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Da Dove Vieni

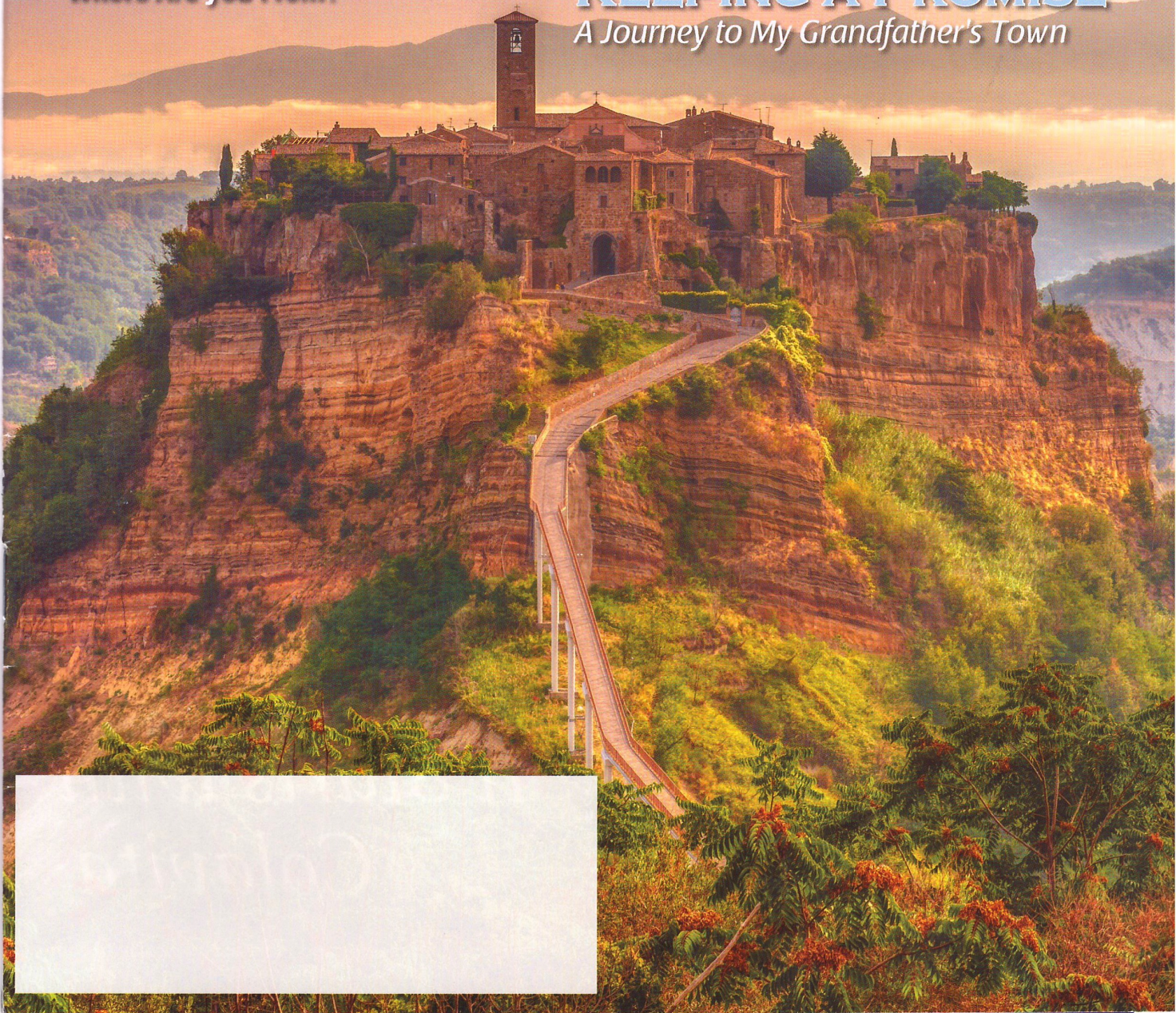
Where Are you From?

The Dying City Lives On

Civita di Bagnoregio Rises from the Fog

KEEPING A PROMISE

A Journey to My Grandfather's Town



Italian America®

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ON THE COVER: Civita di Bagnoregio, known as "The Dying City," rests upon a hill from which there is one way in and one way out. (milosk.50)

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My grandfather lived life like a storied superhero. He was strong, determined, independent, an achiever of incredible feats. During long car rides in his Cadillac, he recounted how he befriended billy goats as a child in Italy and how he swam across the Hudson River at age 14.

Francesco Torre was born on January 28, 1905 in Yonkers, New York. In 1908, his mother, Maria (née Marotta), relocated her young family (my toddler grandfather, his four-month-old brother, and her husband) to San Giovanni a Piro, her birth town in the Campania region. She was determined to fight for her land.

“Two of my sisters were born there,” my grandfather told me. “And while my mother went to Naples for an operation and my father returned to New York to work for our return passage, I was responsible for my siblings.”

researcher fascinated by my family story, who volunteered to locate a name and contact information at the commune in San Giovanni. He wrote in an e-mail:

Barbara, molto interessante. Lunedì provo a telefonare all'Ufficio del Catasto per sapere se ci possono aiutare. Poi ti faccio sapere.

Barbara, very interesting. On Monday, I'll try to call the office in Commune di San Giovanni a Piro to see if they can offer help. I'll let you know.



With two weeks left in my semester abroad work assignment in Siena, I travel 500 miles by bus and two trains to Salerno, where I secure lodging at a bed and breakfast. When I log onto the computer, my eyes settle on an email from Dr. T.

KEEPING A PROMISE

A Journey to My Grandfather's Town

BY BARBARA TORREVELTRI

“And what did that entail?” I asked him. “You were a child yourself.”

That's when I heard the billy goat story again.

“Did you know goat's milk is closest to mother's milk?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“My mother was away for months, so twice a day, morning and early evening, I walked from my town at the top of the hill to get milk for Aunt Jean. I knew to make friends with the billy goat, bringing him an apple or piece of fruit or bread. He was the boss of the other goats, and he sort of protected me. I filled my canteen jug with fresh goat's milk and walked back home.”

My education professor-self, fully aware of research literature that correlates childhood experiences to character traits, nagged me to find out more. I sought help from Dr. Maurizio Tuliani, a native Italian middle school teacher and

His message is simple:

“Are you okay? Did you get to Salerno? Good luck tomorrow when you visit your grandfather's land. Keep my phone number handy to be safe.”

The next morning, I board the local train bound for Sapri, a city that borders the Tyrrhenian Sea. After arriving at the train depot, I expect things to unfold as if I were a sightseer simply touring a basilica open to the public. To my surprise, the bus to San Giovanni a Piro doesn't arrive for two hours. Waiting alone in a circular courtyard, locals peer at me through veiled, lace-curtained windows. Some openly stare from tiered balconies. I am a stranger in a commune that prides itself on knowing everyone.

I board the minivan-sized vehicle and hand two euro to the driver.

“Signora, dove?” he asks. Madam, where are you going?

“San Giovanni a Piro,” I say.

He nods, and I settle into a leather seat on the left side of a narrow aisle. The minibus travels a road parallel to the sea, but soon, lush green hills and an assortment of fruit trees dot the mountainous terrain. We make three stops in 15 minutes. The curved, elongated path toward Scario is still eight miles south of San Giovanni a Piro, my destination. The bus zigzags through a single-lane switchback mountain road. The driver shifts gears unevenly and with every gain in altitude, nausea comes over me.

I open a window and fix my gaze on the incredible view. On the left, ominous clouds of deep gray transform the sea into a mystical body. Halfway up the mountain, the bus stops unexpectedly. The driver heads to an auto body shop on the right, leaving us passengers on board.

I gaze out the left-side window and blink twice to ensure that my eyes are not deceiving me. Perched on the roof of a wooden shed the size of a doghouse stands a male billy goat with horns and beard protruding from his chinny-chin. He exudes confidence and dominion over the nanny and kid goats grazing on the grass encircling his castle.

My chest heaves uncontrollably as tears cascade down my cheeks. Could those be descendants of the same goats who supplied milk for my great-aunt Jean more than a century ago when five-and-a-half-year-old Francesco walked six miles each way to secure food for his baby sister?



Barbara sits upon the steps of *Chiesa di San Gaetano*, where her grandfather made his First Holy Communion.



Francesco Torre (on the chair) with his parents and brother in New York before they returned to Italy.

Is this synchronicity, the timing of the driver's stop at the exact spot where the billy goat stands with his head held high on that worn-out roof?

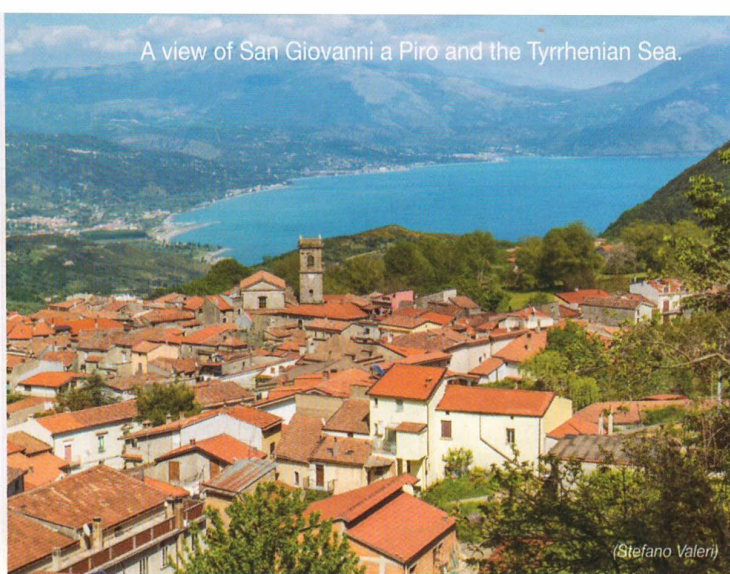
Overwhelmed with emotion, I barely have the presence of mind to take a photo before our absentee driver resumes his position behind the steering wheel.

The crest of the town is within sight as the bus slows to a crawl, this time out of respect for a funeral procession for a deceased member of the community. The driver signals to me, one of only two passengers still seated, that this is my stop. I ask the driver what time the evening bus leaves San Giovanni a Piro to return to the Sapri Train Station.

With limited patience, he shouts, "*Non autobus oggi! L'autobus andava domani!*" (There is no bus today! The bus will come tomorrow!)

Trembling and grasping the chrome handlebar with every ounce of strength that I have, I am ready to collapse right there on the top step of the bus. I have not considered this option—arriving in my grandfather's town with no

A view of San Giovanni a Piro and the Tyrrhenian Sea.



place to stay, no way to leave, no one to take care of me, and no return bus leaving until *tomorrow*.

My face registers panic as my inner voice is screaming at me. *Now what are you going to do? Get off or remain planted where you are?*

The driver, noting my shock and emotional instability, stops his rant and tells me that a bus from Scario leaves at 6:30 p.m.

‘Scario!’ I think with heart and mind racing. ‘That’s eight miles down the mountain’s narrow, windy, unlit road! Even the billy goat house is closer!’

I descend the steps one at a time and stand immobile on the street. It is 4:00 p.m. I am in the land of my grandfather, speak limited Italian, stick out conspicuously as “*la straniera*,” and have no idea of what to do.

“Gramp,” I pray aloud. “I know that you see me, but I’m scared to death right now, and I need help with this.”

Whether real or imagined, I hear words that resemble his own voice. “All right, Barbara. It’s all right.”

I stare at Dr. T’s Italian script on quadrille notebook paper, which has the address for the Municipal building written on it. When I look up, I notice the matching street name chiseled into the cornerstone of the building across the street.

I walk the stone *strada* for a quarter of a mile before I am standing in front of the *Municipio* building, located on the right side of the street with a panoramic view that extends to the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The massive wooden doors are unlocked, so I peer into a 15-foot covered vestibule to notice a flight of stairs to the right. I follow the sound of voices to the third floor. When I get there, three people, employees of the *Municipio*, look at each other, then at me.

One woman asks, “*Chi e lei?*” (Who is she?)

Two respond in unison, “*Non so.*” (I don’t know.) One notes curtly, in Italian, that the office is closed.

Looking haggard, I stand before a woman about my age who is dressed so well that I wonder what she is doing here, in the middle of a mountain-top city. Her designer silk print dress, paired with textured tights and high heels, fits well and is stunning.

At this point, I produce the paper with the name of the *Municipio* employee that my friend in Siena contacted as a point of reference prior to my making this journey.

Immediately, the well-dressed woman questions me. “Why do you want to see this man, my colleague?” she asks.

Three sets of eyes fixate on me. I offer an explanation in my best Italian (which is the best that I have after three-and-a-half months in Italy). “I am here to see my grandfather’s town and find out where the family lived when my Aunt Jean was born.”

They are neither impressed nor empathetic. They tell me to return on Monday at 9:00 a.m. as offices are closed on Friday for the May 1 Worker’s Day national holiday. But I’m here on Wednesday, April 29. At this point, I shake internally and doubt the wisdom of my journey. But somehow, I find my voice.

DISCOVER

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MOZZAFIATO

“I cannot come back on Monday. I am a U.S. professor teaching university students in Siena. This is my only chance to see, with my own eyes, where my grandfather lived as a young boy for five years.”

I pull out a frayed copy of a photo of my grandfather, Francesco Torre, at age 90. In it, he is next to a framed image of his parents, Dominic and Maria Marotta Torre, on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary.

“I am the family ambassador,” I manage saying with my quivering voice that can’t hold back tears any longer. “I took the last bus here and don’t know how to get back to Salerno, where I’m staying tonight!”

My head is spinning from physical and emotional exhaustion. I have researched my family history for months only to arrive at this end. I am spent, vulnerable, and socially naked. The younger woman heads to a separate office and makes a phone call to check on the birth of Giovanna Torre (Aunt Jean) on November 14, 1910. I find out that this lady is actually *la sindica*—the city’s mayor.

I stand alone in front of the well-dressed woman, Germana. She speaks in English and tempers her tone. “I live in Sapri,” she tells me. “You can take the 19:10 (7:10 p.m.) train back to Salerno. Go see the town and return



Francesco Torre (center) with Barbara’s uncles and father at a Torre family reunion 20 years ago.



The municipal building in San Giovanni a Piro, where the workers came to the author’s much-needed aid.

by 18:10 (6:10 p.m.). When I finish work, I will drive you to the station.”

I locate the church of San Gaetano, where my grandfather made his First Holy Communion and his sisters were baptized. I purchase homegrown goods, *prodotti tipici*, to share with family. The female shop owner takes one look at the family photo and zeros in on my great-grandmother, Maria Marotta. She points to her, stating emphatically, in Italian, “*She has people here.*”

Germana’s red Alfa Romeo hugs the winding roads and in no-time we are riding along the sea. She pulls her convertible into a parking lot and urges me to get a close-up view of the sea.

So I step onto the shore. The waves ebb and flow, lapping the shore with a smooth, yet persistent cadence.

My senses cry out: *Barbara, take it all in. Remember the smell of the sea, the sound of the cascading waves, the site of the mountains that reach up to the heavens, and above all, how your heart feels right now, at this very moment.*

Germana interrupts my reverie and points to the statue, *The Statue of Christ the Redeemer*. “This is the second one in the world,” she states with pride. “The only other is in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.”

I strain to make out the form, obscured by a dominating line of tightly knit clouds.

As promised, Germana drops me off in front of the Sapri train station in time for the train back to Salerno. I thank her for being my angel. We embrace (kiss on both cheeks), and I give her an American hug. She peers into my eyes and speaks warmly.

“You did a good deed today for your family,” she says. “It is my pleasure to meet you. Not many people even care about those who went before them. They take it all for granted. Safe travels.”

On the train ride to Salerno, my breath returns to normal, as a purpose-filled sense of peace envelops me. My grandfather is smiling, all knowingly, as I shake my head and realize that all of his stories were true.

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