kind or good or honest. My grandfather Jerry cried on his deathbed about the vicious beatings he had endured as a child. "*Why me?*" I remember his thin lips parsing at the air in his bedroom. "Why did he always have to pick on me?" Grandpa was almost 80 years old and he couldn't forget the beatings, the trauma. He was still crying inside.

How many generations of people had lived their lives like that.

"He was not a nice man," my grandmother said of Salvatore. "Not a nice man." That's all she had to say. Maybe he wasn't a nice man but life hadn't been especially kind to Salvatore Petrone either.

From Laretta's 1905 death certificate, Rosario read off the names of her parents: Michelangelo Prete and Rosaria Tocci.

"Tocci?" he said. "Tocci?" he craned his neck around to look at Cosimo and Angelo, nodding up and down, half amazed, half joking. "I am Rosario Tocci," he tapped his fingers against his chest. "And this is Rosaria Tocci," he pointed at the death certificate. "We are related," he looked at me, for the first time with some small bit of compassion. "Relatives," he said it once more, as if to savor the profundity of the word. Then he sighed.

"Is there anything else you want to see?" he asked, closing the book.

"No," I said. "Just the painting in the church."

"Ok, ok, come with me, cousin." Rosario exited the office and I followed him into the dimly-lit foyer. "Wait!" he tossed an arm in the air, a finger pointed at the ceiling. "Saluti!"

"Saluti?"

"Yes, saluti," he gazed at me intensely.

"Oh, yes. Saluti."

I jogged back into the office and saluted Cosimo and Angelo and thanked them. They saluted me back, still smoking. I'm not sure what I thanked them for, but that's just how things operated in San Giorgio Albanese. Wherever you went, you had to salute the men. A lot. *Tanti saluti.*

\*\*\*

On my first day in San Giorgio, I walked past the church of San Giorgio Megalomartire. I took pictures of its white exterior, its golden portrait of San Giorgio slaying the serpent, but I didn't even think of going inside. The door had been open, but I didn't go in there because they were in there, not just Christ, not just his Holy Father, and not just Joseph and Mary and Mary Magdalene. The souls of the departed were in there, their souls piled up like coins in a mint, dabs of paint on an impressionist canvas. They were all in there, humming in the air like static. And as Rosario led me through the door into the church, I thought of young Salvatore at his mother's funeral in 1905. I could see the children lined up in the front row, their heads down, confused. The cry of the organ. All those children were dead now too, more coins in the mint, paint on the canvas. But I was alive and now I had to face them, and above all, face Him. He was in here waiting for me. For Him, all this had been built and dedicated.

The church exploded with color. From all sides, starry frescoes of Christ and his cosmic companions looked out, captured in sky blues and dark crimsons and shiny gold and lush greens and fruity oranges. The walls were covered with scenes: Black Madonnas, the Holy Trinity, and San Giorgio, the patron saint, upon his horse, dragon-slaying spear in hand. The air smelled of oil and incense, of holiness and some kind of purity

Rosario walked up to a dark canvas near the entrance, one of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. He pointed to text that was painted along the bottom, scrawled in white. "For the marriage of Gro. Petrone and Lta. Prete 1891," it read. Gennaro and Laretta. I knew almost nothing of them, had never seen a photo of them, but here they were. They had once loved each other, loved one another as I loved my own wife and she loved me.

One day we would be like them. Or so I thought.

"Can I take a picture?" I asked.

"Of course," Rosario pulled a chair from the entrance over to the painting. "You can stand on this." I was much taller than Rosario and actually didn't need the chair to get a good shot of Gennaro and Laretta's painting, but I have learned by now it was easier if you just did what Rosario said. So I got on the chair and leaned down to take my pictures, just as he instructed.

"Good," Rosario said. "When you are done with that, make sure to take a photo of the Black Madonna."

I followed him to the old portrait, her face calm and welcoming like the Mona Lisa. I took one or two shots.

"You also must take a photo of the Shrine of San Giorgio." I snapped a few photos of the hero on his steed with my Nikon Coolpix.

Rosario and I went around the church like that for 10 minutes, him pointing out artworks of note in his clipped Calabrian mountain accent, me dutifully photographing it. I dared not protest or do something I was not instructed to do. I might be told to wait or to be calmer if I did.

Finally, Rosario led me to the altar, standing before it with his arms outstretched, like Christ. "Now," he said. "You may take a photo of me."

## **Mangia! Calma!**

"I'M HUNGRY," I told Rosario as we walked across the sunny piazza. "*Vorrei mangiare.*"

"*Hungry?* Do you want a meal or just a sandwich?" he answered.

"A sandwich would be great."

"Follow me."

On the piazza, I waved to Carmine who stood outside his bar, and noticed the same old men were back sitting around the piazza, their canes resting beside their tired legs, staring at me. My grandfather could have been there too, I thought again. I wished he was but he wasn't. Besides, this generation of old men was at least a decade younger. If grandpa was alive, he would be 93 years old. Most of his peers had already passed into eternity. There were a few stragglers left, but soon they would all be gone.

So time took them away, the last babies of 1916, one by one, day by day.

Rosario and I arrived at a street-level shop door, part of one of San Giorgio's many ancient buildings, all of which, it seemed, were painted white, giving the place the ambiance of some Greek fishing village.

Through the small windows, the interior of the shop looked dark, as far as I could tell, and there was no one there.

"It's ok," I said. "We can go somewhere else."

"Wait!" said Rosario held up one hand. "Calma."

A minute passed, and the door to the shop suddenly swung open. A little old granny, her white hair held back in a headscarf, her face and limbs weathered with age, greeted us. We went inside.

"What do you want?" Rosario said, picking up a loaf of bread the size of a small wheel from the counter.

The old granny waited patiently, knife in hand, ready to serve.

"Mozzarella." I answered.

"Mozzarella and?"

"I don't know."

"Mortadella? Salami? *Prosciutto*?"

"Salami," I decided.

"No, you should have the prosciutto," Rosario shook his head, "because this prosciutto," he motioned towards the pink meat beneath the glass countertop, "this prosciutto is the very best. The very best prosciutto in the world. So, make us mozzarella and prosciutto," he ordered the granny, who began to slice the huge loaf of bread with an equally large knife.

"But the salami?" I asked.

"Wait!" Rosario tossed out his arm in my direction. "Aspetta! You're making me nervous. Ok, ok, make it half prosciutto and half salami."

The old granny nodded dutifully, cutting away, never saying a word.

While she made our lunch I looked around the shop for anything special, local, something they didn't sell in New York or Estonia. But here were all the standard ingredients, standard pastas like lucatelli and gemelli, standard breads like semolina. You could get this stuff anywhere.

"But to drink?" Rosario asked.

"I don't know," I shrugged.

"Coca cola, orange soda, water?" he asked, picking up different bottles.

"Um."

"Orange soda? Coca cola?"

"Ok, orange soda," I decided.

"Orange soda!" he slammed the bottle down on the countertop.

"Anything else?"

"No."

"You want some sweets? Here, here," he picked up a box of sugar wafers. "These too."

Rosario held the big sandwich down while the granny finished cutting it. She sawed it into four giant hunks and wrapped it to go.

"But how much does it cost?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Rosario said, perplexed.

"I mean the food. How much do we owe her?"

The shopkeeper stood behind the counter. She still hadn't said anything.

"The food doesn't cost anything," Rosario shrugged. "You're from here."

"I don't understand."

"Gratis, cousin," Rosario said, taking the sandwich, soda, and sugar wafers in a large white plastic bag and patting me on the back. "It's all gratis."

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Rosario led me across the piazza once more and up one of San Giorgio's alleyways to a white house. In the alley two identical white cats cried out for food or attention.

"So you'll have two and I'll have two?"

"No, no," Rosario protested. "I'm on a diet. The sandwiches are all for you."

"Wait? What?"

"Calma!" Rosario juggled with his keys and unlocked the door to the house. "I apologize it's such a mess," he said. "But please, come inside."

A garbage-strewn hallway gave way to several rooms. One was completely empty. Another contained a bed with a stained mattress and no sheets. Did Rosario really live here?

The hallway reached a larger room and we sat down at a small wooden table covered with pens and paintbrushes and newspapers and photos. The air in this room smelled like paint, and from the window, I could look out on the sunny piazza.

"So did you want a prosciutto or salami?" I asked Rosario, who leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on the table.

"No, no," he said. "Like I said, I'm on a diet. But you? You're young. You have to eat. Mangia, mangia!"

I pulled the paper from the first sandwich and began to eat. The soft bread gave way to the smooth milky mozzarella, and there was the prosciutto, so thin the salty flesh nearly dissolved in your mouth.

"I told you they had the best prosciutto. The very best," Rosario smiled as he watched me eat. "How old did you say you were again?"

"Thirty," I said, washing the sandwich down with the orange soda.

I looked for the first time around the room. On the wall opposite us was a black and white photo of an Arbereshe woman in traditional costume. The photo was easily 80 years old, but the woman looked beautiful and exotic, her black eyes like olives, her features angular but still attractive.

Before the portrait was an easel and a pallet of paints, a black t-shirt with painted gold lettering hung from a nearby stool, and a canvas tarp lay bunched up on the floor. Across the room there was another painting, but this was different. In addition to bright, sparkling colors, someone had glued a vinyl record at its center.

"Now *that* is a masterpiece," Rosario said, gesturing at the painting with the vinyl LP.

"Masterpiece." It was the first English word anyone had said to me in the past 24 hours.

"You're an artist? I asked. I had now finished one prosciutto sandwich and was unwrapping a salami.

Rosario shrugged. "How old did you say you were again?"

"Thirty."

"And are you married?"

"Yes."

"Kids?"

"Two daughters. One's five, the other is two."

"Thirty? Married? Two daughters? Five and two?" Rosario tossed an arm in the air. "Wait here! Wait!" He jumped from his chair and raced up a nearby staircase to the second floor.

Who was this guy? He himself seemed so anxious and yet he kept accusing me of making him nervous with his never-ending song of "Wait!" and "Calm!" He worked in the municipal office of a small Calabrian village and dabbled in modern art. And what inspired him to paint? The face of an Arbereshe beauty from the 1920s.

"This was my great aunt's, she made this in 1928," Rosario returned from upstairs toting a golden scarf in one hand. "This scarf is 70 years old. And how old did you say you were?"

"Thirty."

"Right. So this scarf is now yours. Give it to your wife."

I took the scarf into my hands and grasped its soft material, running my fingers along its hand-stitched flowers. It must have taken Rosario's aunt weeks to make.

"I cannot accept this," I held out the scarf. "I cannot take this from you."

"You will take it," Rosario commanded. "Me? I am a bachelor. I'm old. Give it to your wife. She is connected to us too. She should have something from this place."

I had been trying to find a good gift for her in Italy. All the things I found though were just products though: clothes, books, and chocolates. This headscarf was also just a thing, but to me it meant something. It was the embodiment of local culture, of history, *my* history. I too was Arbereshe in some disjointed, disconnected way. Our people were from here. Their blood ran in the veins of our children. Not Rome, not Corigliano.

San Giorgio Albanese.

"Thank you," I said, putting the scarf away in my bag. I pulled out the sugar wafers instead.

"Do you want one?"

"I am on a diet," he shook his head. "But you? You are young. You must eat. Mangia mangia. Mangia!"

By now I had consumed two huge sandwiches, half a bottle of orange soda and some sugar wafers. "Look, Rosario, I'm full. I think I'll save the rest of these sandwiches for tomorrow's breakfast."

"Good," he said. "But how was the prosciutto?"

"The very best."

"I told you!"

From the piles of junk on his table, Rosario unearthed a book and slid it my direction. *Arbereshe in Italia*. I opened the pages to see photos of attractive local girls in folk costumes beside local boys playing bagpipes on mountain vistas. Of all the Mediterranean's ethnic groups, the Albanians seemed the oddest, I thought. Greeks, Turks, French, Spaniards, not to mention the Italians, they all seemed pleasantly familiar. But the Albanians? How much could you trust people from a country that most European guidebooks omitted altogether? Whose flag was of a two-headed eagle set against a blood red sky. Albanian? What was that?

"Now she is beautiful," Rosario said, pointing at a photo of an Arbereshe girl in the book. She had curly dark hair. The olive eyes.

"Yes, she is."

"Do you want it?"

"What? The book?"

"Calma!"

"No, no, you've already given me so much."

"Ok, but come with me, I'll make some copies for you and your family. And of this too," he displayed a CD. "This has everything on it. The history of San Giorgio. Our culture. Everything. So come with me. You need to have these things."

Rosario shot out of his chair and soon we were stepping over the garbage in the hallway, turning out the door, past the cats who were still crying in the alleyway.

Italian life was not linear, I determined. It moved back and forth, like the Mare Ionio in the distance, its waves needling the shore. We went to a store where Rosario chatted up the owner and paid — yes, he actually paid — for some compact discs, before crossing the piazza again, into the municipal office, past the smiling police chief Mario, up the backstairs, into an office where a young man, no older than me, set about burning me a copy of the disc of Arbereshe music, history, and other cultural necessities, while Rosario made photo copies of his book in the other room. At the start of my trip to Italy, I had hoped that my bag would get lighter as the trip went on. Now it would be heavier, heavy with CDs and printouts of photos of Arbereshe girls in headscarves.

The man who made the copies was clean-shaved and thin. He wore a pair of glasses, was dressed neatly and never told me to wait or to be calm once. In a word, he was normal. There were some normal Italians in San Giorgio, I must acknowledge. Perhaps not related to me, but they did exist. Outside in the corridor, the stairs of the municipality buzzed with energy. There were dozens of people standing in line to get their business done, and of course they were in a rush, because business hours in San Giorgio only lasted until 2 pm. After that, the

San Giorgesi would retreat to their homes for meals and gossip. It was like Rosario said: you had to eat.

From the throng in the hallway and older man emerged and walked in my direction. He was short, round, with thinning white hair, a beige jacket, and wore a gentle expression on his face. "Can you help me?" he said softly, handing me a sheet of paper. "I am trying to find out more about my uncle Francesco Tocci who went to America."

"I'll take this home with me," I told the man. "Maybe I can help you."

I looked at the family tree printed on the paper. All the dates were from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All these people were dead. Why did we even bother? Like they cared? But why did people bother with anything though? Why did people waste their time watching football or baseball? Why did people go on vacation? There really was no point in asking about the point of anything. And wouldn't it have been great if I had all the answers for this particular Signore Tocci? If I could open my bag and tell him all he wanted to know about his long lost Uncle Francesco who went to America? What kind of job he found? How he felt about his new life? His hobbies, political beliefs, sleeping patterns? Maybe, "he was happy" or, "he was miserable." A whole dossier of interesting personal information! And what good would it be to know such things? What would this younger Tocci get from it, other than the momentary satisfaction of his curiosity?

"I'm sure this Francesco ate well," I mused to myself. "The best prosciutto. The very best."

## Va Bene!

FROM THE MUNICIPAL OFFICE, Rosario led me to my final destination: the bus stop. Soon it would be 2 pm, and his job of babysitting the troublesome foreigner would come to an end. I still couldn't tell if Rosario liked me or couldn't wait for me to leave. And why had he been so nice to me? Did he want something? Money? No. That would offend his old school sense of décor, I determined. Chocolate? Had Anna Maria tipped off the whole village that there was a foreigner in the vicinity with a bag full of Estonian chocolate? Was that was this was about? Maybe, but I was out of chocolate. I still had a bottle of vodka in my bag, but I had a strong suspicion that my church-loving, modern-art adoring tour guide didn't touch the stuff.

What would Italians do with vodka anyway? Disinfect wounds? Clean the dashboard?

All the time we walked together to the bus stop, Rosario instructed me to wait or to be calm, like a seasick drunk hoping the world would slow down long enough for him to regain his composure. *Aspetta! Calma!* He also informed me of what I should photograph. "Take a picture of Vacchario Albanese," he motioned to a distant village on a far mountain. "No, no, don't take the picture from there, take it from over there."

At the bus stop we relaxed on a bench, waiting for my ride to Corigliano.

"So what did you say your father's name was?" he asked.

"John."

"*What?*"

"Giovanni."

"And your grandfather Gennaro?"

"He's dead."

"His wife? What was her name?"

"Margaret."

"Ah, Margarita. And her family name?"

"Pittman."

"What?"

"Pittman."

"Ah, your grandfather married an American."

"It's an English name."

"And where are you going after Corigliano?"

"I wanted to go to Acri."

"*Acri?*" Rosario scratched his brow. "Why? You don't want to go to Acri."

"Piero said I can't go to Acri and make it to Rome by Sunday morning."

"He's right. Go back to Rome. Forget about Acri. No one goes there."

I still wanted so badly to go to Acri. I was *acrese* deep down. I felt like a failure for being so close and not going there. Yet I also enjoyed this feeling of failure. It gave me a legitimate reason to come back to Calabria. And the next time I would come with a car so that I wouldn't wind up sleeping at the Oase di Pace restaurant or Eugenio's furniture store.

"You go back to Rome," Rosario said. "Get your bus ticket in Corigliano."

I sat there beside him and looked out on San Giorgio. The sunny day had given way to gray clouds and a gentle breeze danced along the streets.

"Do you have any family?" I asked.

"Two brothers. But they are both in Switzerland."

"Where's the bus? It was supposed to be here 10 minutes ago?"

"Just wait," said Rosario. "Calma. It will come."

Just then a small blue car pulled up beside us and young man hopped out. I recognized him instantly. It was the kid from the bus ride, the one who sat in the front with a cigarette behind his ear, suffering everyone's taunts.

"Saluti!" he cried out in our direction, as the car drove away.

"Saluti!" Rosario responded.

"Saluti!" I said to the kid. He said nothing in return, only glaring at me for a moment, as if disturbed by my presence. I was a stranger after all.

"He was on the bus yesterday," I tried to explain.

Rosario only shrugged. What had I done wrong? Was it because we were older and he was younger? Who knew? Was there a *Saluti for Dummies*?

Another car rolled down the hill, this one I saw was piloted by a familiar face: Cosimo from the office. The car slowed to a halt and Cosimo rolled down the window. Rosario approached and the two exchanged niceties.

"He's going to Corigliano!" Rosario announced. "He can give us a ride."

Rosario jumped into the passenger seat and I got in the back and down we went, around the curvy roads, following the slopes away from San Giorgio Albanese. From the car window, I looked down into ravines and orchards. I wondered what would have happened had I spent the night under a tree, rather than within the safe, cold walls of the Oase di Pace.

Rosario immediately ripped into one of his clipped monologues and sometimes I wasn't sure if he was even speaking Italian. Maybe this was Arbereshe? How could I tell? The car gave him no room to toss out his expressive arms as he spoke, so he ran his hands through his bushy hedgehog hair instead. Cosimo barely said a word. He wore a bemused expression on his face at all times. Did he think Rosario was funny?

I had nothing to give Rosario and Cosimo in return. I was all out of chocolate and money and the only currency I had in my pockets was the vodka. Had it just been me and Cosimo in the car, I had inklings he would have called it a good trade. Something about his expression said that this was the one Italian who might try a bottle of Estonian vodka. But with Rosario there, it was out of the question. He was just too old school.

You didn't pawn a bottle of vodka off on someone who everyone saluted.

The mountain finally hit a flat plateau and within minutes we were bumping along Corigliano's main thoroughfare, past shops and travel agencies. Back again. Back in the pit. Cosimo said he had some errands to run, so he let Rosario and me out at a bus stop. I bit him farewell, shook his hand and, of course, saluted him, as you were supposed to do.

"It's closed," Rosario said, staring at the travel agency across from the stop. "You'll have to get your ticket to Rome later."

"Ok."

"So do you want to get some lunch?"

"I'm full."

"How about an espresso?"

"Ok."

Inside a nearby café, Rosario ordered two espressos from the proprietor. When they arrived, he downed his hot black drink in one gulp. I pressed the white cup to my mouth but it was so hot I could barely take a sip. How had Rosario downed his drink so quickly? No normal person could drink something so hot. Maybe Rosario wasn't all human. I chuckled to myself.

"What?" Rosario glared me when he heard me laugh.

"What do you mean?" I said, pretending to cough.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't understand."

"You still have my great aunt's scarf, don't you?" he asked.

"Right here," I touched my backpack.

"Take good care of it. She made it in 1928. Nineteen twenty-eight!"

"Thank you, Rosario."

"You want anything else?" he slammed a candy bar on the counter.

"No, that's —"

"Take it," he handed the candy bar to me. "It's free. You're one of us. *Gratis*." I put it my bag, puzzled. Maybe I would eat it later on the bus.

"How much do I owe you for all this?" I asked Rosario.

"Owe me? No, no, no!" he pushed a few euro coins across the counter to the cashier with a shaky hand. "It's free, cousin, all free here. *Gratis!*"

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By the time I finally drank my espresso, the travel agency had opened.

In halting Italian, I entered and booked a seat on a Pullman — a bus — to Rome that night. I would go back to Rome, back to the hostel, and there I would type it all up, Eugenio's furniture shop, Piero's office, Matthew Broderick's face, Rosario's modern art collection everything. I'd get a nice meal in Rome, take a shower, and be well rested for my flight. Maybe I'd even manage to find a special bakery where they sold *torta di nonna*.

"You can wait here or you can come back to San Giorgio," Rosario said.

"But if I go back, how will I get back in time for the bus?"

Rosario stepped back, as if offended. "You don't want to come with me?"

"But my bus leaves this evening. And there are no buses back," I said.

"You don't want to come with me," Rosario folded his arms.

The truth was that I didn't want to go back. I needed a break. I had been speaking Italian for 24 hours and *I didn't even know how to speak Italian*.

"How will you get back anyway? There are no buses, remember."

"I have some things to attend to," Rosario mumbled. "But you, you go well. Be well. *Va bene*."

There was insincerity in his voice, but contempt too. I had offended this man, but how? Because I laughed when he drank a scalding espresso in one gulp?. But what did he want? Money? Vodka? A kiss on each cheek?

"Thank you for everything," I told him.

"*Va bene*," he said and shook his head in disgust.

"You mean you're just going to leave me here?"

I eyed the deserted bus stop. My ride north wasn't scheduled to arrive for another 10 hours.

"*Va bene*," he repeated.

I wanted to ask him what I had done wrong, or if I could get a ride back to Corigliano later if I went up back with him. Yet his arms were folded. There was no way back.

I glanced at the bus stop again. When I turned back, Rosario was gone.