

Spring 2016

Quant' sei bell': a narrative based on the Transatlantic Love Letters of Gennaro Valvano and Serafina Savignano

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Bard College

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Quant' sei bell':

a narrative based on the Transatlantic Love Letters of
Gennaro Valvano and Serafina Savignano
tr. by their grandson

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
John Cherichello

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY


May 2016


 Jerry Valvano
 50 Lakes Avenue
 Jersey City, 6,
 New Jersey U.S.A.

VIA AIR MAIL


 Savignano
 194 Hickory Street
 Orange, N.J.

(PER VIA AEREA)


 194 Hickory Street
 Orange, New Jersey
 U.S.A.

PESCOPIAGANO
 PER AVION

AFTER FIVE DAYS RETURN TO
 Mr. Gennaro Valvano
 194 Hickory Street
 Orange, N.J.

VIA AIR MAIL

Sig.^{na} Savignano. Serafina
 Pescopagano
 (Potenza) Italy

REGISTERED
 NO. 8556



Per mia famiglia
For my family

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Orange, 12 Aprile, 1948

Cara Serafina

Certamente questa lettera forse vi darà una grande sorpresa. Mi sentivo un po' avverso di scrivere, ma poi mi ho dato coraggio, ed eccola. Prima di andare più avanti, vi devo dire che se trovate sbagli nella grammatica, mi dovette scusare perché questa lingua non è esattamente mia.

Io vi conosco semplicemente dalla fotografia che mandaste a mia sorella, Dorotea. Devo aggiungere quella bella fotografia! Adesso, mi conoscete anche voi, no? Voi avete una fotografia di me e della mia sorella insieme. Non è una fatta recentemente, e naturalmente non

Foreword

Though she spoke *Pescopagnese*, the dialect of her village, and he, English, from his American schooling, they wrote to each other in Tuscan Italian, expressing their love and affection for each other letter after letter. The pair eventually married and started a life, fulfilling the immigrant's American dream in Orange, New Jersey.

Viewed from Google Earth, Orange, New Jersey comes to focus on the screen. An initial display of the globe soon zooms in on North America and tucks in toward the Northeast region of the United States, for the tri-state area, then on northern New Jersey. The software lays out the boundaries of the city of Orange, with its different sections, East, West, South, major businesses, and street names. Shifting from the bird's-eye to street-view, the road stretches across the computer screen, like a car windshield. Hickory Street at midday.

After scrolling down the street, the software settles in front of 194 Hickory Street, the house in which he grew up and later started a life and family with his immigrant wife. However, Gennaro's childhood home was no longer an imagined vision, the one from bedtime stories and car rides. Instead, it was displayed on the computer screen, dilapidated, practically ninety years old at this point; the same house but in present day.

It hadn't belonged to a Valvano for over forty years. On the screen, a metal fence splits the front yard from the sidewalk and street. The yard creeps out from under the fence, however, into the cracks of the sidewalk. Grass and weeds jut out from the concrete. A slanted awning hangs over the front entrance and porch. This house represents two beginnings for Gennaro Valvano. It was his familiar, the location of all family gatherings and the home where he wrote most of his letters to his treasure, Serafina.

Her Italy and his mid-century America was an imagined reality. In the mind of a young grandson, with stories passed down through a generation, the love of Serafina and Gennaro was that of a fairytale and in this way, the geography is fabricated too.

All that I had to base my grandmother's hometown on was a line drawing of her house, rendered by my grandfather. My imagination stretches beyond the discolored page, the drawing of the two-story home sketched on the same stationary as the hundreds of letters. What emerges is a familiar, fictionalized scene of a hilly European village like that of Belle's home in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. I would learn later on in life, though, that the village was not cartoon-animated like Belle's *little town*.

Their letters, which amount to over one hundred fifty total, remain intact today. Stored in the crawlspace of their attic room, the letters were mingled in a bright red shoebox, decorated with Christmas wrapping paper. For all the years of their marriage and life in their home in Orange, N.J., these letters survived, safe in this crawlspace, practically untouched. I gladly take on this project, almost as an obligation to my family and particularly my grandparents, as now, their home is emptied of their belongings, my grandfather has died, and my grandmother has dementia in her old age. What separates this story from the rest is that this young pair had never before met in person. From first impressions to marriage proposal, Gennaro and Serafina wrote the first four years of their relationship.

More often than not, grandparents are painted as golden figures in the eyes of their grandchildren. I can't lie; that is how I saw them for a large portion of my childhood. Whenever I was home with a cold or fever, they would take care of me with tortellini soup, stories, and cartoons. At Christmas, they would give me that unique present. And in hellos

and goodbyes, their hugs and kisses felt the absolute best, so sincere and full of love. I sit here with their origins—a correspondence that began a marriage, a family, a business, and legacy. And so of course, I have a glorified view of these two people. But this golden pair, who sang to me and fed me well, had a full life too, most of which I was not alive for. I feel the gravitas of these letters and their sixty-seven year history as artifacts for my family. On reading and translating this collection, I don't read their voices as my grandparents, but rather as contemporaries, young and infatuated, and soon after, deeply in love. Gennaro and Serafina are just around my current age of twenty-one as they write to each other. In fact, Gennaro is just nineteen years old as he begins this four-year correspondence.

As I've translated these letters, I've considered interpretation—the way in which they were understood by the original reader and the accuracy of my translation into English. Though much of what is being said in the letters is straightforward, I find there are subtle moments where the writer attempts to imply something or communicate indirectly. These instances distance the Italian from the English.

My background knowledge of my grandparents' love story, of their store, and life before I was born, is purely based on the memory of my mother and father as a retelling. When I was a child, my dad tucked me into bed at night with a story from the past, from his childhood in East Orange, to his courting of my mother, to their first years of marriage living in the apartment above my grandparent's store. While my narrative is based largely on Gennaro and Serafina's letters and my own observations, research, and knowledge, a great wealth derives from this family story canon.

Part I: Italia

"But there is, for the traveler at least, the sense that learning about home and learning about a foreign world can be one and the same thing." -Pico Iyer

Orange, 12 April 1948

Dear Serafina,

Certainly this letter will come as a surprise to you. I felt a little hesitant to write but then I gained some courage, and well, now here I am. Before going forward, I must tell you that if you find grammar mistakes, please excuse them, because this is not exactly my first language.

I know of you simply from a photograph that was given to my sister, Dorothy. I should add, what a beautiful photograph! Now, You know of me too, no? You have a photograph of me and of my sister together. That photo wasn't taken recently and so naturally, I am no longer that little boy you see in the photo. I am a young man now—nineteen years old.

This year I finish school. I have to start to prepare to earn money, with a paid job. To start a working life. Ever since I was little I always helped in my uncle's store, together with my dear sister. I may continue there. Also, I've studied music since I was eight years old and I play the trumpet. This is the problem; this is where there is some tension. My sister and I work at the store. But, I love music greatly and I wish to continue to study it. I have a great desire to come to Italy to study, but if you are not at peace with that idea, that beautiful dream will fade away.

But now we can talk of you! I hope that you are very well, together with everyone in your home and family. I understand that you are a seamstress. I wish you a good, prosperous future with your art. In your photograph, I see that you look very, very nice and beautiful, and of course you're taken, no? I assure you that in America, beautiful girls like you are not easy to find! If possible, I am eager to know your age.

Your mother and family I do not know, but you should introduce me to them and give them my regards and salutations. My aunt, uncle, and Dorothy, together with my dear mom and dad, send greetings to all. I hope this letter finds you well and in good health. Do not forget to pray to our God in heaven, that peace will come soon, so that I can come and learn in the country where my father was born.

Affectionately yours,

Gennaro

P.S. I would greatly appreciate a response. Please excuse my grammatical errors.



Here is my address:

Mr. Gennaro Valvano
194 Hickory Street

Orange, New Jersey
March 1948

He didn't know how to go about it. She was by far the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. *And* she was Italian. He chewed on every possible outcome if he decided to write her. "What if she

doesn't reply?" he considered. "Or what if she does reply and there is boyfriend or fiancé?"

He sat with the picture. Short for breath, nervous, as if she was standing directly in front of him, Gennaro observed every one of her features. With the permission of Dora, he kept the photo—he kept it on his person at all times—each day, to work and at home. She was a traditional beauty. With her fair olive skin and thick brown hair, she was stunning. Framed by a confident brow and rosy cheeks, her eyes, enticing. The young lady looks out toward her right at something or someone in the distance. Her glance is inquisitive. As the light catches a glimmer in her eyes, she is the embodiment of hope and desire. She was born on one of the first days of February and was raised into a working class family, the men and women divided in their trades, as blacksmiths and seamstresses, respectively. She was the fourth of the five children of Michele Savignano and Antonietta Cicensia.

Orange, April 1948

One evening in early spring, he decided to write to the woman from the picture. He bustled around the house to locate a pen and some paper. After finding what he needed, he sat at the table and stared at the blank sheet. First, he marked the date and his town at the top right hand corner of the page. Looking down at the characters on the page, he crumpled up the paper and reached for



another all in one motion. "Neatly, this time." he thought as he adjusted his posture in the chair. Starting over, he looked upon the woman in the photograph. He traced the lines of her face, of her rich wavy hair, gently with his thumb. He contemplated every word in English and then in proper Italian before writing it, always making sure his lines were neat and clear for her.

Gennaro Paul Valvano was born on December 2nd, 1929. He told people he was born in 1930 because it was easier and it sounded better. 1930 was a new decade; an even number and one separate from the Great Depression.

His father, Giuseppe, was a widower with five children before Gennaro. After marrying Maria Sanita Infante, Gennaro and his sister Dora were born in Orange, New Jersey. With half siblings above Gennaro and Dora, the blended Valvano residence was a home of many mouths to feed. Gennaro was dedicated to his family, especially to his mother and he studied and worked to please her. He was first chair trumpet at Orange High School and had promise. He did not continue with the trumpet after high school, however, and instead worked for his uncles at their market in Jersey City.

Orange is an in-between. Separated in the four cardinal directions, the Oranges divide to East, West, and South Orange. Orange, New Jersey is a train town and a model of urban sprawl. With routes to Newark and New York, Orange is the perfect town for the commuting businessman. Wall Street men live in tall, well-manicured brown brick apartment buildings, the developments closer to the center of town by the municipal hall, the main park, and the schools. The hospital and the bakery sit side by side and are aligned with these fancier apartment complexes. And just past, in front of the market convenience store, where the paper, lottery tickets, and candy are sold, a collection of men sit, smoke

cigars, and play cards. Jim, Joe, Robert, and Phil are the usual quartet but on this particular day, Pat and Amil joined the table to shoot the shit and to play a round. A bit further down Main Street, the road curves. Around the bend, the Orange town clock stands proudly as a landmark, confident in forest green painted metal. The large yellow clock within its metal frame glows slightly and marks the central point of Orange. Outside the center, away from Main Street and the businessman apartments, family homes and duplexes are tucked away.

The Valvanos lived on Hickory Street in a small two-story white house with a fenced in backyard. The thin and boxy wooden house was wrapped in aluminum siding. The front lawn, a blotchy patch of low grass and dry dirt, was still very much in recovery from the winter. Their house didn't stick out much from the rest on the street. A colonial just around the corner from Chapman St in town. In fact, more were being erected to match its design—a front door that looks out toward the street, two windows on each floor, and a back door with small porch, and four more windows on the side and back facades. Hickory Street was wide, allowing for two-way traffic; most other streets surrounding it were one-way. However, not many paid too much attention to those rules, those with cars anyway.

The Valvano house was quintessentially middle-class American. But what separated this house and others like it from the traditional American home were the products of its kitchen and the backyard. Mounds of soil were prepared for planting. An aerial view of the Italian neighborhood backyards would show how many families had a similar set up; by summer and harvest in autumn, peppers, corn, and herbs were in full bloom. Tomato plants of several varieties reinforced with wooden stakes and butcher's twine, the plants eventually produced deep, vibrant fruits in shades of yellows and reds each season, for

canning and *caprese*. But alas, it was only April and months of cultivating and tending were still ahead.

A gray paving truck headed down Hickory Street toward Central Avenue. The metal above the back wheels was rusted and the back tire was missing a hubcap. Three teenage boys bounced with every pothole and bump in the road in the back of the pickup as they ate their breakfasts before the long workday. They were on their way to the new pharmacy lot.

As the truck passed, Gennaro hustled out the door, his book bag over his shoulder, a letter, addressed and stamped, in hand.



Pescopagano, April 1948

An air, heavy with moisture from high altitude, weaves through the village. A patchwork of farmland across the valleys set the backdrop. Other mountain towns add to

the block-like landscape in the distance. The postman, on foot, makes his way through his morning route, with his heavy satchel. Every day, Signora Alberti waits at her door for him. She is expecting a letter from her son who has been away from home at war for just over four years.

Nothing today.

Pescopagano is nestled in the southern province of Basilicata. The winding streets of Pescopagano loop around the mountain on main routes and the side roads. At the town center, by the *Municipio*, the road opens up. A plateau or landing forms in the main center of the mountain towns. The town fountain rests across from the *municipio* offices; ladies wash their families' laundry there. The textured, ribbed stones at the back of the fountain slant toward the water specifically for this task.

Up and down the steep and narrow side streets, over the hill, and around the bend, the postman walks down the sloped path to his last stop, to the Savignano house. Situated on the corner, it is a focal point of the village. As visitors enter from either direction, he or she passes this home.

Antonietta spots the postman from the kitchen window and makes nothing of it. She



continues her measurements. Giuseppina prepares kindling for the fire, to heat the stove. Rosetta and Serafina wash sheets in the fountain basin outside. They are in their workday outfits, buttoned blouses, skirts that run to their ankles, boots, and aprons. It is a colder morning, with a bite of winter still present, so they both wear a shawl. Along the front and side of the Savignano house runs an aqueduct of sorts, like those along the walls of Ancient Rome. Built into the walls and foundation, the fountain runs half the perimeter of their courtyard toward the road. Andrea and Pasquale chase kids from the fountain, often plagued by swarms of them in the hotter, drier months. Either yelling from the window or running outside with a broom, the brothers shoo the *ragazzini* away. Today, there didn't seem to be any trouble, but it is, after all, only half past ten. Rosetta and Serafina chat over their chore in the dialect *Pescopagnese*, chuckling to each other as sisters do. The postman nods with a "*Buongiorno signorine!*" and one small envelope.

The girls notice the crisp and clean red, white, and blue border. "Orange, New Jersey," Rosetta reads aloud. "Valvano..." she hesitates, "Is this for Andrea?" The occasional letter had been going back and forth between their older brother, Andrea and his girlfriend, Dora, Gennaro's sister living in New Jersey. The sisters investigate. The younger gestures with her face and hand, leaning toward the older, Serafina to *aprilo*, to open it. She peels the envelope open, carefully and steadily as to not tear the pages inside and to preserve the return address. Still outside, leaning on the fountain wall, Rosetta holds the envelope and mouths "Hickory Street" silently, omitting the 'h' and the final 't' in her pronunciation. The older sister observes that the folds of the letter are measured with precision, matched edge to edge. She unfolds the page. "*Cara Serafina,*" it reads. The penmanship, an elegant cursive.

Her mother and all her daughters were seamstresses for the town. Her father and brothers worked down the road as blacksmiths, in a basement shop. Experts in their trades, the Savignano men and Ciconia women were revered. They employed apprentices from the town. Their home served as *azienda*, while the husband and sons were down the street at the blacksmith shop or around the corner at school. After the men left for work, Antonietta would literally set up shop and begin work on wedding gowns and outfits for the bride on honeymoon. Before helping their mother, Serafina and her sisters had to complete the daily chores and the cooking of the midday meal. When the husband and men came home from work in the blacksmith shop and from their outdoor activities, no sign of the seamstress work was present.

A kitchen occupied most of the main level of the of the Ciconia Savignano house. At right, a light colored tile countertop and a window looking out to the street. A table moved around the room over the course of the day and served three purposes: as dining table for the large midday *pranzo* and for the late evening *cena*, as work surface for Antonietta and her apprentices, and as a desk. At the back rested a wood burning oven and small fireplace. A cast iron pot and two pans hung from the wall. Opposite from the counter, a bench ran along the sidewall, almost as a continuation of the fountain. At the same height of a small window, the bench served as a shelf. Assorted household tools and kitchen utensils were arranged in pitchers and terracotta pots on this ledge: wooden spoons, the big meat knife. At the rear of the main room, ran a narrow stairwell up to the second floor bedrooms. Off the parent's bedroom, a small balcony with double doors opens to a view of the front courtyard, directly above the main level entrance.

Serafina and Rosetta, now at the balcony, hang bed sheets to dry from the clothesline, supported by the wrought iron frame. Three large sheets billow and cascade down and hide the front door of the Savignano house from the street. Passersby can occasionally see the girls working busily in the main room, but only if the wind catches the sheets and sends them up away from the entryway. Fabric is washed and drying and elsewhere in the house, it is cut and measured. Almost at midday, the Savignano house is indeed a *fabbrica*, embodying a fortuitous conflation of English and Italian. Gennaro's letter, now folded back up, stays in into Serafina's front apron pocket for the rest of the day. As the sisters hang the sheets, each with four clothespins, two at either end, pulled tight, and two half way from center, looser, Rosetta looks at Serafina, and then down at her apron and smirk, in a light, teasing sort of way. "*Ah, basta,*" Serafina exclaims, swatting her sister to stop. This had already happened five times that morning. But this is *important*. "Gennaro Valvano from New Jersey." She contemplated this, "a respectful letter, a friendly letter, but one with intentions impossible to ignore. *And* he is Dora's brother." Consumed in the letter, her thoughts are interrupted by Rosetta who points to the staircase. With that motion, Serafina snaps out of it and the pair descends to the kitchen.

The Cicensia women were the best in their trade. It was a widely acknowledged fact. Even women from *San Andre'* had their gowns made by Antonietta and her daughters. The Cicensia women as seamstresses ran back decades; all women in the family were involved in this skill and trade. Antonietta's mother before her, and so on.

The gowns were simple and traditional, and above all, well made. Each day, young girls appeared at Antonietta's door to apprentice. Some days two or three, other days five or more. Today, Silvia and Olivia were situated in the main room with Antonietta, settled at

the table. A young woman from the village had arrived to the house much earlier that day with her mother and sister. It was Carmela Mungiello. She had gotten engaged to Pietro Lucii, a boy from across town from a good family. “Carmela, lift your arm, please.”

Antonietta instructed, tapping the wrist of the girl’s right arm. With two pins at the side of her lip and more on her sleeve, Antonietta measures the bride’s dimensions. Silvia arranges the fabric on the table in the background—satin in ivories and cream. “*Buongiorno Olivia, Buongiorno Silvia,*” Rosetta utters in passing as she places the laundry basket on the shelf and walks toward the stove. She uncovers the pot on the stove, which fills the room with a warm steam, and places the fresh *tagliatelle* that Giuseppina had made earlier that morning in the boiling water. Serafina remains quiet. She sits on the stool by her mother, picks up the basket by her mother’s feet, places it on her lap, and organizes its contents. Each girl in the room had a strict task she kept to, so that all the clothing could be produced in a timely manner. With three clients in place at the time, all hands were in rapid motion, stitching and measuring with precision.

“*Va bene,*” Antonietta guides Carmela off the stand and out the door. “Come back on Friday for your fitting.” The wedding was planned for Sunday at church in town, Chiesa di Santa Maria Assunta, elevated high by the *castello*, so this provided just the right amount of time for alterations, if necessary. It probably wouldn’t be necessary. Antonietta measured precisely always. Within minutes, Michele and the boys return from the first half of their day. Waiting for them on the table, now at the center of the room, is *tagliatelle con ceci e pancetta*. A pasta dish of chickpeas with pancetta, sourced from their last season’s pig.

At center, a pitcher of table wine, and a pitcher of water. Half a ball of *caciocavallo* and bread sit at center of the table. They talk about the marriage of Carmela Mungiello to

Pietro Lucii. It was special. Not many weddings were taking place in Pesco recently. The war hadn't been too good to the village and its men. Also, with the winter months just behind, wedding season hadn't fully arrived this year. Pasquale complains about the horseshoe order to his father and how it is physically impossible to produce more than thirty in the morning hours but he is silenced with a "*madonn*" and distracted by the plate presented in front of him.

Serafina pokes at her plate. Underneath the table, her leg vigorously shakes. The ball of her foot on the ground, her leg trembles. Across the table, Rosetta looks at her and smiles knowingly. Her eyes widen. "Serafina received a letter in the mail today."

May 1948

She sat there staring at it, in disbelief. So many questions but she refrained from asking them. And so, she decided to keep her tone rather formal. A friendly letter to a future brother-in-law, a contact in America.

But why would he ask her if she was taken? Sera had practically abandoned the thought of courtship, of a suitor. Especially in her village and the surrounding towns, the remaining men were much older, and those who were around her age, she wasn't drawn to immature boys with whom she had grown up.

She marveled at his handwriting. "So beautiful," she thought. She traced the letters of her name on the letter and read and reread the lines. His Italian impressed her. Yes, there were a few mistakes here and there, but nothing too major that would affect his meaning. Her photo was in America in his hands. She thought of his hands on her face,

running through her hair, and felt an unease. It was an intensified sensation, almost frantic, happy. The only possible thing she could compare it to was when she saw one of her mother's gowns on a bride in the village. Always a thrill, a pop of clean, crisp white in the daily beige. But this, Gennaro's letter, this contact, materialized into something greater than anything she ever before experienced. She didn't want it to go away. A welcomed attention. She held onto the letter in the pouch on her apron, conscious of its weight at her waist, keeping it also in her mind, the whole day.

Pescopagano, 5-5-1948

Egregio Gennaro,
giorni fa mi giunse una vostra lettera, non
conoscendola, mi sorprese di certo, ma dopo
aver letto esattamente pochi righe della
vostra già me ne misi conto che eravate,
e ne sono onorato di avere fra le
mie mani una vostra.

Si si conosce nella foto unita alla
cara Dora e dimostrata anche di essere
un bravo diavolo, come fare se ne
ringrazio di avermi fatti mille quadri
nei miei confronti, cioè nei confronti
della mia foto, e penso che sono frasette
solamente dette da Giovanni; non sono
mia una ditta - vero?

Siete desideroso sapere la mia età;
ho compiuto una mese fa l'età di 21
anni, e come solite sapere se sono fidan-
zato; - non lo sono, però dichiarazioni
ne ho avute, prima perché non era
nell'età di fidanzarmi, poi dietro alla
visti che si è abbattuta nella nostra
casa, della disgrazia del caro babbo,
certo ne siete accorgenza. -

Sono contenta che studiate la musica,
a me piace tanto. -

Per cambio i saluti da parte dei miei,
a tutti voi, tanti baciami alla cara

Pescopagano, 5-5-948

Dear Gennaro,

Some days ago, I received your letter, I did not know it was coming and so, it certainly was a surprise. After I carefully read some lines of your letter, I realized and laughed! I am honored to have your letter in my hands.

I know the picture you speak of, together with your sister. You seem to be a fine young man. Also, thank you for those compliments about my photo. I am flattered but you must know, I am not a diva, ok?

You wish to know my age; two months ago I turned 21 years old. And you wish to know if I am in a relationship... I am not, and I never have been before. It is because I was not the age to date. The war, this crisis, has ruined this land, the land of your dear father. The land you will surely become accustomed to.

It is nice to hear that you practice music. I like it a lot.

Return the greetings to yours, to everyone, many kisses to our dear sister, Dora. Tell her I am so sorry that I have not written her, together with the family.

To you, an esteemed friend,
Serafina Savignano

P.S. To Dora, many kisses
-Serafina

Orange, 16 May 1948

Dearest Serafina,

Personally, I believed that I was not going to receive a response, but my uncles assured me that I would, and in fact, they were right.

Your response was just the way they told me it would be: brief, but in it was everything that I wanted to know. Like the first thing—you're available and single! I already calculated your age based on that of Andrea, but the first piece of information is more interesting. Now I can stop fabricating ideas in my head.

If you need me to be more clear =I wish to express = intent to make you mine, as your brother Andrea is doing with Dora—Could this be possible?

I hope!

If I continue to write to you now, I could come off as annoying, so therefore I leave the answer to you, which I hope will be in my favor.

Greetings and respect to everyone in the family, and to you, my affectionate thoughts.

Gennaro Valvano

P.S. Many kisses to send to my sister Dora

Gennaro

That spring morning, Serafina felt like a soft and warm blanket draped over her. The feeling came upon as she read his signed name. She read the letter quickly, and read it over once more. It made her smile. Gennaro from Orange, New Jersey had sent her two letters now. Two. She felt his infatuation in the words, a pot of espresso. It was an eager sensation, more than an excitement but thrill that shrouded her. He asked her to date, a formal relationship, boyfriend girlfriend. As she folded the letter back up and placed it in the envelope, she imagined her portrait in his hands. His eyes looking upon it. The space in his wallet where he kept it safe, surely weathered, but secure on his thigh.

Pescopagano 9-7-948

Dear Geri,

After a little bit of time, I respond to your letter.

You must excuse me, I should have gotten back to you sooner, but there were five days of festivals, including the feast days of S. Padrone and S. Francesco di Paola, at the end of last month. I did a lot to prepare, I worked in the kitchen to feed the town, the festival patrons, and that is why today I finally have time to write you.

On behalf of your sister, Dorothy, I understand everything, but it would be even better if you come together, so we could get to know each other better, and closely.

Also, I hope that the four of us will be together one day, but today, I believe that this is but a dream, right?

Listen Geri, why is it that so many Americans send pictures of people here? Between me and you, as well as Dora, I doubt that in your area there are photographers. I hope in your next letter, you can try to send me one.

You are not boring or annoying, what makes you think that?

Greetings to your sister Dora and ask her when she has to decided to come to Italy?

Best wishes from my mom to everyone in the family!

And from me, affectionate greetings,
Serafina

Signore Brettoni and the town judge, Federico, hoisted little Gerardo Brettoni up above the crowd. Out of all the boys in the village, Gerardo was chosen for this year's festivities. Earlier that morning, Antoinetta fitted his costume, an angel in pastels, complete with wings and a metallic helmet. Gerardo and his family live three houses up from the Savignanos. The evening they found out Gerardo was selected to portray San. Francesco for the *festa*, Signora Brettoni almost immediately ran to their door, gleaming with pride for her family and her eight-year-old son. The whole street heard the conversation—Signora Brettoni's requests for her son's costume, fabrics of eggshell and periwinkle for angel wings, baby blue and soft champagne for the outfit and ribbons. Antonietta and her daughters got to work straight away on Gerardo's regalia for the special day. This was something the Cicensia girls loved to do—a break from the usual attire, an annual tradition.

Over the parade, Gerardo recited his lines to the town, in the role of their patron saint. He skated through the air, with the help of his father and the judge, articulating the very rehearsed incantation down to his audience. He looked like a cloud in the air, sprinkling petals across the main corso. To a rhythm, little Gerardo spoke of poverty, chastity, and obedience, of God and prayer. As he blessed the village, the crowd cheered. Serafina and Rosetta looked up at the puff that was Gerardo and giggled to each other, proud of their work.

Luglio 1948

My dearest Serafina,

Just a few lines to let you know that I'm fine... I sent the photo with my sister and I hope you enjoy it. With it, I also send a small gift of clothing because I thought it necessary. I hope you are well.

Now that sister is there, she can tell some beautiful stories, she has, right? Greetings to all.

Yours,
Gennaro

I want you; I call you, I think of you! This will also be our dream!

16 August 1948

My darling sister,

I received a letter from my darling heart on September 14th from Gorga. You can imagine how happy I remained after reading what was in it. I answered it the following day, sent it off, as did the same on the 9th and the 3rd of this month!

Yesterday, I had to go register for the lousy draft. God knows when they will call me for a physical. I hope they never do and pray God that any other war doesn't break. The way things look, it's just around the corner.

Today, we had chicken for dinner because of your---let's say half wedding? You have my deepest and sincere compliments and may you and your husband always be happy, always love each other, always one heart for life. God Bless You.

Boy, I hope nothing happens politically because I'll die if I have to wait longer than I expected to come to my dear Serafina. Boy, am I going crazy about her, I don't think there is a minute that passes that she doesn't give me a sweet torment. I love her so much!

There really isn't anything else to say. Give my regards to all, especially my brother-in-law!

Love and kisses,
Jerry

P.S. When you write to Pescopagano, don't forget to send my girl my love, kisses, and affection, swarms of them! Write soon. You have plenty of time, no? Boy what a feeling a person gets when he knows someone loves him. Oh sister, do I love her!

Yours, Jerry

(Don't forget to write to mama. After all, she is your mother!! She feels very bad that you don't write her.)

Sanitella Valvano sent her daughter Dora to Italy to lead a better life than the one she could provide for her. She readied her only daughter's accommodations with family friends, the Prinzo's, a well-off family. They took Dora in as their own. Her upbringing was dramatically different from her brother's, who stayed in New Jersey with his mother and family. Gennaro went to public school in Orange and at the ring of the dismissal bell, he rushed to the Jersey City bus. Even as a pre-teen, he went to work for his uncles after a full school day. He loved his mother and tried his best to please her in any way he could.

Dora, on the other end of the pond, did the opposite. She didn't want to return to a dreary life in Orange. She didn't see her mother's actions as they were. She held an unprecedented grudge for being shipped to Italy. But, while in Italy, Dorothy was treated like a princess. It was only when she fell in love with Andrea, when she decided to return to

America. Sanitella was selfless, sending her only daughter to Italy, raising and providing for her husband's children and her Gennaro. Her son tried to act as a middleman, a mediator, between mother and daughter. But Dora's perception of her mother did not allow for this. Neither comprehended the other's pain. Upset by her mother, Dorothy refused contact. Heartbroken by her daughter, Sanitella devolved into a depression.

For Gennaro, Serafina was a distraction from this awful family tension and for Dora, her Andrea. The Savignanos entered the scene as saviors for the Valvano siblings.

Pescopagano, 27-9-948

My Geri,

Some days ago, your beloved letter came to me. When I have my hands on one of your letters, I am the happiest girl in the world.

And, Destiny! Who would have ever thought a photograph would have so much attached to it? Who knew that a photograph could do this? For my part, I will tell you that you never leave my brain. I hope that our love will not be like a flower that wilts. I hope that it remains strong. I hope!!

Otherwise, I would die from pain and misery. It was a pleasure to have Rosa and Dora here, accompanied by Uncle Mauro--

Listen my dear Geri, as you know, Dora and I are constantly talking. We went out one night and walked around talking about your plans. About staying in the store or studying music. I want you to do what you want but it seems like staying in the shop is a good idea. Dora was telling me the trumpet could consume your lungs, and then, you will not be always with me, so I worry. As we've said, I want you to be close to me. Work in the store, and keep the thoughts of music dear in your mind. Dora says there are more things

going on in the store anyway, more than playing. Remember when you wrote me one time that you wish for the four of us to be together? Well now, Dora says that can be possible!

I love you.

Yours, Serafina

Jersey City, 27 August 1948

My sweet love,

To this date I have not received a letter from you. I realize that you are very busy with the arrival of my sister, so please excuse me for asking. But I await with anxiety for yours, day after day.

My sister has already written me a letter, from Gorga, telling me everything. I am very happy that you get along and love my sister, as I do, and also that Andrea is fond of me, I return the compliments to him.

He, as you know, works, and he works a lot, but patience...is a pleasant sacrifice. Do you remain content with the photo?

My dearie! Not a minute goes by when I don't think of you! Every minute I think only of your love...of my Serafina, who I love so much, and who loves me the same. How sweet a life when you know someone loves you. Oh! My hope! Now the thing most dear to me is you, and the only thing I have to remind me of you is this photo. How many sighs, how beautiful are you. You tell me you are not a diva, but to me you are, and that's a good thing! I'm saying this as a positive. You are the most beautiful, the nicest, the best, in the world.

Believe me dear, I have love only you---our love. I cannot wait for the day that we have ourselves in a warm embrace, in each other's arms---when you will be mine, forever, my Serafina---my love, my life! Oh! How I love you. Embraced for life! Together for life!

The other day, I began to write some words, some poetry, to express my feelings. To get it out on paper. I am not a poet, but here is what I wrote, a poem that is only for you and me:

*Chi sa'! Chi è, il mio amore
che tanto lontano mi fa cantar,
e' un dolce tormento quest'impulso nuovo
che mi lascia tranquillo e' mi fa sognar.*

*La stella vigile, lontana lontana,
mi lascia sognar d'una diva, d'un fior;
è vado incontro a questa incerta sorte
me stesso sperduto, ogni momento, ognor.*

*Ma la stella vigile lontana lontana,
un giorno vicino sprillerà una luce,
e darà a due cuori innamorati;
un amore più pronto, più forte del mar.*

*Adesso conosco il mio amore
che tanto lontano mi fa cantar ancor,
non più son sperduto a questo mia diva,
che un giorno vicino gli lancio la vita!*

I repeat, I am not a poet, but these words, they are my heart beating—Serafina—Serafina—

Serafina!

Dear, it is late, I am tired, and very hot. I will write more when I receive one of yours, sound good? Now I end, with many kisses and greetings to everyone. One kiss also for mom, and for you, my love.

Yours for life,
Gennaro

P.S. Do not forget to write soon, and longer! More kisses.
I love you, I love you, I love you.

Write me at my uncle's address:
50 Dales Ave
Jersey City, 6,
New Jersey

Jersey City, 8 September 1948

My dearest,

I promised you that I would write every week and I meant my word.

Yesterday, I received some lines from sister, saying that you still haven't received a letter from me. I wrote two letters, one from the month of July, one from August, both that you have not received? But this and that, previous are recommended, and I assure you that every letter of mine was sent.

The other day, I was in Orange, and I passed by the building where at one time, lived my uncles, together with your dear father. I stayed there for a while, and thought that at one time the father of the girl who I love was once in this same city, on this same street. Dear, believe me, my parents and my uncles have talked of your dad, but did not make the connection about knowing who he was. And now, still, they speak of him, how he was a good man, affectionate, loving, kind. I wish to call him "dad."

Dear, every evening I think that another day has passed, and so another day closer until I see my love. Oh! What love I have for you! You are my iron that gives me strength, you are my happiness, you are my heart, and you are my everything!

Dear, tell me how you pass the day. Did you have fun in Gorga? How were things there? How is your mother? I hope she feels better. I pray to God for her always. My mom speaks of her too and sends her many warm wishes.

Love, if I write you every week, I hope that they come. I've been writing longer ones. I have nothing more to write except for I love you I love you I love you!

Many kisses to everyone of your family, from everyone here, a dear kiss to mama, from mama. My salutations again to Andrea, and my compliments. To you, my affectionate thoughts with all the love.

Yours always,
Gennaro

P.S. Write me quickly! (Kisses) *I love you!* (I love you)

Jersey City, 15 September 1948

My sweet heart,

Yesterday I received your long awaited letter. You asked me if I have received yours from the 26th of August....yes, I have received it and I responded on September 3rd, and I also sent another one on the 9th... Let me know if you have received those. You are completely right in saying that its horrible to not receive a letter. What torture when the postman passes by without bringing the thing that makes me go forward and live on. One of yours-----when I have it here, and I know you have written it and touched it, the same stationary that is in my hands, oh! What a feeling, how it is loved!

Oh! Sweet, if you know the joy you have given me by saying you have sworn that you are mine, only mine. And I, equally, swore from the first time I saw your photo, the love, the hope, the joy, the happiness I feel. You are my life, mine! My Serafina, my love, how I love you.

There are times when I am lost in the clouds, and then through the mist, the clouds, I see a brilliant light, and I run, run with open arms toward another pair of arms, with some nerves. Then I wake up and find myself on the ground, here, so far away from you, but with thoughts that linger and such love for you, and only you.

Oh! My dear, every time I look at your photo, I lose all my strength before my queen. There, you have a look in your eyes, fixed in the sky, set on the stars, which look back my

eyes, your jewels. How I wish to pass my hand through your wavy hair, so beautiful. And then, that puddle, the little dimple on your chin. You are the most beautiful in the world. I cannot count the number of times I look at you, I adore, I admire. I kiss you, I wait for that moment, the instant, when I can touch your lips to mine.

Now that we know the papers went through for Dora and Andrea, we must pray to our good Lord in heaven that ours will also come soon! My God, please, tell us our day is coming soon. We are two hearts in love. God, we pray that one day soon, we will become one, always together, always in love, always with your help. My love, I am yours...only yours.

My congratulations and best wishes to Andrea. Many dear and affectionate kisses and thoughts to everyone and one to dear mama. I wish you you well, always.

Your love,
Gennaro

P.S. My greetings to Rosetta, a dear kiss from mom and from uncle. Write to me soon, because your writing keeps me going, my love. I love you. Gennaro

[Around the translucent paper, Gennaro made a frame for the paragraphs of the letter, a border with his words: I love you! You love me! I love you! I love you! Yours, Gennaro Only you! Always you! I think of, I want. Kisses, kisses, kisses, Serafina and Gennaro! Mine for life. I love you!]

Pescopagano 30/9/48

(I love you) (I love you)

My dear,

I did not want miss sending you my two letters. Anyway, I want you to be happy, with joy in the workplace.

I feel pride and joy, when I receive one of yours. I send one to you and I received also one of yours that you wrote, it was much longer than mine.. Let me know that you have gotten it, and know that I am very very busy. I hope that you don't take as long as I did to respond.

Many hellos from my mother and dear kisses to your mother, and to you, all my affection,

Yours always and forever, Sara.

My darling brother,

Boy! Was I happy when I received your last two letters. Anything written in English is good over here and then especially that they were written by you. Brother, are you in love! Man, I was in love but you pass the "three mile limit" and Serafina is surely in love with you. She kisses your picture continually and sincerely hopes that you are able to come next year. That would surely be wonderful. She's so glad that you've decided to remain in the store and not continue with the "musical department," and truthfully I'm happy too, so that we four surely can make progress because we are honest with one another. You know what? I washed your "love's" hair and mine and then I set both our hair. She surely is "Americanized." She even puts lipstick on! Jerry! Man, am I in love. And is my husband in love with me.

I send you love and Kisses/ will write to you soon in a following letter.

Your sister,
Dora

[Serafina on the bottom:] I wish good for you always, kisses. Your dear, Sara

October 7th, 1948

Gennaro adjusted his mouthpiece. He moistened and pursed his lips and put the trumpet in place. He played through songs from memory. A couple from his school lessons, short tunes as well as his favorite scales and arpeggios. The trumpet music was never really a nuisance for his family. When he had to practice, he simply closed his door. The muted jazz and classical tunes that streamed from his bedroom actually comforted his mother. Downstairs in the kitchen, she would wash dinner dishes and hum along to Schubert and Mozart, Chopin, and Sousa.

Tonight, he practiced in the basement. He took a moment to sift through his sheet music and landed on Schubert's "*Ave Maria*," a song from church he quite enjoyed. With a deep breath, he began to play the melody at an andante pace, walking through staff by staff of the piece. His fingers pressed down on the three valves to the tune as he pressed air in through the small mouthpiece, a skill that took years to hone.

As the song progressed, so did the volume, from a *mezzo piano* to a *mezzo forte*. In the dimly lit space, Gennaro's thoughts consumed him. His sister's opinions projected onto his beloved. He had tried for months to convince himself otherwise, but his love for the trumpet far exceeded anything else in his life. Of course with the exception of one thing, Serafina Savignano. She was the answer to his sadness. He had to keep reminding himself of this; the sacrifices he had to make were worth much more because he had her, *suo tesoro*, Sera. The melody of the song swelled from the horn.

Pescopagano 14-10-48

Mine for always,

After thirteen very long days, look, here, I get your long, but long-awaited letters. You could not imagine how sad I was to see the postman pass without stopping at my door,

with something of yours, dear, for me. I realize, it's not your fault, and the delayed mail just makes it all the more special when I get another, long after the previous. I know your good news, I am glad that everything is good.

I know from the letter that you are in possession of the photos. Truthfully, I didn't want to send them because they are so worn out, and I wanted to retake them, but you're glad nonetheless, right?

Regarding height, in that picture I have on flat shoes, you noticed? And I usually wear flat shoes, but now I certainly will, because you say I should wear them. If you do not mind, to be sure, would you please send me your height measurement? I will send mine, but now everyone is around and I don't have a ruler so later I will send you---

I am happy that the registration happened, and I pray too to our God that a war doesn't come. I think of that all the time, about if another war will come (poor me)---

You've been very clear regarding when you want to come... I thank you and I love you even more for it. Oh! What joy! How I try to pray to God, he wants you here in the summer, close to me, I hope that this year it will happen, early summer, right? Who is happier than us?

If I had wings, I would fly to you, It would be enough for only one hour, to see you, hug you, and make you notice how much love I have for you, how much I love you, you are my first love, my sweetheart, and you will be my master for the rest of my life, it is true, my dear treasure?

I will be stuck to you like ivy to a dry, dead, trunk, void of any bad thoughts that circulate through my brain, because we will be together.

My brother Andrea wrote to your dad, I hope that he received it. He spoke about you and the two of them, chatting about little things. Does that make you nervous? Whoever sees me, I always say the same thing...The nerves I get when I think of you, I think about you in good health, and that's it, the country should know you are ill-equipped for the draft, but nevermind, I pray that you don't write anything to them, but it's your choice, you choose.

I will not write more because it's late, 1:30 in the morning. I delight that I am writing here, you see me, you understand me?

Our poor love, so far, far away, but what they do not see are our two little hearts, beating, throbbing!

Many greetings and kisses from mom, and thanks about your thoughts, a kiss from mom to you, dear salutations from Andrea and Rosetta.

I want you to know that I love you with a million (kisses), believe me, yours forever,

Sara

[On the back of the letter:]

No, you cannot leave me, I love you always, I cannot forget, here, only in my heart, you will find love, true, great, love.

Write always, always, I wish always of your news. I live only for your letters, I die otherwise.

Kisses, kisses, yours forever, dear,
Sara

Do not let me go ever, endless kisses,
Sara

I love you so,
Sara I dream of your kisses,

Sara

Write soon!

Jersey City, 8/11/48

A kiss from dear Andrea,
brother in law, Gennaro

My treasure,

Today, the eighth, I received your long, long, dear letter. What a feeling, when I have one of yours in my hands.

I've finished school; I left, even though I wanted to go to college and pursue trumpet, I know what I have to do, that is, what we want, and so I forget about college.

Now there are only four days and our loved ones will be with us again. Four days but that seems so far away, Uncle and I count the hours until they arrive. I think of the summer of '49, and you? I think of it even when it makes me sad, with affection, in isolation. I think of it. The whole time I see you, when we are together, I'll have you in my arms, hold you to my chest, to tell you that I love you so much, I think even the day that I must leave --- how bad that word! --- Leave! It is amazing our parents, families, know each other. It is really something sent by God. My father knew yours as a child. So much love from God that is comes down to their children.

Dear, when I am resting, I close my eyes and think of you, I see you, in my arms, and I become wild with pleasure. Oh! As you would like exciting and emotional! How much! How much! How much!!!! How good are thy words "my darling" Oh! How I adore you!

Dear, what I mean is this. When I read your dear letters, you must shed a tear, rolling slowly down your face, but why this tear? Believe me dear I adore you, they adore you. Do not dispute it. I told Dora to take your measurements, if she didn't, can you take them and send them to me? I want to try to send you a package. Oh! I really hope and pray

so much to God that the day comes immediately that you come to America. My darling, how I love you, you're the thing most dear to me. I write with all my heart, believe me. We love you so much. I love you so much.

You ask what I do here on Sunday. Well, I get up, I wash, get dressed, go down to the store, and I struggle until one o'clock in the afternoon. Then I get dressed again and go with my uncle to New York to eat at a restaurant. After lunch we go to the cinema, and then we return home. We've made this a routine nearly every Sunday for the past three months. On Monday, I get up, I go down to the store—I struggle until ten in the evening, then to bed.

Last Sunday, we saw the movie adaptation of "*The Betrothed*" by Manzoni. I was very fond of it. But the love that I have for you, well, it goes one hundred thousand times more than that of Renzo and Lucia.¹ Our love is true!!! I do not write more, as you see I have already began to make many mistakes because my eyes are closing and then it is past twelve, midnight. Many kisses and greetings from all to all—

A warm kiss to mother, to you, all my dear thoughts

Your forever,
Gennaro

P.S. write soon
(*I love you ---- do you know?*) (I love you --- do you know that?)

¹ The love of Renzo and Lucia is met with obstacles, like evil people and distance. The most widely read Italian text among students at *liceo*, the 1827 historical drama. *I Promessi Sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni is a master- work of fiction in three volumes. The story was adapted into film for the first time in 1941. *The Betrothed* is the universal Italian romance epic, second only to Dante's *Inferno* in popularity. (Gennaro rejects the similarity of Renzo and Lucia to his love of Serafina; however, the largest plot point tracks these two innocent souls' suffering. And though devoid of kidnap and villains, the love of Gennaro and Serafina is tormented with distance.)

Jersey City – 17/11/48

My sweet love,

Not a minute passes when we don't talk of you or of Andrea. Every minute, different things come to mind, that we recount, like love, what to eat, washing hair, and many other things. The more I talk of you, the more my love for you grows. Then, one or both of my uncles tell me that you probably think that when I arrive in Italy, I will change my mind and fall in love with another. I don't even know where to take this. Where do these thoughts come from? These many horrible thoughts, where? I tell you that I love you, I want you, I cannot wait for the moment when you are in my arms. Forget those bad thoughts. Do you hear me? You understand me? Oh! How I love only you, my dear.

When I come to Italy, you should think that I come for you, only for you, understand only for you! You know that you are my everything, and without you, I cannot live? I want you close, always, and you know that! Oh! Dear, please, forget these ugly dreams, our dreams should only be beautiful.

My love, why don't you write me more often? My uncles say it too, do not wait for my response to write, write me! I wrote you on the 8th, and the 14th and now. Do not make me suffer so, especially now that our love is so secure. Believe me dear, you cannot imagine how much love I have for you. You believe me? How about you.... Every night when I close my eyes, I sleep so peacefully with a mind full of --- a Serafina. Then when I cannot sleep, you are to blame, but that sweet torment! As I think, I dream for you!!! In the morning, after I open eyes, I see a second sun—you. Not actually, but I see you and think of you and then my eyes close again.

I end with lots of kisses and greetings to all by all. To you all my heart full of love for you. I love you.

Your unforgettable love, Gennaro

P.S. Write me soon, soon. I love you! I love you!

My dearest compatriate, friend, Andrea,

If you knew how much your wife suffers, it is a thing of another world. When she did not receive a letter, tears, tears, tears. You should come here soon. I hope you are not jealous, but I keep her in my arms, always. We love you, and you know that I will always, You together with Serafina, her in my arms. Oh! How I love your sister, my Sera! Many kisses, to all!

Your compatriate,
Gennaro

My Andrea,

I love you! I am yours, all yours, Write every other day. Remember "the promise." Come soon!

Yours forever,
Dora.

Gennaro and Dora were together in America. Serafina and Andrea *insieme* in Italy. Separation from each other felt like torture. The line repeated in most of the letters. A longing, waiting, which heightens their want and love for the other.

Gennaro writes this letter to Serafina on November 17th, 1948, and ends with a quick note to Andrea. Dora adds her two lines to her fiancé at the bottom. This letter is one of seventy just like it, which fit a format, a rubric of sorts, on the love letter to Serafina. He

asks her to write more often. He lists the dates of his past letters, and he references his visit, his journey to Italy.

Their loves were forming side by side. Parallel relationships with identical dreams. Brother and sister loves sister and brother. Gennaro's sister, Dora, spent several years in Italy. It was where she met Andrea. The budding romance of Gennaro and Serafina is greatly due to the love Dora and Andrea. The situation was both amorous and convenient. The love story, a tale of hundreds of transatlantic letters, settled in Orange, New Jersey, and a quartet of familiar and new started a family. A double date began an adult life together in America. The four names inside the doodled hearts on Gennaro's letters—Serafina and Gennaro, Andrea and Dora—*insieme per tutto*.

Orange, 28 Novembre 1949

[...] I end with the most sweet and loving thoughts from me to all of you. To you --- I hope that I have been able to express myself and that this letter will convince you and give you restored hope. I want you as my wife. --- Kisses

Yours,
Gennaro

P.S. Kisses to mama, I hope that she accepts me as the prodigal son! Best wishes to dear Rosetta --- A quick response!

Gennaro

I want to thank you for your dear thoughts on my name day. I hope that San Gennaro watched and watches over you... ok, enough, good night!

2 Dicembre 1949

The house was silent in late evening. Some snores came from the boy's room and the occasional bark from a guard dog outside. Serafina shook Rosetta.

"Basta! Sera, basta!" Rosetta turned on her side and tried to ignore her sister. But Sera was pretty insistent.

Rosetta sat up in bed. *"Che cos'è?"* Irritated, Rosetta wiped the sleep from her eyes.

Serafina was overflowing, her eyes wide open, eager to share something with her sister. *"He wants me as his wife!"*

With that whisper, Rosetta gasped and the two sisters hurried down to the main room. Without words, they had the same idea. Rosa reached for the shawls and Sera the shoes. They walked out the door and into the night side by side, toward the *corso*.

Once they got far enough from houses, Rosetta jumped and shouted! *"O mio Dio, Sera! Mia sorella si sposa!"* The sisters kept on their way to the fountain. Neither tired, it felt like daytime, laughing and talking through the village on their way to the center.

They tried to whisper but their excitement couldn't be controlled. Of course, the conversation of marriage had come up, early even, for Gennaro and Serafina. But it seemed definite after his last letters. Rosetta hyped Serafina up on the midnight stroll. The sisters, the angel and the flower, stopped at the fountain and sat. It was a chilly night, but the temperature didn't seem to be affecting them whatsoever. The elation over the proposal overshadowed the cold.



10/12/48

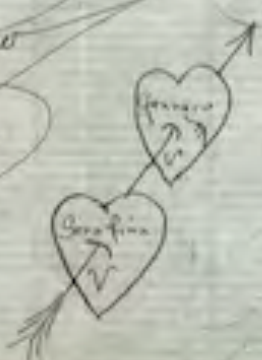


Mio Tesoro.

Sono passati quattro giorni tuttora senza una tua.
 Perché mi fai soffrire tanto, cara? Lascia, non lo sai
 che solo le tue lettere, il tuo scritto mi dà gioia, frega
 la puzza, consolazione, anima ----- e tante, tante altre
 cose!!!
 Mio fiore, come stai? Tanto bene di salute, i solo
 il cuore che si sente un po' --- sai ---
 Vadi, dolcissima, non ho proprio nulla da scriverti, così
 ti prego, scrivi! scrivi! Non farti impadronire da una
 forma pensante presunta. scrivi! scrivi! scrivi! scrivi! scrivi!
 Baci e saluti a tutti. scrivi! scrivi! scrivi! scrivi! scrivi!
 Sei Vostro per sempre
 L'AMO

Lascia con tutto il
 cuore: Love you!!!

Baci
 L'AMO



10/12/48

My treasure,

Four days have passed like torture without you. Why do you make me suffer always, my dear? You don't know it's only your letters, only your writing that give me joy, strength, inspiration, consolation, soul and many, many other things.

My flower, how are you? I am in good health...only my heart hurts a bit... you know?

See, my sweetness? I don't have anything else to write, so please write! write! write!

Kisses and give my regards to everyone, my love.

Your kisses forever,

Kisses,

Gennaro.

I write with all of my heart: *I love you!!!*

Jersey City, 13/12/48

Serafina, dear angel,

Oh! My life, I am even happier today, do you know why? Yes, I received one of yours, and how dear that felt. These letters are my life!

Sera, it made me sad to read that after eighteen days, you hadn't received my news.

Dear, if you suffer, then I suffer as well. I feel the distance between us even more, and believe me, sweet flower, there have been many letters between us, I hope that you have gotten most of them.

I had another great surprise today. I got photos that were taken by Dora! Only two came out well, one where you all are playing ball, and when you are eating grapes, I think? I couldn't rest after I got these photos. This evening, I saw them, I've seen you smile for me, but not yet walk, talk, or hear you speak or laugh. I have only seen you smile. After looking at these photos, I could not rest. You are my life, my love, my future, my everything!

Oh! Treasure, oh! My flower, oh! My love, how I love you, how beautiful are you.
Even today, my mom received a letter from you, she wrote to you immediately,

Tell me dear, why don't you like milk? You don't know that it's good for you? Is milk not good in Italy?

Treasure, take my recommendation? I pray you. I am always thinking about you, only you, my brain continues to think of only one thing, of Serafina. When people ask me what is on my mind, I say, "my love, who is far from here." But if they could only know.

My heart beats, and beats for Serafina. It cries, and cries for you, for my Serafina. And the blood, does the same, the blood is full of Serafina. Oh my God, why?! Why? Why must we suffer? One day the prayer will be answered.

It is late, so I should close. Many kisses to all. One separate for mama. Best wishes to all, a kiss from nonna. To you, dear, you know, all of me, to you. All of my kisses are yours.

-Gennaro

P.S. We are prisoners of----love!! I want you close, in my arms, so that I can...but...kiss you. *I love you!*

-Kisses to Andrea-

Pescopagano, 18/12/1949

Dear Sanitella,

With much pleasure, I received your dear letter, and with a little bit of delay, I respond. I speak of my dear son, Andrea. You can well imagine the upset it was to see him leave, but I want only the best for him and dear Dora, all the best in the world, so it is ok. Now it is time for my Serafina. Truly, one thing that weighs my heart down is that my

children, all my children, are leaving home, and that scares me, but I know it is for the best.

We will be in touch.

With fondness, yours,
Antonietta Ciconia

A note to Gennaro at the bottom of the letter from his beloved:

From me, please receive a world of good. I write to you with early birthday wishes
and dear kisses

My dear, I am home, and yesterday, two of yours arrived. I found your dear letters
only when I came home. Two letters, Andrea received, but nothing for me? Your next letter
to me should be long. Write to me, so I don't have to wait any longer, because in that
waiting, I suffer. I need something of yours to arrive so I can read your beautiful words, and
so my heart can be filled with joy, rather than melancholy. Andrea received letters from
Dora as well, and for me, there was nothing, why?

Kisses,
Your Serafina



December 1949

Her photo represented more than just her features. Her photo was the Statue of Liberty—a mark of possibility. She was that something to reach for, the goal. Whenever he looked at her face, he envisioned their meeting for the first time. He pictured knocking on the front door of her house and asking for her. He pictured her effortless natural beauty coming down the stairs to greet him for the first time. Like waiting for a date to the school dance to appear at the top of the stairwell, this vision replayed in his brain.

Gennaro dreamt of the day almost every day. He had this recurring vision of waiting for her at the dock in New York City. From the bus window, he spotted the Empire State Building across the river. He thought of that day, oh man, so soon. He didn't know the logistics of the day but the thought of it translated into a colossal smile. Everyday was one

day closer to her arrival. After the half hour ride, he hopped off the bus. It was golden hour, that time of day about an hour before the sun completely sets, where everything seems gilded by the sun's rays. It was much colder earlier that day. That morning, as he got ready for work, his teeth chattered. There was crunchy frost on the grass and black ice on the sidewalk. The early evening sun felt good. He walked home lit by the warm embrace of the hour to discover a letter from her in the mailbox. It was small; the envelope was petite and square. Its contents didn't feel like a folded letter on soft paper. Instead, it was thick cardstock. Two postage stamps at the top right hand corner of the envelope *per via aerea* were side by side, each 50 cents lire. The same design for both of them: a thick tree trunk morphs into a valiant crowned female figure. Her arms are raised toward the sky. She is the liberty tree.²

Gennaro hustled inside and found a knife. He sliced the left side of the envelope and a piece of cardstock fell out to the floor. He quickly scooped it up to find that it was a Christmas greeting from his beloved. "*Buon Natale,*" it read in blue on the thick stationary. To the left, three small children played in a snowy village with a snowman. The melting snowman's big red nose, pristine top hat, cane, and pipe made Gennaro chuckle. On the roof of the main house in the image, a boy prepared to toss a snowball. And then, a note from Serafina:

"Together with everyone, Merry Christmas. Happiness and kisses, my dear.

-Serafina"

² The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants" – Thomas Jefferson; A tree was planted in Rome's *Piazza delle Scole*, to mark the legal abolition of the Roman Ghetto, (which was, however, reinstated with the resumption of Papal rule). The last surviving liberty elm in Italy, planted in 1799, celebrates the new Parthenopean Republic.

Gennaro held the small card to his chest and walked into the house further. He showed his Mom who took it out of his hands and placed the card on the windowsill by one of the Christmas candles.

Trends appear in the letters of 1948 and 49. Their messages are repetitive, replicas of the ones previous. Back and forth, the pair creates a formula in their letter writing. First, the date and the town they are writing from. Then a variation of—*Cara Serafina, Gennaro, Il mio tesoro, Mia gioia...*

The first sentence often states how long they have waited for the letter, the anticipation building every day, between letters from their beloved. Then, they continue with a few mundane anecdotes, notes about their day, their family. They then both write about the future that will take place once they are together. The relationship accelerates rather rapidly in the written messages, its status evolving from friends, to more than friends, to engaged to be married. Gennaro and Serafina look forward to their married life, and write about it frequently. Then, the pair closes their letters with greetings to all and an extended farewell to the other. Oftentimes, they will add a postscript or two and leave little drawings and notes to each other on the margins of the letter.

The special letters, repeated, becomes paradoxically ordinary. But in the monotony of the formula, a ritual develops. Like a customer at the diner ordering their usual, Serafina and Gennaro derive solace from their regular, the morning cup of Joe and short stack of pancakes, i.e. from the themes and lack of variation of their scripted missives. They become the familiar, the placeholder for the person.

A te----

*O mia fanciulla ammobile.
O delicato fior,
Gioia, speranza, palpito,
Sorriso del mio cuor.*

*Tu se l'eterna immagine
Nell'anima scolpita:
La luce fulgidissima
Della mia triste vita.*

*A te vicino, creditimi,
La vita e` paradiso:
Splende nel cuore estatico
Il tuo celeste riso.*

*Vieni, vieni abbracciami,
Stringa suoi lacci amore,
Ed il piacer si accumula
Finche non scoppi il cuore!*

Alla mia Serafina

*Quest'oggi, di tutto
Io mi meraviglio:
Del nero e del giglio,
Del bello e del brutto.*

*Quest'oggi, ogni cosa
M'allita ed attrista:
Son una non vista
Pensante mimosa.*

*Io dico: perche
Questi alberi sono
In tanto abbandono?*

*Io penso perche
La vita, che in core
Mi trema, lasciato
Ha il colla ed il prato?
E` forse l'amore*

*Fuggite dai mondi?
E ancora mi chiudo:
e questi che io vedo
Germogli profondi*

*di luce negli occhi,
Che sono? Soo pianto?
O lume soltanto
Di cio` che non tocchi?*

*Ho quasi paura
Dello stupor mio;
Si libra, piu paura.*

*Se tutto qui muore,
Se noi siamo vani,
Io so che rimani
Tu solo mio amore!*

Jersey City, 3/1/49



Serafina, mio amore,
Quanto sono rimasto felice
oggi dopo le undici. Sai perché?
Il postino ha lasciato una tua
per me. O quanta gioia - credimi.
Mi domandi, come ho passato
il S. Natale --- pensando sem-
pre a te. Sì sono solamente

parole -- ma le dico con tutto il cuore e mi devi
credere --- non ho fatto altro che pensarti. --- tu
mi hai tormentato tutto il giorno -- (dolci tormenti)

Non ti scrivevi, anch'io lo immaginavo che ti
facevi triste, ma non ero presente. Andai a Orange
per comprare un paio di scarpe. E poi non sapevo
che scrivevi, già che non ricevi nulla -- ma
ti ho già promesso che ti scriverei sempre, cara,
non voglio che tu soffri -- mai -- mai -- !

Farò sono stanco? Ma perché me lo domanti,
perché? Come posso essere stanco a scriverti,
dimmi tu, come? Oggi ho lavorato pesante,
adesso sono quasi le dodici di notte. E tu

come sei bella -- Ti teno
più cara di un prezioso gioiello
TAMO, CARO, OI MA QUANTO
too get

I love you!

Jersey City, 3/1/49

Serafina, my love,

How happy I got today, at eleven. Do you know why? The postman left one of yours for me. O! What joy—believe me.

You asked me, how was Christmas (S. Natale)---Well, all I thought about was you. There are only words---but I tell you with all my heart and you have to believe me—I have done nothing else but think of you---you have tormented me every day (sweet torment).

I did not write to you, I could imagine that that made you sad, but I was not present/here/around. I went to Orange to buy a pair of shoes. And then I did not think to write, because you hadn't written, but I have already promised you that I would write to you always, dear. I do not want to suffer in anticipation—ever—ever!

Maybe I am tired? Why do I wait until I'm tired to write you, tell me, why? Today, I worked hard, and now it is twelve at night. And you ask me if I am tired. Maybe I am tired of work, but I am never too tired to write to my love, to my everything, to my life, never, ever!

I received all of your notes—I hope that you get all of mine.

Listen darling, I beg of you, I pray that you do not forget to write me every time I write to you. Andrea—understand?

Also me, I feel bad when I do not get anything from you, you cannot imagine. Yes dear, the man is stronger---but when the heart we miss the most desired home----the man loses all his strength—Oh! How I fall, I faint! So, write to me! And much longer now!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I end, not because I have nothing more to write, but only—Oh! How I love—how I love—how beautiful you are, how I love you.

Kisses to dear mama, Rosetta, Andrea, Pasquale. Give them all my best, all my kisses, all my heart.

P.S. If you have lipstick, why don't you kiss the paper, so that I can kiss it too? I would like that...Please?...Yes?

Gennaro

[At the top left corner of this double-sided letter from January 3rd, 1949 is a pen sketch of Serafina's portrait. Gennaro drew the features of his beloved in a pen outline, based on the photo he had of her, the one he carried with him every single day. Framed by thin gold gift-wrapping ribbon and a loose garland of doodled flowers, the small drawing is simple yet pictorially accurate. Around the crafty border, Gennaro writes *Mia Serafina, Mio Tesoro. Come sei bella, Quanti sei bella.*]

You are more expensive than a precious jewel. I love you, dear, Oh! How much I do, your Geri.

[Beside his signed name at the end of the letter, Gennaro draws a cat with a quill pen in its right paw. Underneath, a heart, with *T'amo* in the center]

Serafina! You call, you hear me? I love you!

[And a boat travels off the page with his words, across the Atlantic. Geri repeats *Ti amo* and *T'amo* twelve times on the letter paper, along the border, around his drawings, and within his sentences.]

Jersey City 18/1/49

Joy of my life,

It is 11 at night. I worked a lot today, I am truly tired, but then the love gives me some extra strength to be able to write—and well, you now that you are my heart.

Yesterday, I got one of your notes, where you said that you went to Giuseppina's house. Here, they're talking about how there is the flu in Italy...oh joy...watch out for yourself, do not get sick, because I will then suffer too! Take care of yourself, you hear me?

Here, the winter is very, very cold. But this year, the season is something that is unimaginable. Snow, here and then not! Cold,sometimes. Then, its hot...like springtime. Then, it snows and gets cold again. Anyway, the weather is crazy this winter!

Darling, I wonder why I love you so strongly. Honestly, I will not try to explain because when I do, I find myself tormented, in love. I love you, very much, always, always.

Oh! Angel, if you knew the joy that you give my little heart, how you give me your love. I reread and reread it. I want you in my arms, against my chest. And kiss you...but then...there is the sea...I stay here, I remain, static. Still, I am in love with you. [Three hearts shot by arrows]

I hope that when I get another one of your letters, it is a little longer than the one before. I end with many kisses and hugs to Rosetta, Pasqualino, Andrea. One kiss to mom. From me, all of my heart to you. I love you.

Yours, Geri KISSES.

P.S. The words in English are (*I love you- do you know that?*)

Translation: I love you- do you know that?

Write to me always, you are my blood. If you know, love, how much I love you, a crazy amount, I tell you, fully in love.

Then comes the night, in dreams I call for you and you don't answer me. And then I die of pain. So many sighs, Geri! And so I call. We go days, there is grace in the search. I love you. The search makes me ache and pain overcomes. In the middle of thousands of flowers, flowers in love, I love you, from near, in dreams, and far.

Many kisses from mom, who is beside me as I write.

I love you!

Will you send me your lips with lipstick?

Do not forget your lips! Oh, otherwise! Goodnight!

[On a piece of 5x7 stationary, Gennaro wrote to his beloved. He wrote neatly with even spaces between lines. His clear cursive font was like that of the first letter he ever sent to Serafina, his first letter, dated April 1948. On the top left, Gennaro embellished the design on the printed stationary. Two letters arrived to Serafina with this corner design: a blue wishing well overflowing with ivy and flowers, two birds flying on either side of the well, in the background, under the clouds. Gennaro's addition, a smiling sun above the image, peeking out from over the clouds, heart-shaped with rays shooting from it.

Two copies of this letter exist. A draft and a final mailed letter. Gennaro may have sent both to Serafina, since both still exist. The letters are practically identical on the front—the blue wishing well, the smiling face in the heart, the words. A minor error in phrasing, which forces Gennaro to place '*voglio*' above a line with a carot, is probably the reason for his starting over.]

Jersey City - 14/2/49

"Eh, Jerry, vieni qui. Help with these boxes."

The uncle pointed toward the loading dock where a shipment had arrived earlier that morning: cans and produce to inventory and then stock on the shelves. Gennaro followed his uncle's orders and proceeded to cart the goods to their respective areas of the store.

The day was dreary, cold rain for the most part with pockets of sunlight. 9:30 am and Gennaro had already been up for five hours. Gennaro had the sections of the grocery

store memorized—all the beans and canned goods belonged on the bottom shelf and just adjacent, the baking essentials. Jerry preferred being around the deli counter. He liked the customer service it required and the motions of slicing and weighing, half pounds of ham quarter pounds of salami. Though it was a supermarket, the store wasn't very large at all. It was quite the opposite, a tiny marketplace for the neighborhood, which just so happened to be owned by Acme supermarkets.

Across the street, the storefronts along the sidewalk were decorated for the holiday. Paper hearts and cupids formed patterns in the jeweler's window and the florist's down the street. Jerry looked out as he shelved the goods. The sight of the Valentine's Day decor added to his sweet torment. The holiday triggered thoughts of his lips on his beloved's, of her hand in his. His thoughts slowed his usually impeccable work ethic, something that was happening a good deal lately.

"Jerry! You're needed at the counter!" The young man snapped out of his *sogno di Serafina* at the sound of his uncle's command and dropped what he was doing. Customers were waiting for him there. A young couple, arm-in-arm, were in need of some cheeses from the case. He assisted them with an artificial politeness.

Jersey City – 17/2/49

My Serafina,

The sound of bell, so far away that nothing of its ring is heard. Nothing audible. But on some days, the sound is heard; a very tiny sound, and I begin to listen. The pealing of the bells is even greater now, something beautiful. Now you ask—what is it?—As you continue to read on, you will understand and the mystery will be unveiled.

The answer—but what is it? Let me be more clear, and please, don't forget to respond as soon as possible.

I am willing to leave this land to come and make you mine forever Next spring, with a stay at home in Italy together for two months.

In this said period, we should do everything together. It is not possible to speak of the departure date, of our starting date, if I do not first receive a letter from you and your mom, a response, soon.

So to you, the decision.

What I will tell you is that it is hard to obtain a ticket for a desirable date. It wouldn't be pleasant if, I wouldn't want to travel in the winter, it wouldn't be convenient, especially for a solo trip, but also during our time in Italy. Then for no other reason, we can begin to talk about the date of departure—If Andrea will come here soon, we could then take the trip back home to you, together.

I wrote you another this week, I hope you received it. Today, my sister received a letter, but me?? When you get this, I hope that you already figured out why the other letters weren't for you but for Andrea—patience!

I finish—Greetings and kisses to all—To you all my best—Kisses—

I love you! Gennaro I love you!

Pescopagano 21/2/49

My dear Geri,

Today, and with such pleasure, I received your very dear letter for me, what joy it ignited in me. To see Andrea receiving a letter the other day, from his Dora, and me, nothing, nothing dear! Oh! But today, I got yours and I thank you so for it, I sent you

another dated the 15th, I hope you have received it, you must forgive me, my darling, I made you suffer then, but as you can imagine, I felt the same during those bitter days; I was sad for some days, ah!

I want you to explain to me everything, everything, you tell me everything, my joy. You belong to me and I belong to you, I want you to write me always. You must not hide anything, must not leave anything out (what is new?) tell me (I want to know)- - -write to me- - - -

Mom could not include your ticket because as I already told you in the other letter I sent, she fell and broke an important bone in her hip. The doctor said that there were tears, as well, and I don't know what it's called but I hope she heals soon. On this earth, you must never stand without getting hurt...

Pasqualino leaves on the third of March for Napoli, and embarks on the 5th. We hope and pray to our God to watch over him and his health—

From everyone, you receive many kisses and dear greetings. I will say hello to dear mama and papa for you.

With all my affection,
yours Serafina

I love you so much—
Take me, tell me everything—
Sending sweet kisses to you—

Jersey City 23/2/49

My dearest Serafina,

The subject of marriage is like a delicate flower. If you're satisfied with everything said, then we would be happy, in fact, the happiest in the world. [...] I hope you are and remain happy. [...] There has been some time between letters, So you owe me a response, immediately please.

Do not misunderstand me; I want you as my wife. But only as a happy and content wife. I hope to hear from you soon. Kisses to your mother.

Excuse my handwriting-

All of the kisses-
Have all of my love,
Everything, Always,
Gennaro

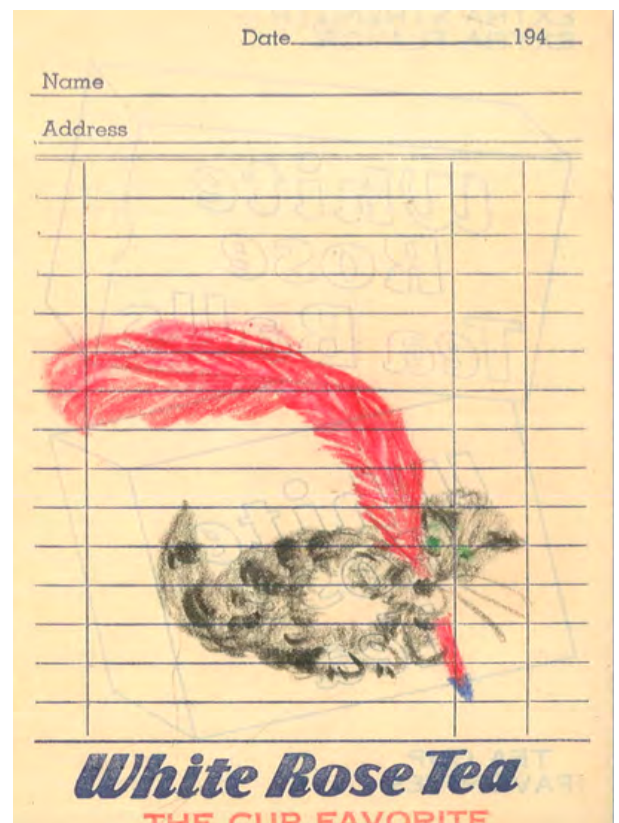
Newspaper clippings and drawings on receipt paper and loose leaf accompany later letters. Gennaro tends to supplement in this way more than Serafina. Commercial ads for shampoos and perfumes with beautiful women or a smooching couple to promote the

product become repurposed and contextualized for their long-distance love.

A *belladonna* with perfect, symmetrical facial features and a big smile scrubs her hair with shampoo. She annotates the clipping, “Your Serafina.” A pair kisses passionately in the newsprint. He labels the heads of the figures. “Gennaro” --- “Serafina” --- “You” --- “Me”



On a small piece of paper from a notepad advertising *White Rose Tea, the Cup Favorite*, Gennaro doodles a pussy cat writing with a fluffy, scarlet, and disproportionately large quill pen. While adorable and seemingly innocent, the name of this creature and the texture of feather or fur suggest something more risque. Lines of “*Spiegami*” and “*T’amo*” run across the pages as their love advance from *fidanzato* to *sposato*.



10/3/49

Dearest Serafina,

It has been ten extremely long days without receiving a letter from you. In a few days, it will be a month that I wrote a letter, it feels like. It's not true of course. I always wonder if you are ready to receive me this spring. But still, I have received nothing.

The date has already been confirmed, I am eligible for a passport---but I wait for your response to assure me.

Serafina, I sent you two other letters after the one from 18/2, where you tell me to tell you everything—t c. etc. Let me know what you think, ok?

But tell me, how could so much time pass and you not write to me? I hope that I receive yours soon, so that I can hear your definitive decision.

How is your mama? And you, are you good?

You know dear, I really don't know what to write. I feel like it's because there are two letters that I wrote that have not gotten your responses. Enough said, please excuse me if I seem a little short.

I end with many kisses to you, Greetings to Andrea, Rosetta, and to Mom.

Your kisses,

Gennaro

P.S. Write to me!

Write—often! Big kisses, Dora

Pescopagano, 15/3/49

Geri, my dear,

I received your letter after a while. There has been too much snow to receive the postage, the post office of Potenza has finally opened back up. And so, I got one from you dated the 23rd. I understand everything you shared with me.

Listen, dear, my mind is in a thousand places at once. I need some time to settle my thoughts and calm down,

Yes, my joy, I want to be a happy and content wife. I want to live with happiness and joy, and everything beautiful in the world.

Jersey City 14/5/49

My dearest Serafina,

I know that I'm late in sending this, but as you've always forgiven me, I pray you the same again this time—do you forgive me?

You know why-----no? Well, I've been busy with this and that; you guessed it in your last one.

I am trying to see if I can come this year—I don't know yet—so you must wait a bit longer, for me to figure out my situation. So far—so good—let us hope the future brings bright things for us.

Please excuse me, I cannot write more, it is so so late and I'm very tired---

I will write more in the next one.

I wrote these few lines so you will get something from me, that is, not to make you suffer.

I cannot wait.

Many kisses and greets to all and to you from all. My best to you—

Yours forever,
Gennaro

27/8/49

Serafina sat by the window, like a housecat basking in the sun. But instead of occupying her time with a skein of yarn, she worked tediously on an embroidery of lilies, a gift for a childhood friend who married a man from outside of the village. Maria Cafaro, who lived four houses away, toward the *castello*, to Jacopo Frino, a boy from San' Andre. The house was quiet and still this particular afternoon. Serafina was uncomfortable by the silence but kept herself distracted, engaged in her work. Earlier that morning, Antonietta left the house to run errands around the village including two fittings, two last minute house calls planned the day before, by the fountain. One hem and one neckline for a mother and daughter.

A terracotta pot abundant with flowers, bordered by basil and oregano, sat beside Serafina on the sill. In the late afternoon light, Serafina resembled a painting by one of the great masters of the Renaissance. A soft ruby red apron tied around her waist, and a billowing blouse draped loosely on her body. The young woman's garments fell into intense light and shadow. She looked down on her work, the doily spilling across her lap. The heat of the afternoon sun sunk closer to the horizon, and directly into the main room of the home. The window framed her profile: the young seamstress, who, illuminated by the summer rays, transformed into a deity. Serafina embodied the very definition of her name. She evoked Leonardo da Vinci's image of the Madonna. In the master's *quattrocento Annunciation scene*, the Madonna works in solitude in a domestic space. Suddenly

interrupted by the archangel messenger Gabriel, who enters the scene to inform her of the miracle, Mary is presented in tableau, surprised.³

The postman knocked on the door. At last, a letter had arrived.

³ *Annunciation* by Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea del Verrocchio, c. 1472-1475, depicts the Madonna at the moment archangel Gabriel tells her that she will have the son of God. The bowing angel holds a lily, a symbol for Mary's virginity. Leonardo's *Annunciation* is recognized for the master artist's attempt at painting anatomically correct wings on the angel.



Jersey City - 9/3/50

Serafina carissima,
Eggi appunto, con grande

sorpresa, ho ricevuto una tua ---- cara!
Ci ha impiegato un tre giorni per arrivare a
sua destinazione.

Un'altra sorpresa è stata quella che è
oltre un mese che non hai ricevuto mie. Puoi
stare sicura che ogni tua invitami, è stata
risposta, --- che poi si sono perdute, non lo so!
Ma con tutto ciò, non preoccuparti; che fra poco
è ---- -. Io sto bene. Il biglietto d'imbarco
è stato preso, i passaporti sono arrivati; i panni
per te sono stati comprati; gli anelli compreso
l'orologio sono sicuri, le vaccinazioni sono state
fatte, che chiar, ---- deno comparirmi qualche
cosa per me ---- e sabato si faranno le carte.
^{in necessarie}
per me, cioè quello per sposare, e poi il 21 Mayo!

Il giorno di sbarco vorrei venire subito
a Pescopogono, figurati, e poi ci sono sempre guasti
ma!

Jersey City - 9/3/50

Serafina dearest,

Today, with great surprise, I received one of yours----dear!

It took three days to reach its destination.

Another surprise is that a month has gone by and you haven't received anything from me. Do you feel secure that all of your letters have reached me? Because I feel like many have been lost! I don't know. But, with everything, all those written, we shouldn't worry, because we know what we are saying to each other and ----- it's ok, I'm good.

The ticket has been purchased, the passports have arrived, and the clothes for you have been bought; the rings are secured, as is the clock, the vaccinations are done. All these purchases and things done, makes it feel all the more real. And Saturday, cards go out announcing our marriage. And then, March is over!

The day I arrive, I wish I could be in Pescopagano immediately, but there are always obstacles, but! There is some more travel before reaching you once I arrive in Italy, but it is more than worth it.

Mom has not seen her sister, her brothers, etc., in twenty years. She would like to go there first, but only for two days. They will teach me the etiquette while I'm there, and when I get to you, I will be Pescopaganese also, yes or no?

Eleven days and then we depart! Then ten days at sea and another three and then I have you! Serafina, finally!!! I hope your impression of me doesn't change, I mean, I hope you like me in person. It is an incredible thing that we have seen each other almost every day, but only in one form, the photos. I remember the first time I saw you. I loved you then. I worry that when you see me, I won't look good for you, I mean, after all that travel. Uh, oh!

Madonna, I don't know if this is the last letter, but certainly this one, you shouldn't respond to, because I will be on my way.

Many kisses to Mama and Rosetta. I hope that I won't be an inconvenience for them.

Please, receive all my best.

Your soon-to-be husband,
Gennaro

(There was a stamp in the envelope you sent. So, I return it to you here, because I am an honest man.)

Orange 13/3/50

Dearest Serafina,

I find myself at home today because I started to prepare the papers, and with this reason, I also went to the priest, at the church where I was baptized. I have done everything the church expects, except I haven't been confirmed, but I talked with the priest, and I will get that done soon. He recommended I write you, so that you could talk to your priest, to begin to prepare what is necessary with the church. I believe the marriage license also takes a while, so If you want for me to come, naturally, a month will go by and that is precious time. After fifteen days, we will have everything in order. I believe you know my full name, but just in case: Gennaro Paolo Valvano (of Giuseppe), the father, Giuseppe Valvano (of Antonio), the mother, Maria Sanita` Infante (of Paolo).

I was born in Orange on December 2nd, 1929. This is in case you need this information for the license. All of the invitations have been sent, and the notices have been made to the church. I recommend you go to the church before I arrive to settle this. You understand!

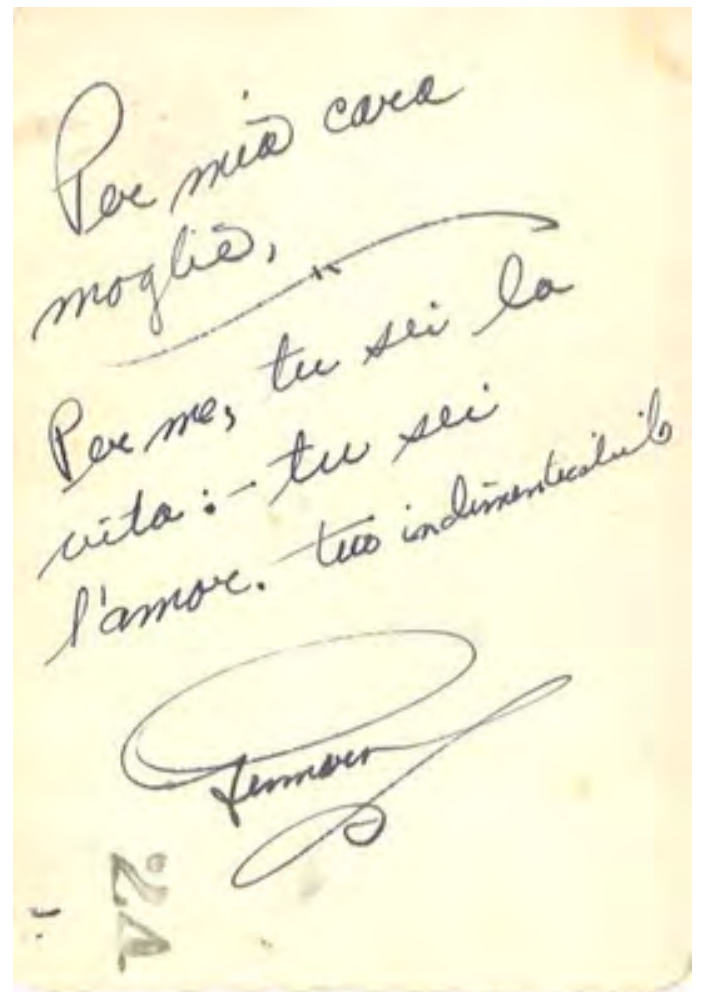
This is as not to waste time. I hope that we have the same mindset and you are already doing these things. I hope this gets to you sooner rather than later in case you haven't started these processes yet. If the priest has any questions, like about my confirmation, you can answer for me, and if he has anything further, I can answer when I am there.

Madonna, what things! I hope that everything sounds good to you. We have everything figured out!!

I will not add more. Please excuse the handwriting, I am just so excited!

Many kisses to Mama and Rosetta.

And to you, everything,
Gennaro



Aprile 1950



Gennaro Valvano and Serafina Savignano are married in the Pescopagano. The pair spends some months together including a miniature honeymoon to Capri, the island off the peninsula of Sorrento.

Aprile 2015

Married for almost a full year, the pair celebrated their first wedding anniversary apart for each other.

Two telegrams arrived at the house a month apart from each other and between the longer letters. The slips of telegram paper feel like soft watercolor paper. Both telegrams come to Pescopagano as messages from Geri. In a stranger's handwriting, an employee of the region's postal service, Gennaro's charming one-liners are delivered to his beloved. They seem to mark the formal end of their four-year transatlantic back and forth. Gennaro sends Serafina a "*Buon Viaggio*," on May 25th, 1951 and their communication continues face to face, for over sixty years.

Postmarked 26.4.51

Gennaro to Savignano, Serafina
Exhaustively waiting for your departure in May
-Geri

Postmarked 25.5.51,

Gennaro to Savignano, Serafina.
Have a good trip, beautiful.
-Geri

Fatevi correntisti postali. Pagamenti e riscossioni in tutte le localita della Reppubblica—Fra correntisti i pagamenti e le riscossioni posta sono eseguiti senza limitazione di somma ed in esenzione da qualsiasi tassa.

15. 6. 51

"Incredible. *Incredible*," he exclaimed as the sun enveloped the room. Morning arrived, and after a night of very little sleep, Gennaro was virtually unaffected. He felt, on the contrary, perfectly rested. His dreams were his thoughts, as he lay there awake in the dark hours of early morning. Before the sun peered in. Today is the day, he thought. Equal to that of a young child's excitement opening, each day, the next paper door of the Advent

calendar, the anticipation was overwhelming. This whole month, the whole year, even, was preparation for today. Really, ever since the pair parted, each day felt longer than the one prior.

She, his vivid beauty and his bride, with a complexion that matched the elegantly pressed wedding dress she donned, was his constant. He recalled her voice, delicate, smooth, yet firm. A weighted voice. Homonym to wait, that thing he had done over and over, week after week, as each letter—didn't and then did—come. His yearning, the shortness of breath, the restlessness was palpable. This anxious enthusiasm shoved him out of bed. The waiting and expecting of every single letter was Gennaro's limbo, a purgatory he simultaneously savored and despised.

It began to settle in rapidly as he got ready for the day—husband and wife together, in the same house, *nella stessa casa*, in the same bed, *nello stesso letto*.

When he started thinking about the logistics of the day, he became impatient, vexed. The fanfare that could potentially—that would definitely ensue—he thought of his uncles, ma and pop, the extended relatives and friends, and their reactions to his bride, his Serafina. And more importantly, her reaction to them...He scratched his scalp, from forehead to neck, with his fingertips, wiped the crust from his eyes, and opened the medicine cabinet.

Shaving was something Gennaro enjoyed very much. The process was a daily regimen, which provided him a little time alone, to ruminate over it all, the joys and the sacrifices, mostly the future. Today, he looked into the mirror with a renewed energy, a cheer that made his hands cold, clammy with excitement. He set out his materials—the barbasol that always strangely, or not so strangely, gave him a hankering for an ice cream

sundae, his bristle brush with the tortoise shell-brown handle, a fresh razor from the back of the cabinet for the special occasion, a warm washcloth. With the blade, he made sure a neat side-burn was marked, first left then right, parallel to the top of the jawline. Carefully, methodically, he cleaned up the rest of his face, in a rhythmic motion, down then off, down then off, rinse, down, off, down, off, rinse.

Patting his face dry, he sealed in the shave with Clubman talc, the powder from the kelly-green container that smelled of barbershop and man. He snuck a tiny drop of cologne from the stand, the one in the thick emerald glass bottle that his father used every so often, for church on Easter and Christmas, and for important days at work. He slapped it on his neck and between his wrists. It had a wooden and metallic odor to it, but pleasant.

Geri caught the aroma of the espresso brewing downstairs. He picked up the pace. His outfit was pressed neat on the closet doorknob. Slacks, undershirt, suspenders, and shoes right beside, all of which he had prepared the night before. The shirt, bought specifically for today, a crisp cotton dress shirt, a dignified sky blue with matte ivory buttons.

As he adjusted his collar, he played through all the hypotheticals. They will lock eyes first thing. It will take a half hour to track her down in the swarm of people. He will tap a lady with brown wavy hair under a floral scarf on the shoulder, it will not be her. He stopped, too much... He thought about what she could be wearing. Something fit for travel of course, but still effortlessly gorgeous all the same, because it will be her—she who radiates elegance and class, *sua Serafina*.

15.6.951

It had been over a full week by this point and in tight quarters, it wasn't the most pleasant situation. But whenever she felt claustrophobic or seasick, antsy, anything at all, she reached for a letter. Neatly stowed away in her trunk, a deep wooden chest, wrapped in an emerald green and black leather coating, was her whole life, every single letter from Gennaro—*Cara Serafina, Mio Tesoro, Mia vita*— The hundreds were packed in the center of the trunk as the nucleus, in butcher paper and clothes. But three, she kept with her, on her person, in the inside pocket of her coat. She traced his words and illustrations, the bride and groom at top left, the small house tucked away from the road. To pass the time, she used his envelopes as drawing paper and wrote out his name, her *nome* with a new, shorter three-syllable *cognome*.





Part II: America

"If you decide to come from Naples, or from other Southern towns such as Bari, Cosenza, Potenza, or Reggio Calabria, lose no opportunity to point out that all the great Italians—Dante, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Galileo, Raffaello, etc., —were Southerners. Mussolini was a Northerner. So was Lucrezia Borgia."- Lou D'Angelo, 1971

All but one of the remaining Cicenia Savignano siblings married and immigrated to America. Soon, the family was together in New Jersey, and expanding. By the 60's, the neighborhood of Carteret Terrace, Fuller Terrace, and Highland Ave in Orange mapped a rectangle of family. Walking distance from each other, the Cicenia Savignano children, their spouses, and their children formed a nest for themselves on the side streets of Orange. An American life of children, of nieces and nephews, careers, and cars.

August 26th, 1961

Balloons of shapes and sizes in pastel primary colors formed a canopy over the backyard picnic table. Serafina opened the backdoor off the kitchen, and made her way down the stairs onto the back patio. Sheet cake elevated in her hands, she minded each step. Her outfit matched the balloons, a pastel summer dress. In pearls, her beauty rivaled the tan, voluptuous, and stunning Sophia Loren. It was Nanette's fourth birthday. It was a Saturday. August 27th was her actual birthday, but most of the people had off from work today, and so Serafina and Geri planned for the day before. It didn't have to compete with church.

"Michele, Nanette! Come here!" Geri sang from the grill. A wrought iron fence, painted white, separated the patio from the yard. Michele jumped up from the grass and helped her sister, the birthday girl, up from the ground with one hand. Nanette scooped up the two Barbie dolls with her available hand, one in a black-and-white striped one-piece

swimsuit, the other in her Sunday best, and the sisters, in matching dresses, ran over to the patio, where the all the adults, their older sister, and the cousins sat. Below the trellis of balloons and ribbon, the table was crowded with birthday hats, grilled burgers and hot dogs, sodas, two antipasto platters, bowls of potato chips and pretzels, potato salad, and coleslaw, and paper dishware and confetti. "*Tanti auguri a te, Happy birthday to you, tanti auguri a Nanetta, happy birthday to you.*"

Italian Food Store in Orange a Family Affair

By HELEN P. SILVER

Special to The New York Times

ORANGE—Everyone is related at Serafina's, an Italian food store and processing plant at 182 South Center Street. The proprietor, Genaro (Jerry) Valvano, firmly believes that it is good business to keep it all in the family.

"We produce all our own pasta products in our rear-of-the-store plant," Mr. Valvano explained the other day. "We cook our own Italian specialty dishes, like the ricotta cheese-stuffed shells, ricotta cheese ravioli and the traditional manicotti and lasagne. And we bake our own pastries, like the lemon love knots, the honey and confetti struffoli balls and the powdered sugar rosettes.

High on the list of Easter Week specials are the pizza rustica, a meat pie filled with the store's own combination of Italian salami, prosciutto and Romano cheese (\$3.50 for the eight-inch size); the light-as-air taralli, a bagel-shaped biscuit, and the pizza dolce, a special Italian cheese cake whose ingredients include ricotta, orange peel, citron and fruit flavorings.

Business Trademark

The baker's wife, Italian-born Serafina, whose name has become the business trademark, interrupted to say that many foods once prepared solely for Easter were now in demand all year.

"In some cases, this has given us a better product," Mr. Valvano declared. "For instance, take the struffoli. We never knew how to make it right. When we made it once a year, the small, honeyed balls were hard as a rock. You could crack a tooth on them.

"We learned how to make them light enough to eat comfortably and to taste just right. Of course, we don't sell as much later on as we do during Easter. But it goes. Every week."

Meanwhile, in the back kitchen, six teen-agers were busily at work, all at their appointed food-producing tasks. One was at the pasta machine, another was attending to the ravioli, two young men were dicing salami for the pizza rustica, and one slender, saucer-eyed beauty, her hair pulled sleekly back in a barette at the nape of her neck, was heaping the cavatelli, a shell-shaped, ricotta-blended pasta, onto large trays for overnight drying. The sixth youngster was sweeping up.

There was a good deal of chatter and laughter among them, but no one's hands were idle. This was a family at work.

Nothing Is Frozen

"We prepare all our own food here daily," observed Mr. Valvano, noticeably proud of both family and food. "With my wife and our three children, and her sisters and their children, there isn't a pot or pasta-making machine that isn't being carefully watched."



Batista Savignane making struffoli, a honey-coated pastry, at Serafina's Italian food store in Orange.



The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad

Serafina Valvano takes some pizza rustica from the oven. The meat and cheese pie is made for Easter.

"Nothing is ever frozen here," he continued. "Some stores we deliver to say that our products freeze well. That may be. But we don't do it here. We believe in fresh."

The store's clients include the Village Cupboard in Bloomfield, Lombardi's Delicatessen in South Orange, James Intile's Meat Market in Montclair and Franklin Farms in Belleville. Restaurant buyers for his fresh, homemade pasta dishes include Nicaastro's in Newark, the Brownstone Inn in West Orange and the Town Pub in Bloomfield.

Mr. Valvano is especially proud of his cheese ravioli, which he has been making for 23 years. He says it sells

well as a substitute for cheese blintzes.

As for fettuccini, Mr. Valvano observed: "We don't make the final dish. For it to taste as it should, it must be tossed with the cream sauce just before eating, preferably right at the table. We cannot package it to taste the way it should."

"All we can give you is the right fettuccini. The cream sauce is up to the cook."

However, Serafina's does package its own spaghetti sauce—either meat or marinara—for 95 cents a pint or \$1.89 a quart. Another daily chore is the grating of fresh, imported Romano cheese at \$3.49 a pound.

The making of mozzarella

cheese is a special feature at the store.

"We have it in the twist shape and in the popular ball shape," Mr. Valvano said. "And we also have it salted and shaped like a bottle. But we are proudest of the butter-filled mozzarella ball. This was the way

Italians used to store butter before refrigeration became commonplace."

All mozzarella sells for \$1.95 a pound.

Serafina's is open weekdays from 8 A.M. to 6 P.M., and on Sundays from 9 A.M. to 1 P.M. The telephone number is (201) 674-9043.

March 20th, 1975

“Wife!” Jerry’s voice echoed to the back of the store. Sara was busy in the back room with Battista and her daughters and nieces. With a line from the door to the counter, the business couldn’t move fast enough. Between the lunch hour rush and the holiday coming up, it felt like the whole town was at the store for their sweet pies, meat pies, fried dough balls, and *ravi-s*. Jerry worked the deli counter while his daughter Maria was stationed at the cash register ringing up the masterpieces straight from the kitchen, the oven, and the fryer. Nanette, Michele, and cousins were in the back following their mother and aunt’s orders to produce orders for the front of the house.

“Ok, Jerry! Here we go.” Serafina walked out into the store with the tray of meat pies and set it down. Within ten minutes, the pies were out the door with Serafina’s customers, some familiar faces, some new. Easter season was one of a hand full in the year where everyone in the family, immediate and extended, was needed in the store. Christmas and New Year’s were equally busy.

“Sara, take a breather!” a customer joked at Serafina as she made her way back into the kitchen. She chuckled and swatted her hand in the air, as if to say “Psh, yes, I know, I would do that, but how about you be quiet and let me do my job.” Jerry rang him up at the other end of the store and sent him on his way.

March 28th - April 1975

Jerry brought home a copy of the Times from the corner store and flipped through to find the article by Helen Silver. Under Food News, there it was. His wife and sister-in-law in large photos at the top of the article. Upon noticing some type errors, he recalled that he had joked with the journalist not even a week prior to paper going to press about tricky

Italian words and their spelling. But really? Serafino's? Jerry promptly corrected the couple of the mistakes neatly with black pen to match the print, his penmanship, barely noticeable, matching the font of the article. He trimmed along the margins to free the words on his store from the larger newspaper.

"What an honor," he thought before voicing aloud the august name: "The New York Times." he voiced aloud. Sure, this thought had gone through his mind all throughout the interviews and photographers, but with the physical article in his hands, he felt such pride for his establishment, the eponymous store, his Serafina's.

In preparation for the published article, Jerry purchased two cheap frames. Two different sizes and formats, just in case: one more narrow in black wood and the other a thick green plastic. The page fit almost perfectly in the black frame. Swiftly, Jerry aligned the article with the glass and border, sealed the back closed, and brought it into the house from his garage work station to show his Serafina.

The next day, he hung the article on the wall behind the counter. And for more than a month after the fact, Serafina's regular customers came in with the article clipped from the Times for their friends and owners, Jerry and Sara. A pile formed on the desk in the back office. Nanette brought in a folder from home to store them, pressed and ordered in the filing cabinet.

August 6th, 1977,
July 23rd, 1983,
and July 20th, 1985

Serafina and her daughters dressed the bride-to-be. The photographer and his team were on their way to the Valvano home. The sisters donned bridesmaids' dresses that fell to ankle length. The bride, in cream white, ran her fingers through her bangs and along her

temple, tucking strays behind her ears. Her thick Brunette hair resembled Princess Diana's Dorothy Hamill's do, short and stylish. In front of the mantle, the photographer positioned the family, matriarch and patriarch in their golden velvet armchairs, daughters on both ends, and bride at center. After some shots of the camera, they reconfigured, the bride's sisters to her left, her parents to her right. Between the first couple of photos, Serafina adjusted the bridal gown on her daughter—the way it draped to the floor, the folds neatly organized. She even fluffed the veil. On this special day, the Valvano family of five, father, mother, and three grown, beautiful daughters, transformed into an altarpiece, in front of the fireplace, stacked from seated, to the standing bride, the focal point of the image.

A limousine pulled alongside the curb. The five left the house from the main entrance. Jerry and Serafina guided their daughters into the limo, then husband assisted wife into the car. The Church, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, was about a ten-minute drive away from 304 Carteret Terrace. The church, erected in brick, resembled a fortified *castello*, with references to medieval and Renaissance ecclesiastical architecture. The peak of the church's completely gilded bell tower extended toward the sky. Mt. Carmel stood sanguine, on the corner of South Center Street and Freeway Drive. It was the family parish, where the three daughters and their cousins attended primary school and where one later taught. The entrance, where the Valvano bride arrived with her father and exited with her husband, were brass double doors, like those on the Florentine baptistery, but simplified.⁴ The

⁴ The doors of the Florentine baptistery were designed by Lorenzo Ghiberti, c. 1401. At the opening of the *quattrocento*, a contest was held by the Cloth Importers Guild of Florence to choose the artist's design for the votive offering reliefs on the doors to the baptistery. Ghiberti won the competition over others like Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello. The most famous piece on baptistery doors is Ghiberti's *Sacrifice of Isaac*.

limousine approached. Inside, the rest of the wedding party and guests awaited the arrival of Maria, 1977, Nanette, 1983, and Michele, 1985.

June 9th 1989

Frank and Antoinette's first child was born. Her name is Genna, after Gennaro.

Tradition in Italian families to name children after their grandparents, Nanette tweaked her father's name for her baby girl.

Serafina was the honored name in the family. The name of Gennaro's treasure, his beloved, and the store. With Nanette's baby girl, his legacy was honored. He taped a copy of the hospital photo, the infant in pastels, to the cash register.

In June, and through the summer, Gennaro brought up his new granddaughter to practically every customer who came into the store.

May 14th, 1997

"Mommom and Poppop are here!" Nanette hollered up the stairs to her kids. Genna was painting Johnny's face in the upstairs bathroom. She had him stand on the toilet seat, completely still, to decorate his face with stripes of orange and yellow, white and pink for the whiskers and nose. It was a backyard birthday party for Johnny. The theme—Tigger from Winnie the Pooh.

Nanette greeted her parents at the front door. Her father, clean-shaven and cologned, hair perfectly combed back. A short-sleeve button down sweater shirt tucked into dress pants with a belt. Her mother, hair voluminous, with the help of curlers from the night before, her fair skin made up with red lipstick and blush. In beige and creams, a blouse and slacks, elegant spring attire. She reached for her daughter's hand, brought it

close to her, and kissed one cheek, at the door. Her mother's hands, soft, warm. She smelled of rose water and Lancôme.

On the back patio, Frank worked the grill. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends of the birthday boy and the family spilled out into the backyard, on the hammock, around the picnic table, and under umbrellas.

October 17th, 1998

A large 2x5 canvas entered the house in a gilded frame. Behind it, Jerry and Serafina. After hours up in his studio, he brought his second daughter, Nanette, her framed oil painting. He painted her dream garden, an alternate universe—a refined nature that did not require weeding or raking. A garden for the eyes. The panoramic view depicts a winding path at center and choreographed nature in the foreground. Up the path, a gate is the focal point of the expansive painting. Beyond the fenced-in area, the natural world opens up into the sublime, complete with mountains and water, hills and trees. The garden is a fantastical fusion of the Italian countryside, the patchwork view from elevated Pescopagano, and Nanette's ideal backyard garden sanctuary.

November 15th, 2000

Genna and Johnny ran down the five steps into their grandparent's basement from the garage entrance. After greeting Gennaro and Serafina with kisses, they went to the trumpeter clown on the ledge by the bulky china cabinet. A source of entertainment in the basement for the children, the trumpeter amused the kids a great deal. Genna grabbed some cookies from the snack drawer, which was always stocked with fresh baked oatmeal raisin and store-bought *Stella D'oro* cookies. The ceramic little clown sat on a wooden crate

in a bowler cap, patched-up maroon blazer and gray slacks, and worn-out dress shoes. His face, dirty and made-up like Emmett Kelly Jr. remained still until a small black switch on his crate was flicked on.⁵ The tiny hobo clown moved to and fro with his trumpet in hand, to the tune of *"Oh When the Saints Go Marching In."* The melody from a trumpet track accompanied the back-and-forth motions of the battery-operated figurine. The little clown amused the children while the adults chatted in the kitchen, no more than fifteen feet away.

Serafina and Nanette spoke in the dialect, a comfortable white noise for Johnny and Genna. With the occasional slip into English, or familiar Italian phrase, the children vaguely entered and exited the conversation with phrases like *"Quista Qua"* and sometimes, it became clear through gesture and words that the adults were talking about the children. But Genna and Johnny never had a grasp around the broken dialect to fully join the conversation and say their piece.

November 24th, 2004

The family sat down for Thanksgiving dinner this year with his parents, grandparents, and grandchildren. Six total, Gennaro at the head of the table, Serafina next to him, dad and mom beside each other, Genna and Johnny on the other end. Nanette described the Thanksgiving of her childhood and reminisced with her parents about the elaborate full day affairs they once were. The family Thanksgiving was an event where the three daughters were put in their poufy holiday dresses and like the tool of the skirts, the

⁵ On Emmett Kelly Sr. (1898-1979) and Emmett Kelly Jr. (1924-2006) were the world's most famous circus clowns. Father and son had a clown persona named "Weary Willie" who was based on the hobos of the Great Depression. Emmett Kelly, junior and senior, brought light to a low point in American history. "Weary Willie" is also reminiscent of the Italian *"Pagliaccio"* by Ruggero Leoncavallo in Pietro Mascagni's 1890 *"Cavalleria Rusticana."* Luciano Pavarotti made the role of the clown famous with his beautiful tenor voice, in modern day.

house was full. A crowded table of brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, mostly all first generation Italian. The only way the meal can be described is in list form:

To start, a fruit cocktail. Then, Italian wedding soup or a variation on escarole and bean soup. Manicotti, stuffed shells. Meatballs, sausage, *braciole*, in sauce. Then, at last, the traditional Thanksgiving meal of turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, etc. Salad. Pies, pastries, cakes. Coffee, espresso, liquors, and liqueurs.

This Thanksgiving menu suggests the meal was a full day affair as well as an Italian infused American tradition. Nanette recalls there was pride in celebrating this national holiday. The Thanksgiving meal was coopted in the Valvano home, with Savignano cousins and siblings surrounding the table. It was a solid dress rehearsal for the elaborate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day feasts.

April 24th, 2007

Nanette drove down to Orange with Frank and Johnny. The actual direction was east but down was always how they phrased it—down to Mommom and Poppop’s house. Johnny shared the back seat with groceries from Shop Rite, double bagged in paper and yellow plastic. Approaching their house, around the curve of Carteret Terrace, Johnny interrupted the conversation between his parents to point out Serafina sweeping. Petals and leaves had fallen from the two trees on either end of the driveway, creating a layer of white on the edge of the property. Frank rolled down the window, “*Serafin’! Bagenzia’*,” he shouted in a playful tone.

“Ma, what are you doing? Let us help you.” Nanette didn’t like it when her mom was outside alone. With the garage door wide open and an entrance into the main house directly off the garage, she worried about her parent’s safety. After five or so burglaries

from her youth living at 304 Carteret Terrace, the neighborhood was no longer considered completely safe.

They parked and Johnny shot out of the car, greeted his grandmother, and reached for the broom.

"*E` va ben'*, Its ok..." Serafina assured her grandson. "I can do." Johnny traded the broom for a bag of groceries.

"*Che puzz?*" Frank exclaimed, knowing full well that the stench was coming from the trees.

Mother and daughter walked into the house while Johnny and Frank finished clearing the driveway from the fragrant floral pests. On the way in, Nanette took the bag from her mother's hands and they descended into the finished basement, where Geri was reclined in his chair watching the 5 o'clock news.

"Hi Dad." Nanette said as she set the bags on the kitchen counter.

"Hey Nan. Where's Cheek?"

Nanette's family referred to her husband, Frank Cherichello, as *Cheech*. Jerry abbreviated the nickname, separate from his daughters, wife, and son-in-laws.

"Outside with Johnny, they'll be right in." As Nanette said this, the door swung open from the garage and the Cherichello boys entered the basement. The basement was a grand room, not grand in scale, excellence, or beauty, but grand in that it didn't have walls separating the rooms. From the garage, the wooden door pushed open to a landing where the option for upstairs or downstairs is presented. Red and black-checked carpeting ran along the stairwells and down into the basement. More frequently, guests went downstairs, as Serafina and Gennaro lived the majority of their days in later life in this

finished basement, a plebeian alternative to their lavish upstairs, where they journeyed, only at night, to sleep.

On some visits, Johnny climbed up to the main level of his grandparent's home. From room to room, he ran his finger down the books on the shelf, marveled over the oil paintings in gilded frames, the ornamental furniture, the plaster statuettes and figurines of Venus, Michelangelo's *Pietà* and *Moses*. Every window and door was bolted shut with elegant and wrought iron, the same kind as the railing and benches on their front porch, protecting everything and everyone from any intrusion. Their home was a guarded museum.

Among such gorgeous decor, some on the cusp of gaudy but not quite there, the grandson reflected on Sera and Jerry's living habits, their everyday routine. The thought upset him. In their basement grotto, the pair was practically homebound. With the exception of course for holidays and doctors appointments, their retired life was conducted from the multi-purpose basement.

February 1st, 2009

To celebrate Serafina's birthday, they brought a lemon meringue pie down. It was a known fact that lemon meringue pie was Poppop's favorite, so on the drive down, Johnny was confused as to why they were bringing one for Mommom's birthday dinner. He punched the four-digit passcode onto the keypad, 1-9-2-9. As soon as the door had risen above his head, Johnny ducked under, despite his mother's protests.

"Johnny! Wait for it to open all the way!" his mother exclaimed from the other end of the driveway.

"I'm fine, mom!" he yelled back as he ran into the finished basement. Gennaro was in

his caramel leather recliner in his silk pajamas. On this visit, Gennaro looked run down, bags under his eyes, stubble on his face, which made for an unpleasant greeting for the grandson's ritual kiss on the cheek.

June 22nd, 2012

"La vecchiaia e` una corona, ma piu peg' non arriva," Serafina chanted as Frank and Johnny assisted her down the steps toward the car.

The mantra, in her dialect, roughly translates into English to, "Old age is the devil, but worse those who do not arrive there." Serafina repeated the phrase whenever she was receiving help in getting up from the sofa, ascending or descending stairs.

Repeated so often, grandmother and grandson recited the words in unison, as they buckled her seatbelt together. Frank pulled out from the driveway and they drove to Florham Park, to visit Gennaro at the nursing home. Nanette clicked the CD option on the console to the last song on Andrea Bocelli's album *Romanza*. Johnny sang along in the back seat. *"Con te partirò, Paesi che non ho mai veduto e vissuto con te, adesso si li vivrò, Con te partirò su navi per mari che, io lo so, no, no, non esistono più."*⁶

⁶ Translation: "Time to say goodbye, to countries I never saw and shared with you, now, yes, I shall experience them. I'll go with you on ships across seas, which, I know, no, no, no longer exists. It's time to say goodbye..."-Andrea Bocelli, *"Con te Partirò,"* 1996.

September 15th, 2013

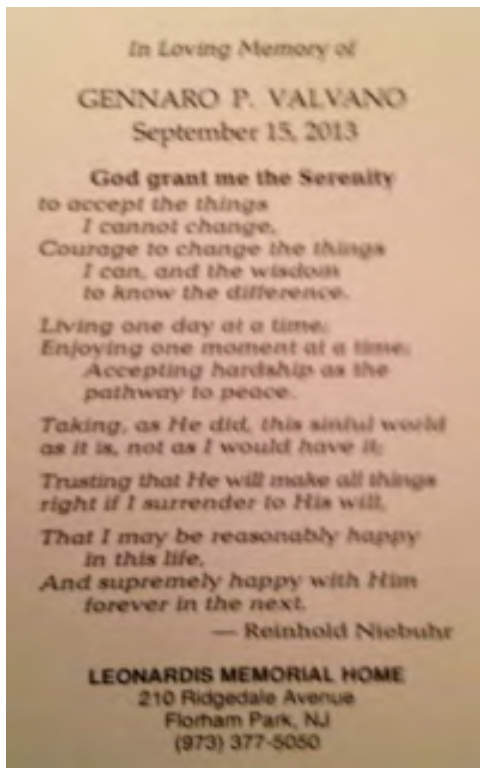
Gennaro "Jerry" Valvano, 83, life-long resident of Orange, owner of Serafina's Italian Specialties in Orange, passed away on September 15, 2013. Beloved husband of 63 years to



Serafina (Savignano). Devoted father of Maria Clayton, her husband James, Nanette Cherichello, her husband Frank, Michele Doyle and her husband Dennis. Loving grandfather of James, Sera, Genna, John, Matthew, Daniel, and Michele. Dear brother of the late Dorothy Savignano, Madeline Tropa, Rose Ricci, Frank, Anthony, and Alfonso Valvano. Visitation at the Leonardis Memorial Home 210 Ridgedale Ave. Florham Park on Wednesday from 3-7pm. Funeral on Thursday assembling at 9am followed by a mass at Holy Family Church in Florham Park at 10am. Entombment at Gate of Heaven Cemetery.

September 17th, 2013

The sun reflected off the casket as the two men opened the door of the church. The parish was in a residential area of Florham Park and the closest church to the nursing and funeral home, which sat across the street from one another, a blatantly suggestive juxtaposition. The boy thought of Gennaro and Serafina and their walks back and forth to the mailbox, their conversations with the postman, who mediated all their letters to and from Pescopagano, Potenza, Italy, and who was thus in some



sense as important as the man who gave away the bride when Gennaro and Serafina walked down the aisle in April of 1950.

A man directed orders to the four cousins, the grandsons Jimmy, Matthew, Daniel, and Johnny. "One hand on the bar and one hand on the bottom of the casket. Ready. Lift." They did as commanded and guided the coffin to a gurney-like piece of equipment. They were the last people left outside and the last to enter the church where all waited, facing the entrance. As the four pushed their grandfather toward the steps that led to the doors of the chapel, their faces were expressionless, then somber. The laid-brick sidewalk made for a rickety wheeling toward the door, while the fresh mulch that bordered the path and infiltrated the nostrils.

"Lift." Once again, one hand on the bar and the other at the base. "Wait, move six inches down, back three inches. My apologies, forward a bit more."

In the lobby, the funeral home men situated the four cousins.

Johnny took a deep breath in through his mouth, rather than his nose to avoid the stench of mulch, as the double doors opened. Jimmy and Johnny placed their hands on each front corner of the coffin and guided it down the aisle. A priest stopped midway down the nave, where the sacrament of baptism is performed, to recite a prayer and sprinkle the wood of the coffin with holy water. The walk continued past empty pews and then to the full ones. Johnny recognized mothers of friends and colleagues of my parents. Some faces were unfamiliar, cousins of my mother, and friends of my aunt. All the while, watching his footing in dress shoes on a slippery, polished marble floor, Johnny and his cousins brought their grandfather before the altar. The men passed us a beige and purple cloth to place over the varnished casket. Johnny tore off a small orange dry-cleaning tag from the edge of the

sheet that someone had neglected to remove. He crumpled it up and put it in his left pocket before anyone could see.

Serafina sat in the first pew in front of the altar: a woman so tied to her husband that his funeral was the first time since 1950 that she stood as an individual. After sixty-three years of marriage, three children, seven grandchildren, Gennaro, her husband, the father, and grandfather, had passed.

At the conclusion of the mass, the boys wheeled him out to the hearse. Tears streamed down everyone's' faces. Hand on bar, with Jimmy at left, Daniel behind, Matthew at right and Johnny following, the cousins carried a man who used to hold them in his arms.



SORRENTO - Panorama con Marina Grande (1880)

CARTOLINA POSTALE

Luglio/July 2014

Cara Mamma,
 Sono a Sorrento
 per un mese e lo
 adoro. L'Italia è
 bellissima e voglio
 abitare qui per alcuni
 anni della mia vita.
 Mi manchi e ti voglio
 bene - Il prossimo week-end, andrò a Pescopagano!

Tuo nipote,
 Johnny Giovanni



Serafina Valvano
 33 Wellington Rd
 Livingston, NJ 07039
 USA

PRINTED IN ITALY

July 2nd, 2014

Dear Mommom,

I am in Sorrento for a month and I adore it. Italy is very beautiful and I want to live here for some years of my life. I miss you and I love you. Next weekend, I go to Pescopagano!

Your loving grandson,
Johnny

July 30th and 31st, 2014

The first evening in the village, a fair stretched across the *corso*, down *Via Indipendenza* toward *Via Zanardelli*. When I arrived in Pescopagano and heard about the festival from my cousins, Pietro and Giuseppe Cicenia, I gleamed with excitement: what better weekend to visit than one that featured the local food of the area? The whole town was out and about for hours conversing and celebrating. The festival, *Podolica*, named for the particular cow of the region, featured meats and cheeses, traditional dances, and live entertainment. For the weekend of 25-26 *Luglio* in Pescopagano (PZ), the primary special was *caciocavallo*, the cheese made from the milk of the *podoliche*. Up and down the *corso*, vendors promoted the cheese with dishes like char-grilled toast with *caciocavall'* melted on top, *cavatelli* or *orecchiette* with breadcrumbs, tomatoes, olives, meat, and the star of the show.

Giuseppe and I walked around with Giuseppe's friends and cousins for hours that night. They traversed almost every road in the small village. Many "*piacere's*" and embraces were exchanged with Pescopagano residents. I met Marias and Antoniettas and two Serafinas, names I once considered unique to my family unit, completely common in this petite village in central Basilicata, at the sole of the boot of Italy. Certain older folks

remembered Serafina or one of her siblings and explained their relationship to the Savignano and Cicenìa families to these distant cousins, or rather to Giuseppe in the dialect, who translated for me in proper Italian and broken English.

At one end of the festival, toward *Via Zanardelli*, a series of musicians performed on a stage, some amateur, some seemingly professional. The music didn't draw a crowd, but animated the background as people visited each booth and gathered along the street. The cobblestone street, where the festivities took place was on a slight incline, or decline, depending on your direction. On a hill, practically every road in Pesco was far from flat. As Giuseppe and I climbed the historic *corso* toward the stage, a young boy approached the microphone, tightened his trumpet, and began to play a familiar tune. Giuseppe starting humming along. "*Oh, when the saints, oh, when the saints, oh when the saints go marching...*" The song consumed the street and overwhelmed me with a deluge of emotion: excitement, fear, alarm, apprehension, and monumental grief. Gennaro arrived in Pescopagano that night.

August 2015

"Ma, time to get up." Nanette peaks her head into the room. In the twin bed of her granddaughter Genna's childhood bedroom, she lays there for a while staring at the ceiling and clutching her 'S' necklace. A golden letter with a thin gold chain, this is Serafina's permanent piece of jewelry in her old age.

The font of the 'S' around Serafina's neck matches the original font on the Serafina's ravioli box. The design of the box, from font to coloring to image, was designed by Gennaro; a white bowl of ravioli dressed in sauce and pecorino romano sits on a crisp table cloth, within a red and green border on the cardboard. One of the boxes rests on Genna's

bookshelf as a worshiped relic of the establishment of her grandparents, her home for the first six years of her life.

This late morning, Serafina traces the letter around her neck and utters her husband's name into the air above her.

Nanette and Michele sit in the dining room, waiting for their mom to get ready. Michele is here to take her to the dentist.

It takes a little while for Serafina to get herself together. The daughters lay out her clothes, help with the blow dryer, guide her down the steps.

My father and I get home from running errands to see Serafina and Aunt Michele out. Serafina looks up at me, grips my arms by my elbows, and readjusts her footing. I wonder who she sees in me, in my cousins, mothers, and aunts, when she looks into our eyes. They are safe faces to her, familiar and familial. But I wonder if her mind, now burdened with dementia, transports her to other moments in her life. Yes, I am Johnny, fourth grandson, and sixth grandchild, but in her aged mind, am I a friend from Pesco? A customer at the store? A brother?

"Chi e`?"

In Italian and English, we help her remember names. *"Figlio di Nanette, Ma,"* Michele plants into her mother's ear. "Johnny."

A term of endearment—how beautiful you are, how handsome are you—repeated time and time again in Gennaro and Serafina's letters, is one of the few phrases remaining in the elderly widow's vocabulary. "Oh! *Joh-nny.*" She pauses, looking up to her grandson with a smile. She places her soft hand on his cheek. *"Quant' sei bell'."*

PER VIA AEREA



NO POTENZA

POTENZA

Gennaro Valiano
194 Hickory Street
Orange, New Jersey.



U.S.A

PESCOPAGNES
PAR AVION

Index; A Lineage**Savignano**

Michele Savignano, husband, father, blacksmith
Antonietta Cicenia Savignano, wife, mother, seamstress
Pasquale Savignano, son, brother, blacksmith
Giusseppina Savignano, daughter, sister, seamstress
Andrea Savignano, son, brother, blacksmith
***Serafina Savignano*, daughter, sister, seamstress**
Rosetta Savignano, daughter, sister, seamstress

Valvano

Giuseppe Valvano, husband, widower, father, factory worker
Maria Sanita Infante Valvano, wife, mother, shepherdess, seamstress
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Anthony, son, half-brother
Rose, daughter, half-sister
Madeleine, daughter, half-sister
Dora Valvano, daughter, sister
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Savignano Valvano

***Gennaro Valvano*, husband, father, storeowner**
***Serafina Savignano Valvano*, wife, mother, storeowner**
Maria Valvano Clayton, daughter
 m. James Clayton
 James Clayton Jr.
 Sera Clayton
Antoinette (Nanette) Valvano Cherichello, daughter
 m. Francis Cherichello
 Genna Cherichello
 John Cherichello
Michele Valvano Doyle, daughter
 m. Dennis Doyle
 Matthew Doyle
 Daniel Doyle
 Michele Doyle

Savita Valvario
194 Hackensack St.
Orange N. J.



J.M.M. M.M.

Mr. Jerry Valvario
50 Lakes ave

Mrs. Mrs. M.M. Jersey City N. J.

Glossary; Phrases I Remember; Pescopaganese; Pronunciation of American Words;

Amburg': Hamburger

Bageanzia Y-oh: Patience, hold on

Che puzz'?: What smells? What stinks?

Coom a see chiam: What is your name? What does it mean?

Gavateel: Cavatelli, fresh pasta most traditionally prepared with broccoli rabe

Uffa: An exhale, exclaimed when sitting down

Madonn(a): oh my god

Mafangoul': But, fuck you

Manigot: Manicotti, fresh pasta stuffed with seasoned ricotta cheese

Medighan': American

Mopeen: Dishtowel or rag

Pruzut': Prosciutto

Quant' sei bell': How beautiful you are; how handsome you are

Quista Qua': This one here...(either a person or object)

Refrigerade: Refrigerator

Tadale; Taralli: Hard circular Italian cracker, flavored with anise seeds and black pepper

Va ben: Ok

Miss Stefina Savignano
Italy Pescopagano
(Potenza)

Italy.
Daci a tutti cosa

Abbreviated Timeline of Events in America and Italy between 1948 and 1951

April 18 1948: Italy holds its first democratic general election with universal suffrage

May 11 1948: Luigi Einaudi becomes President of the Italian Republic

July 20, 1948: United States President Harry S. Truman issues the second peacetime military draft amidst mounting tensions with the Soviet Union. The Cold War begins. Six days later, an executive order ends racial segregation in the Armed Forces

July 29, 1948: The Summer Olympics begin in London.

December 10, 1948: The United Nations adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

January 20, 1949: Harry Truman is inaugurated into his second term as President of the United States

March 26, 1949: Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida*, conducted by Arturo Toscanini, is telecast by NBC, live from Rockefeller Center Studio 8H

April 7, 1949: Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* opens on Broadway. The musical becomes an instant classic with popular song, "Some Enchanted Evening"

June 27, 1949: U.S. President Harry Truman orders American military forces to aid in the defense of South Korea against North Korea

December 7, 1949: The United Socialist Party is founded in Italy under Minister of Interior, Giuseppe Romita

January 10, 1950: United Nations headquarters opens in New York City

November 1, 1950: Pope Pius XII defines a new dogma in Roman Catholicism, which suggests that God took Mary's body into Heaven after her death.

May 1, 1951: The United Socialist Party dissolves and fuses with the Italian Socialist Workers' Party to form the Italian Democratic Socialist Party (PSDI)

August 12, 1951: The coming-of-age story, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, is first published in the U.S.

October 15, 1951: *I Love Lucy* makes its television debut on CBS

October 21, 1951: A storm in Southern Italy kills more than one hundred people.

December 31, 1951: The Marshall Plan expires after distributing more than \$13.3 billion United States dollars in foreign aid to rebuild Europe