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Listening to My Father's Accent

ANNA MONARDO

Life is short, art is long, the occasion fleeting, the attempt risky, and the judgment difficult.
—HIPPOCRATES (as written on a file card in my father's desk)

WHEN I WAS nine or ten, a friend said she liked my father's accent. I was so stunned, I stopped somersaulting in our Pittsburgh town pool and told her, "He doesn't have an accent."

She laughed. "Anna, there's nothing wrong with it, but your dad really has an Italian accent."

After that, I listened for it, and even asked him about it.

"Yes," he said, "of course I have an accent. I was thirty when I learned English."

I already knew that, right after World War II, my father had immigrated to the United States to establish his medical career and send help to his mother and siblings back in war-devastated Calabria. And I knew that, to ease his entry into the US, he and Mom, second cousins, had had a "marriage of convenience," which I didn't like. I wanted to believe that our family had blossomed from nothing less American than a love match.

Mom reassured me: "If I didn't like him, I wouldn't have to marry him, but I liked him right away." So I assumed our family was like any other American family after all. But after my friend prompted me,

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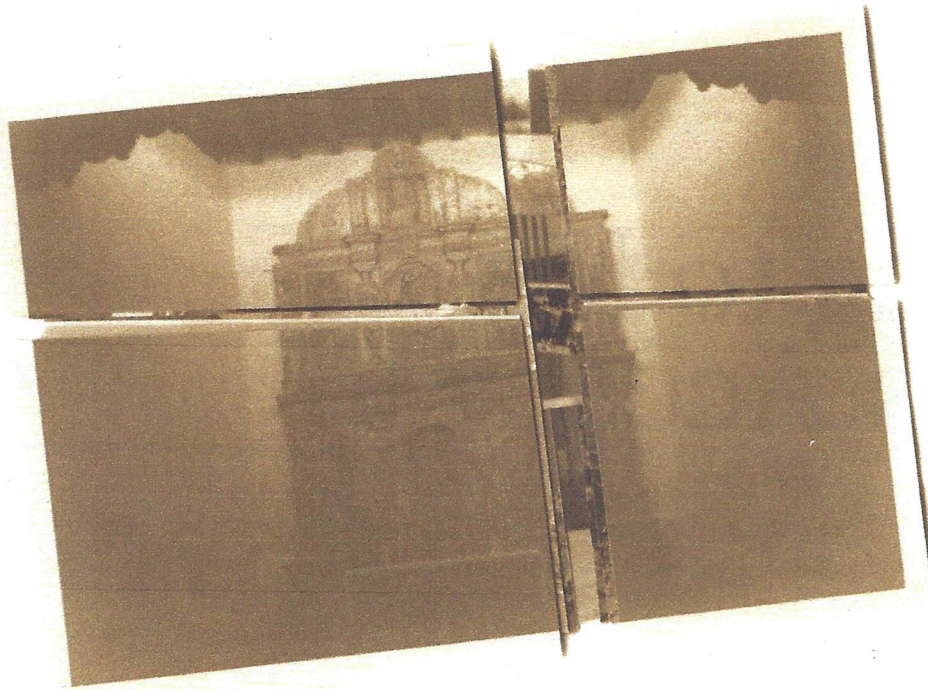
MY FATHER, Alfredo, was the firstborn of seven, born in 1920 in the Calabrian mountain village of Vazzano, which he described in this way:



There was one paved piazza. Its fountain was beautifully made of steel and covered with branches from 4 trees, one in each corner. The physicians lived in the big house in the piazza. In another big house on the top of the town had lived the De Sanctis family, the noble family of Vazzano, during the 1800s. By the time I was born, that house was divided, and we lived in one unit. Later, my father bought another unit and in this way he made the largest unit in the building.

I was forced to listen and hear that my father had once been a man who was completely Italian and then he became someone else. Who was he?

FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER Dad died, when my brother and I were emptying his desk in Florida, we found five autobiographical narratives he had hand-written. The stories—"My Father," "My Mother," "My Father's Family," "Life in Our Village," and "Education"—were dated two years before his death. The simple language and focus on historical details suggested he'd written them for his young grandchildren. Their world was so vastly different from the village of Dad's peasant childhood, he probably thought the kids would find his stories entertaining. By then, he was seventy-two, a survivor of a series of heart attacks, and retired. Perhaps, anticipating that he likely wouldn't see his grandkids grow up, he wrote so they'd have a way to know him when they got older.

The day we found Dad's stories, the clean-out was tedious, and I welcomed an excuse to sit and read. I was just taking a break. I wasn't expecting to meet the man my father was before he came to America.

Though I've edited this excerpt (and those that follow) a bit, it remains true to my father's vocabulary, sentence formation, and voice. I hear his intelligence and love for his village, as well as his unapologetic familial pride. I hear history lessons for his grandchildren. And, especially now, in our times fraught with the trauma of global migration, I'm reminded that, no matter what conditions drive them, each immigrant, refugee, and migrant begins their journey with a rupture from *home*.

The majority of houses were built with stones or mud blocks or bricks, and were two stories high. The family lived on the top floor. The ground floor was divided, half as stable for the donkey, pig, chickens; and in the other half they stored grains, oil, cheese, beans, and other provisions. When necessary, extra beds were improvised down there for some of the children.

Vazzano's population, less than 2,000, was made up of 80% or so peasants working the fields for other farmers and larger landowners. There were four or five carpenters; three brothers were the bricklayers; four tailors who hand-made our suits to order; four

shoemakers hand-made our shoes; three general stores; and three cantine (bars), where men would meet evenings to play cards, have a drink, talk about politics.

We had one priest and two churches.

Most of the peasants' children worked on the farms or helped tend sheep. The children of the maestranza (tradespeople) went to school and in the afternoon the boys went to their apprenticeship to learn a trade. The girls would go to a seamstress. Children of both sides married within their caste.

The Vazzanesi were peasants descended from peasants, and ingrained in them was a grudging obeisance to the nobles who owned the property and had governed the peasants' labor, economy, and judicial system for longer than anyone could remember. From pre-Christian times, one invader after another—Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Lombards, Muslims, Normans, Hohenstaufen, Spanish, French, Austrians, the Spanish again, the French again—had colonized and dominated southern Italy and Sicily.

Eventually, in 1861, with Italian unification, the southern mainland and Sicily were gathered into the Kingdom of Italy under the first Italian king, Victor Emmanuel II. And though Italy was now unified, the south was still divided into large agricultural estates owned by barons who kept the peasants trapped in quasi-servitude. In the south, the common man knew only the vertical hierarchy of the patriarchal latifondo system: laborers were in competition with each other for the landowner's favor, which kept them too disempowered to unify and overturn the status quo. In exchange for his labor, the peasant was granted a small patch of land, barely enough to feed his family—hunger was not uncommon—but never enough to accumulate wealth and gain independence. Then, as now, the hoarding of power degraded everyone. In the public sphere, the patriarchy diminished male peasants in the same way that, in the domestic domain, women were kept under thumb. The laborer's only power was the obedience he demanded from his women and children, at times with the same physical force the landowner used freely on him.

But outside of marriage, what options were available to women? Entering the convent required family donations; a spinster was dependent on her family's goodwill. Similarly, how could the peasant even attempt revolt against his overlord? The barons' dominance had been conferred by rulers who, it was believed, had received their mandate directly from God. The poet Francesco Fazzalari, a contemporary of my father and a pharmacist in Vazzano, wrote, "Poor Calabrians, / who think a king is the same as a saint." This feudalistic mindset was what truly governed the laborer. When it was prudent, the peasant demonstrated his allegiance to every god tiered above him—landowner, priest, physician—but he never surrendered his distrust, which was his sole power and best protection.

There has never been since New York was founded so low and ignorant a class among the immigrants who poured in here as the Southern Italians who have been crowding our docks during the past year.

—1882 EDITORIAL IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

IN 1913, my father's father, my *nonno* Paolo, aged twenty-one, sailed to America. For two years, he worked in the Edgar Thomson Works, Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill, in Braddock, just east of Pittsburgh. Then Nonno Paolo sailed back to Italy to fight in World War I. "Assigned to the heavy field artillery," my father wrote, "he reached the rank of corporal major."

I'm sure he relied on his native distrust to protect him, but my grandfather was also ambitious and determined. Leaving behind his pregnant wife and one-year-old Alfredo, he returned to America in 1921, the same year the Emergency Quota Act restricted annual immigration from any country to 3 percent of the number of residents from that country who were listed on the 1910 census. By design, the law favored many northern European immigrants while limiting the number of Poles and Italians, as well as other southern Europeans, who were considered racially and morally inferior. But Nonno Paolo applied for and gained entry. "Instead of working in the steel mill," my father wrote, "he went into business, did very well, and in 1926 he felt

economically secure and returned for good to his much loved family and country and town." In the eyes of six-year-old Alfredo, Nonno Paolo was made larger than life by his years abroad.

> *My father's arrival [in Vazzano] I do remember. I was in the midst of a lot of people crowded around a car [taxi] stopped at a point where it could go no farther because the street was too narrow. In that confusion of my father's arrival, I did not see him. Was I shy? However, while the car was being unloaded I tried to keep all the other kids away from "my father's car." When the car left, we kids ran after it. I vaguely remember a big man raising me in the air. And that is what I remember of the "Big Encounter."*

Nonno Paolo had returned home with enough savings to buy land, which became a profitable farm—olive trees to make oil, sheep rented out for fertilization, and hired laborers to help him while his five sons and two daughters went to school. Nonno was still a farmer, a *contadino*, but now the land he worked was his, and so was the profit—some earmarked for his children's education and some to benefit his town.

> *To stimulate the economy of Vazzano my father organized an orchestra, hired a director who taught the peasants and artisans how to play all the instruments. It was exciting to see these young people go to neighboring towns to give their concerts during the religious feasts. Besides the money they made, they felt great, having learned to read not only Italian but also the music.*

Not long after his return, Alfredo's father announced to the little boy, "You will become a doctor." Though my dad would never have admitted it, perhaps this anointment was overwhelming for a child. It was both a compliment—*I see you're intelligent enough to go to the university and study the most venerated discipline*—and a command: *You will do this, and you will not fail.*

Alfredo's journey beyond his "caste"—leaping from peasantry, over *maestranza*, and all the way to the "aristocracy" of the professional class—was accomplished by his perseverance; however, it was Nonno Paolo who introduced the idea that class jumping was possible and best achieved through education.

Alfredo was skinny and plagued by colds, and so the village women made him wear a string of garlic around his neck to protect him from the evil eye. Not the *evil* evil eye transmitted by jealousy, but a more complex evil eye that could be inflicted upon a child when someone simply loved him too much, which was what the village women thought Alfredo's father, with his ambitions, was doing to his son. Townspeople chided Nonno Paolo: "Why would you make your sons better than you?" With his democratic notions imported from America, Nonno Paolo was upending the system.

> *Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary.*
>
> —Benito Mussolini

BY 1926, the year Nonno Paolo returned to Italy, Mussolini had declared himself Italy's leader, all political parties but the Fascist regime were banned, and the press was largely censored. In tiny Vazzano, Nonno Paolo, an outspoken anti-Fascist, was embattled. A town chronicle recorded that among those "most targeted: Paolo Monardo, ... suspected of spreading subversive propaganda." When Fascist rallies were scheduled for the town, he was arrested and held in prison for fear he might cause disruptions.

To attend school, children were required to become card-carrying members of the Fascist youth organization, signing a vow to "follow without discussion the orders of Il Duce and to serve with all my force and if necessary with my blood the cause of the fascist revolution." My grandfather's campaign to educate his children was now up against obstacles more daunting than the townspeople's skepticism. Still, he didn't back down.

> *When the cancelliere (retired town secretary) died, the town gave a big funeral and all the school children had to participate. Of course, for this funeral the male children would wear the black shirt, their*

fascist uniform. My father prohibited me to wear anything black for the funeral because the cancelliere and the fascists had been fighting my father. That morning, I was sent back and forth several times but my father was IMMOVABLE and would not let me wear black. Finally, he kept me home.

Fellini-esque, this scenario of little Alfredo running back and forth between his schoolmaster and his father, but the fact is that Alfredo was very young when he began parsing out his dual allegiance to his father and to the Fascists—two powers in direct opposition to each other and each expecting much of him.

For high school, Alfredo had to leave home to live in a larger town, a full day's journey by foot. And yet, his father's reputation preceded him. "Because of my father's antifascist attitude," my father wrote, "I had some problems in [high] school, but I succeeded all the time to prove that I was a good fascist." In order to attend medical school in Naples—still the guiding vision for both father and son—Alfredo not only had to maintain a show of allegiance to the state his father abhorred, but he had to be conscripted into the Italian army as well.

When WWII exploded, Mussolini wanted medical students to go into military service to continue their studies and serve the country by working in military medical units. I volunteered so my brother would be exempted from the draft—he would certainly have been drafted for the infantry. Mussolini still helped families with 6 or more minor children, and only one was to be drafted. So I thought it was less dangerous for me than for my brother.

In Naples we were placed in a school building . . . but most of us bribed some officer in charge (gave our salary) and he "ignored" our absence in the evening. Groups of 3–4 of us rented a room nearby where we studied and slept. However, most nights we spent in underground tunnels protecting ourselves from English air bombing. The Americans usually bombed us in the afternoon.

My father didn't tell us a lot of war stories. Perhaps he thought we wouldn't understand. But there was one story about a night when he and a friend went to a dance hall. Music, a crowd. Eventually, Alfredo and his friend were on opposite ends of the hall, and a bomb dropped on the side where his friend was dancing. The friend died.

"Oh, Dad, what did you do?"

"What could I do? I thanked God I was alive."

It wasn't until I was grieving my father's death, trying to keep him present in my life, that I began to read about his war. One book was *Naples '44*, a memoir of the Allied occupation of Naples, written by Norman Lewis, a British Intelligence Corps field security officer. Years earlier, I'd given the book to my father, who leafed through it and put it aside; picking the book up myself, I understood why Dad hadn't been interested. Early on, Lewis mentions "that anthill of humanity, the city of Naples itself," and I was offended by what seemed to be the dismissive and ridiculing tone too often used to describe southern Italy. Further in, though, Lewis's clear-eyed account of Naples's deprivations and horrors got my

attention, as did his unsentimental compassion for what he had witnessed. I couldn't stop reading.

Lewis was telling me the stories my father never did: hunger so extreme that the tanks at the aquarium were emptied because any kind of fish, any kind of animal, was good for a stew. Women and children picked through roadside fields to harvest edible weeds.

When the Allies arrived, in September 1943, their hefty military supplies were a stark contrast to the civilians' deprivation. In exchange for tins of food, Lewis reports, housewives lined up on chairs in an abandoned building, offering themselves to soldiers. One haunting story was about a father who sent Lewis a formal letter, politely offering his attractive daughter if only the girl could receive one good meal a day—"[she] has no mother, and she hasn't eaten for days. Being out of work I can't feed my family," the father wrote. An astonishing number of Neapolitan women—on their own or with their relatives as procurers—turned to prostitution to feed their families.

I tried to imagine the moment when each woman realized, *I'm going to have to do this*. And then I began to understand how much I would never understand about southern Italy and my father's wartime experiences.

When we found Dad's handwritten stories, we also unearthed his Italian academic and military papers, the paper trail of his early career. On every Italian document, my father was *Monardo Alfredo di Paolo*: Alfredo Monardo, son of Paolo Monardo. When I saw that Alfredo's legal identity in Italy was always as the son of his father, I couldn't help wondering, Did Alfredo ever belong to himself?

I could hear my father: "That question makes no sense, *AN-na*," saying my name in his Italian way. "If you don't belong to yourself, to whom do you belong?" People noted the physical resemblance between my father and me—same round face—but our worldviews were often irreconcilable. He grew up under the mandate of duty and allegiance, while I, earnest child of the sixties, grew up infused with (he would have said "brainwashed by") the dogma of self-actualization and independence. It made me uncomfortable to see the paternal link, intrinsic to my father's Italian identification, on all those official documents. How reluctant I was to take anything away from my vision of Dad as a self-made, quintessentially American man. I wanted Alfredo to be *father*, exclusively *father*, not *son*. Just like Mussolini and Nonno Paolo, I wanted to claim Alfredo for purposes of my own. How willing he was to give all that was asked of him.

Beyond the "near-famine conditions in the city," Lewis described in his war memoir the people of Naples and the surrounding towns coping with malaria, typhus, typhoid, vendettas, the *Camorra* (mafia), and the incessant petty thievery of people who had nothing.

And then there was the bombing. Lewis writes: "Apocalyptic scenes as people clawed about in the ruins . . . to rescue those trapped under the masonry."

The Americans usually bombed us in the afternoon. All I could do was read between the lines my father left us.

During the war I was lucky. When Italy and Germany were being defeated in Africa, I was in Bari and my name was drawn to go to Africa. I informed my family and tried to tell them I considered myself lucky to be able to go to Africa to defend my country. However, within 48 hours, my father came to Bari, talked to the Major General of the Southern Italian Front, and I was assigned at a local hospital a few miles away from Bari. The ship I was supposed to go on to Africa was torpedoed and SUNK about one day before reaching North Africa.

Nonno Paolo, all-powerful father that he was, literally saved his son's life. How alarmed he must have been to read Alfredo's wish "to defend my country." I myself was unsettled to realize that young Alfredo's allegiance may actually have been swayed by the gray-green uniform he'd been forced to wear and by Il Duce's frenzied nationalism. Dad was among the troops assigned for transport to Rome to stand in Piazza Venezia and chant *DU-ce! DU-ce!* while Mussolini proclaimed from his balcony. What kind of psychological gymnastics did my father, as a young man, have to perform in order to sustain his "good fascist" public act while remaining loyal to his anti-Fascist father? Maybe he was

using politics as a way to push back against his father, as every son needs to do at some point. When a young person claims they feel lucky to defend their country, how much is strutting, and how much is cowering, and how much is simply resignation?

And yet, I have to face the possibility that young Alfredo's Fascist pledge wasn't an act. Yes, he was proud of his father's boldness, including his stance against the regime. And when Dad recounted the story of Mussolini's death and public hanging, he made clear that this conclusion was basically inevitable after so much damage done. But my father also insisted that the dictator's era was not all evil.

"But, Dad, he sided with Hitler."

"You don't understand history. Italy was in chaos before Mussolini."

And after?

I can never know who my father was when he was twenty or twenty-one, can never fathom Italy at his time, the limited choices, or the convoluted compromises he and many others had to make to survive then. One thing is clear: whatever clash there may have been within young Alfredo between what he believed and what he professed, his unmalleable allegiance was to his father and his vision that education was a peasant's best way out from under autocratic rule. I once asked him, "Did you become a doctor because you wanted to or because your father wanted you to?"

"Both," he said.

ALFREDO PASSED HIS final exams on July 21, 1945. Two years after the Allies landed in Sicily. Almost two years after Italy changed sides and declared war on Germany. Three months after the deaths of Mussolini and Hitler. Two months after V-E Day. Less than three weeks before the US attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was now a doctor. Before the war, in discussion with his father, Alfredo had considered venturing to Rome to practice medicine there, but funding and connections would have been needed to launch such a career, and in the postwar devastation, his only option was to return home. His first jobs were filling in for the *medico condotto*, the town doctor, in villages near Vazzano. A modest start. But then, in October, start of the olive harvest, Nonno Paolo became seriously ill. On August 6, 1946, he died. The town's band played Verdi's *Requiem* during the procession to the cemetery.

So there I was without a job, 6 siblings and a mother in need. We sold the farm animals, I found temporary jobs. I had a salary and there was a bus. And making some money, or at least food staples (type of barter), my brothers could continue their studies.

We planned to send my sister to school with the Sisters of San Domenico. We tried to carry on even this wish of my father. But our sister and our mother could not be separated and so she returned home after a few weeks.

Alfredo's sadness is palpable, but the profundity of the emotional loss that preceded his emigration becomes clear to me in his description of a trip he and his father took to Catanzaro, the regional capital, when Alfredo was a child:

What I remember of this trip is a beautiful dreamy golden opera house. We were seated close to the front of the orchestra, and on the stage I saw soldiers dressed in golden and silver military uniforms, fighting with enormous swords.

Next, I woke up in my father's arms while he was carrying me up the large stairs in the hotel, and I saw myself with my chin resting on his shoulder, and his back in a huge mirror covering the whole wall.

With the "dreamy" opera house and orchestra, the uniformed soldiers ready for any battle, a hotel in a big city, and that image of himself safe with his father, a "big man" who had returned from America, the two of them captured in an oversized mirror on their way upstairs to bed, it's all there: father as protector, ever reliable, guide into the wider world. In time, father and son would not always align perfectly, just as my father and I didn't always agree, but I am touched deeply to see that, at age seventy-two and fatherless for over forty-five years, Alfredo returned to a moment "in my father's arms." The father Alfredo adored is similar to the father he became. As I read, I feel held by both of them, two men forever unknowable to me. ■