

"A Journey Home Making a New Life in the Old Country" by Waddler, an article that was in the NY Times about someone of Italian American heritage who goes back to Italy to look for relatives.

THE story of the unmarried American woman and the Italian grandparents she never knew and the home she has made for herself in this small mountain village in Southern Italy began one Thanksgiving holiday when she was traveling alone.

You might say it is odd, to go off by yourself on the most family-oriented holiday of the year, and Angela Paolantonio, a Los Angeles photographers' representative with a shock of black curls and a tendency to worry about other people's feelings first and her own later, would agree. But she needed, in a very bad way, to get out of Dodge. She was 41, she hadn't had a serious relationship in years and she had no desire to be what she calls the spinster at the table. Although she had a fine arts degree and considered herself an artist, she'd never focused on her own work. She was proud of her small stable of photographers and graphic artists, but the business part was hardly creative, and a lot of being an agent is being mother, shrink, confessor; she'd be on the phone for hours, going through *their* divorces.

The visit to her grandparents' village, which has a population of about 6,000 and lies an hour and a half east of Naples, was intended as a day trip, an add-on to two weeks knocking around Italy, punctuated by a Thanksgiving dinner of a tuna sandwich in Rome. She arrived in town not knowing if there were even any family members left, stepping off a bus so early in the morning that only the fruit vendor was on the street. Nor could she speak more than a few words of Italian. But the ones she knew were the ones that mattered: "Paolantonio" and "famiglia."

That was seven years ago. Now, Ms. Paolantonio, who still lives and works in Los Angeles, owns the house in which her grandmother was born. She has a good-looking boyfriend who makes his own olive oil and lies with her under the cherry trees. Cousins and great-aunts and -uncles, who did not know of her existence for most of their lives, treat her as if she's always been a cherished member of the family; touching her, patting her hair.

Walk down the street with Ms. Paolantonio and you get the feeling that not only is she known and liked, but that this entire town is reaching out and putting its arms around her. “I really didn’t know I was searching for anything till I got here,” Ms. Paolantonio says. “Then I realized what I was missing and what it meant.”

Calitri is a faded postcard of a town; no movie house, no bookstore, weathered pastel stone buildings and the ruins of a medieval castle clinging to the side of a mountain. It takes a series of hairpin turns to reach and once there you can see the exposed interiors of buildings that were destroyed in the terrible earthquake of 1980. Elderly widows wear black and the agricultural tradition is strong. Ask Ms. Paolantonio’s cousin Giuseppina Paolantonio, who appears to be in her late 70’s, how to make nocino, the walnut liqueur that is popular here, and the recipe begins: “On June 24th, pick the walnuts.”

A pale yellow chapel stands on a hill overlooking the town and Ms. Paolantonio, who exults in the area’s ancient culture, says that on Good Friday, villagers carry a statue of Christ up the hill on their knees. Her middle-aged cousin Vito Cestone will later correct her; they haven’t done this for years, they weren’t even doing it when he was a kid, he’ll say.

But a romantic is a romantic and Ms. Paolantonio has always felt the pull of the past, particularly to the story of the woman she was named for, her father’s mother, Angela Maria Cicoira, whom she never knew. Both her grandmother and her grandfather, Nicola Paolantonio, grew up in Calitri, emigrating to America and settling in Brooklyn in the early 1920s. Growing up in Stewart Manor, on Long Island, Ms. Paolantonio often heard stories of her grandfather, who returned every year to Calitri with clothing and money for the family that remained.

She heard less about her grandmother. No photos of her were displayed, and Ms. Paolantonio’s father never discussed her. Growing up, Ms. Paolantonio thought often about this mysterious woman, who had died in an American mental institution when her son was 10, and worried, sometimes, that she might inherit emotional problems, and might, like her grandmother, be “lost and not remembered.”

Ms. Paolantonio appears always to have had a desire for an extended Italian family. “My first trip, to Tuscany, I knew walking around the streets that I was an outsider looking in, but that I did belong inside those homes.” The house she has rented in the Hollywood Hills for 14 years is owned by Italian-American brothers and sisters, who, she says, have become like family to her.

She was never, however, able to create a family of her own. She was romantically involved for several years with a photographer — “not a healthy relationship,” is the best she can say for it. And Los Angeles can be a tough place for a woman in her 40s. By Thanksgiving of 2000, when Ms. Paolantonio made her first trip to Calitri, she had not had a serious boyfriend for five years.

The story of her first day in Calitri is, even now, one that Ms. Paolantonio tells beat for beat: First she’s taken to a shop owner named Vito Cestone, whose mother is a Paolantonio, but who doubts they are related; then Vito takes her to an elderly woman named Paolantonio who greets her with excitement and brings out a family album, but turns out to be the wrong Paolantonio; then Vito calls his mother who says Angela’s grandfather was her father’s brother. It’s the first time any of the Paolantonios who have emigrated to America have returned to Calitri since World War II. Things start going crazy. Vito closes the shop and takes her from cousin to excited cousin.

“Everybody I meet immediately offers me coffee — I’m thinking I’m gonna die of coffee poisoning,” Ms. Paolantonio says. “Nobody speaks English. I speak very little Italian. Then I enter this smoke-filled room, I get to Zio Franco, my cousin, a very distinguished man with a mustache. He says, very slowly, in English, ‘Your grandfather was a very great man.’ I just collapsed emotionally. After lunch, I go for a nap and I totally cried myself to sleep because I am so overwhelmed.”

In the afternoon, Ms. Paolantonio meets her great-aunt Concetta who knew her grandmother when they were both young women, and lives in what had been her grandmother’s childhood home. Zia Concetta, as she comes to call her, would eventually be able to tell Ms. Paolantonio about AngelaMaria; it is a

tragic story, involving a child who died on a visit to Calitri and another who died in America, but it is finally knowledge.

SEVEN years later, Ms. Paolantonio spends two to three months a year in Calitri and is trying to figure out a way that she can live here full time before she retires. No small part of this is her boyfriend, Giuseppe Zarrilli. He is 35, 13 years younger than she, and works the family farm. Ms. Paolantonio, who says she is a person who has to have big fireworks, has been seeing him for four years. At dinner, the skin under his fingernails will be dark, and Ms. Paolantonio will later explain this is not dirt, it's from crushing the grapes for wine.

The difference between him and Mr. Los Angeles photographer?

“Huge,” Ms. Paolantonio says. “You feel like you are completely supported without a word; that his manliness is holding me up. I say to my friends, this guy is the real deal, not like a guy from Milan, a guy with cologne. This is a chop-your-own-wood kind of guy.”

It is not, however, an untroubled relationship. Ms. Paolantonio is aware of the cultural difference, aware that Mr. Zarrilli probably wants children, and at her age that could be a problem. They have broken up a few times; when Ms. Paolantonio came to Calitri during the Christmas holidays last year, Mr. Zarrilli did not invite her to his home. It was painful, but Christmas in this culture is for family, Ms. Paolantonio says. This is an assessment her friend Enza Cubelli, who lives in Calitri, will later dispute — the man is just a blockhead, she says.

Ms. Paolantonio knew, from the first time she visited Calitri, that she wanted to own a house here. But she wanted one with a family connection. A year and a half ago, after the death of Zia Concetta, she was offered her grandmother's childhood home, a tiny two bedroom perhaps 250 square feet, on Via Fontana, in one of the oldest parts of town.

The cost of the property, which included a grotto just down the street the same size as the house, was 18,000 euros, or about \$23,000. Ms. Paolantonio, a freelancer, could not simply write a check. But she was not about to let a piece

of her heritage get away from her. She scraped together a down payment. And when she returned to Los Angeles, Ms. Paolantonio, who believes she is psychic, had a dream.

“A woman in black appears at the window at the foot of my bed,” Ms. Paolantonio says. “At first I don’t know who it is, but I know she is definitely not American. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of love, like the unconditional love of a parent or a grandparent. I was speechless. Then she was gone. I have a feeling it was either my grandmother or Concetta.”

Maybe it was just her unconscious, just a dream, Ms. Paolantonio is told.

“It could be the unconscious, if you wanted to get scientific,” Ms. Paolantonio says. “It could be myself saying to myself, wow, this is the end of the story, this is what all of this meant, the quest was about my grandmother — maybe not in the beginning, but slowly, this was the journey of me trying to find this woman who was completely forgotten, locked inside my father’s heart.”

Ms. Paolantonio does not know how old her house is. The date 1900 and the initials “V. C.” are carved into the stone archway over the heavy chestnut door, but she believes that was simply the time her great-grandfather Vincenzo Cicoira put in the new door. The walls of the house are a foot thick. The front room, which serves as kitchen and living room, has a Formica-topped table, a few chairs and a cupboard containing a copy of Angela Maria’s American citizenship papers.

The bedroom has a balcony, from which Ms. Paolantonio can see a circle of land her grandmother’s family once cultivated. She believes from a conversation with Zia Concetta that her grandmother’s ashes may have been scattered there, though her great-aunt spoke in a dialect she could not fully understand.

Ms. Paolantonio is asked about her Calitri family. It is interesting the way they have embraced her, she is told.

“I think sometimes they see things in me I don’t maybe see myself,” she says. “This older woman who is trying to be independent, but is a little lonely and is

involved with a man and maybe it will work out and maybe it won't. But whatever it is, they support me."

She still lives in Los Angeles — how does a day there compare to a day here?

"In Los Angeles, everything you do, you do alone and in your car," Ms. Paolantonio says. "Here I don't leave the house without somebody saying, 'Where are you going?' I went outside the other day, a neighbor, this ancient woman dressed completely in black, comes out. She usually takes half an hour to kiss me a thousand times. I don't understand a word she's saying. She's cooing at me, like a little dove, cooing."

She hopes to expand her home in Calitri by buying the house next door. She has noticed, here in Calitri, that she is finally doing her own work. She's written a memoir of her Calitri journey that she hopes to publish; she's taking pictures. The grotto, she thinks, will make a very nice [art](#) studio.

Source: New York Times