

When I Am Italian

TITLE ESSAY

Summer mornings while my coffee is brewing I slip my feet into the plastic slippers I keep by the door, before I go out on my terrace in my nightgown or an old, loose dress to sit. This is a luxury in New York City, wearing *una vestaglia* outside, in full view, but not in public. Half asleep, I sit and study my large pots of geraniums. The endless rain this spring has forced excessive blossoming. There are some that are dark velvety reds, a single pale Giotto pink, and two shades of coral. I gaze at my flowers and then off into the distance at the Hudson River and at Riverside Church. The Number 1 subway descends into the tunnel with a noisy clatter. I go to gather my cup and milk and coffee from the kitchen, setting them out on the Moroccan tray table, look around again, and slowly begin to drink my coffee. The *Times* is under my coffeepot so that it doesn't blow away, but I rarely read the paper out there: too breezy.

After my first cup of coffee, I stand to visit each large pot and inspect my blossoming plants. My body is relaxed under the thin fabric loosely grazing my skin; the skirt flaps in the morning breeze.

Is this blossom ready to be snapped or clipped, then stuffed down into the soil in the pot? Are there still buds under the flower waiting to unfold? This takes time and consideration. I don't act quickly. I stick my fingers in the dirt. How dry is it? Water? I go back to my coffee, sipping and gazing.

I'll spend some time going back and forth to my kitchen filling watering cans. The watering leads to the various colored petals scattering over the terrace. I might gently shake the dense ripe blossoms to loosen the ones that are ready to drop.

Then I sweep. The soft repetition of brush, brush, against the hard surface, the sound and the motion of the broom, makes a meditative moment. I seek out every crevice between pots, sweep, sweep. Sometimes I sweep more than is needed, loosen a few more petals, tweak another blossom to make room for the new buds underneath. The gathered petals create a small pool of color.

Each brush calls up in me *anime di donne italiane*, the spirits of Italian women. They flow into me with each sweep of the broom, inhabit me. Brush, hush, a whisper from woman to woman. All my Italian women are with me: Siciliane, Lucane,¹ Calabrese, Abruzzese, Napolitane, Pugliese join this convocation. They are in me, with me. Mornings, Mediterranean women sweep around their pots on their *terrazzi*, or in front of their doorways, around their plants: they bend to pick up a stray stem or stick or pebble from the ground, a bit of litter. They, too, are in their *vestaglie*. They, too, sprinkle water on plants, then throw some of the water on hard stone pavement, throw a rag down to the ground. The broom collects the rag in its bristles, then sweeps away the dark earth stains. Then they rest on their brooms, look off.

All of this is real. Something that lives in me.

Other gestures and postures transport me to this state. When I come upon women crossing their arms over their breasts, standing outside their doorways talking to their neighbors in southern Italy or Sicily, I want to stop and chat with them, pretend I live there too. When I snap the ends of string beans, mend with good small stitches, tug just so with each stitch. When I cut the bread toward my breasts instead of cutting down on a breadboard—my Italian women are with me. In me.

This archaic sense of *italianità* beckons itself to me at particular moments. Once, just steps beyond the Milano train station, about a dozen Roma children surrounded Bill, James, and me. James was a young boy. Many of the Roma were younger and tinier than James. We were in for the day from Torino. Encircling us, they touched Bill all over his body, while one small hand slipped in and out of his pocket stealing about 100 euros without him realizing it. They ran off while my husband reached into his pocket to discover the money was gone. Then this group of a dozen or so waifs dared to circle back to us to see what they have left behind. Watching them approach us again, my grandmother's shrieking dialect poured out of me, "*Chiesta ca! Ma che fai mo? Ancor' ritorn.' Ammazatevi!*" They scattered instantly recognizing my tone, if not my words. It was the voice of an old Italian woman who's afraid of no one. No one had better dare to come near her family. It worked. I was enraged and thrilled at the same time. I know who I am at those moments in no uncertain terms. I am more than myself. I am my original self.

During the time we lived in Torino, I noticed that all the women of my mother's age dressed precisely as my mother and my aunts dressed: the same boxy rayon blouses in flowery prints were worn over sheath skirts reaching just below their knees. They all wore the same low-heeled pumps. Simple and elegant. I could and did buy almost whatever came to hand in the outdoor markets, and my mother was delighted. How had that style sailed across the ocean. It wasn't high fashion, it was simple and lovely, what older Italian women wore then, wherever they lived.

Two years ago I began obsessively searching for French bistro dishes with an orange stripe around the rim. At some point I realized this search had overtaken me, because they looked so much like the dishes that had always been on my grandmother's farm table. When I tripped into that recognition I bought even more of them. They belong to me. These dishes happen to be French bistro, but who's keeping this record? *È mio*.

All this belongs to me. Is me.

When my sister and I heard older women speaking in Portugal, Lucia turned to me. "Don't those soft *s*'s sound like Tolvese dialect?" She was so right. Didn't those women look like our aunts and grandmothers too? They wore the same long skirts, the same scarves tied to their heads as our older Tolvese relatives. Why would vernacular Portuguese sound like our dialect? *Chissa?*

When I read *Palace Walk*, the first volume of *The Cairo Trilogy* by Naguib Mahfouz, the descriptions of the coffee gatherings, with plates of sweets after school hours: the women and the children all gathered in one room every afternoon, I was stunned by recognition. This was *my home*, this was *my family*. The voice and tone of the father in that novel was identical to that of my grandfathers. I began to understand how widespread the Mediterranean culture was and is: how broad and old the culture I belong to is. Yes, this too is familiar and recognizable.

For years on my travels throughout Italy, I admired the gold necklaces on Italian women, tracing their fine Italian necks. I saved every extra penny all of one year because we were going to be in Italy that summer. I bought myself one lovely gold necklace. When I wear that necklace I am more Italian. This identification takes on a new meaning. Buying the necklace, wearing the necklace helps me assemble more of my Italianate self. These are layers I reach for, plastering onto my skin to reinforce this identification.

I study the way women dress when I travel in the Mediterranean, then buy clothes just like theirs. I study their eyeglass frames. Search for similar ones myself. My homes for decades have been filled with coffeepots, platters, silverware, duplicating the ones I've found in the Italian and French homes of family and friends, in flea markets, in home good stores.

These are things I gather to me as I travel, take home to store in my home and inside me.

I am Italian. I am Mediterranean, I reassure myself.

While Waterbury,² my Italian ancestral village, my Italian colony, came first, once I was firmly outside the paradigm of my origins, all my extensive travels throughout the Mediterranean, in Italy especially, the reading, studying, observing, has reinforced what I knew as my Italian self. I carefully harvest each observation, each new understanding, applying the additional layers like gold leaf onto myself.

This is invocation, is an embracing, but also, an insistence. But to whom am I insisting?

Perhaps the construction of this overlay onto my origins is not just an embrace of the larger Italian culture, but in my intensity is, at times, exaggerated. Perhaps I've even become a fabricator of the first fraudulent order.

I'm a primitive Italian speaker. I get by in Italy. Although the sounds of my dialect create an intimacy and longing when it swishes past my ears, I only have a scattered vocabulary, the dialect words we used daily alongside of our everyday English. Merely, the obvious.

I was born and raised in America, however much our daily lives were embedded in the ancient ways of southern Italian immigrants. I grew up listening to rock 'n' roll in the late '50s, as it poured through our radios; Fats Domino, Buddy Holly. I went to sock hops in high school. I wore madras plaid shirtwaist dresses with the best of them. I learned to dance the jitterbug first, then the twist, then the jerk, then I learned to move my body to the rhythms of rock and soul. Motown still thrills me. I have lived through the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the sexual revolution, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X. I am embedded in our history.

I enjoy the privileges, and I am ashamed of the meanness that attends growing up at the height of the America First World Empire days.

When I'm in Italy, clearly *sono americana*. They know it, so I have to know it.

While I work always to create another deposit of this complex, layered identity, I am really only trying to say one thing. This is a confession, so I'm just going to go ahead and say it. I confess. I am American.

Just not when I'm sweeping my terrace.