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{ IN HIS WORDS }

In December 1995, my parents took me back to Italy for the last time. They had grown up in Sant’Elpidio, a small village at the top of one of the highest mountains in the Valle Del Salto, and it was the return to this village that I most eagerly anticipated. I’d visited Sant’Elpidio and the major Italian cities as a child, but my memories were distant and dreamlike. I recalled kicking a soccer ball between two olive trees to score an imaginary goal; sticking my hand between the stone lips of the *bocca della verita*, the mouth of the truth; and sitting at my mother’s feet over long, rambunctious feasts, begging her to translate what my relatives were saying.

In fact, my most enduring memories of Italy consisted of my mother’s face smiling down at me as she smoothed my hair and retold the stories, jokes, and legends that formed the centerpiece of every family gathering. A few of the stories, she said, would have to wait until I was older; some of the jokes wouldn’t make much sense in English; but most of what my relatives discussed she faithfully and patiently recounted to me there at the table or later in the night, as I fell asleep. In that strange and beautiful world, my mother was always my guide, my voice.

We didn’t go to Italy to sightsee. We went so that my mother could visit the family she’d given up to marry my father, who’d emigrated to America after World War II. We went so that my parents could introduce me to the “real” world — vivid, honest, and unspoiled — and so they could escape the harsh and colorless “new” world. We went because my mother missed her best friends, her six brothers and sisters, who were still relatively young and very much alive.

In 1995, I was a shy young man of twenty-three. I was a student of literature with the dream of becoming a writer, and I was also anxiously closeted. Compared to my parents’ lives and the ones led in their ancestral village, my future seemed unchartable, unprecedented. The apparent simplicity of

Sant’Elpidio, little more than a cluster of stone houses linked to other clusters by one narrow and bumpy road, bewitched me. Wandering through the village with my parents at my side, I thought, All the answers are here! If only I observed it and my mother’s family closely enough, I thought, I’d understand more fully her nagging sadness, and my father’s pride, and, somehow, my own inexpressible longings. By seeing where we came from, I’d find out who we were.

Night after night, we feasted. On Christmas Eve, we ate the traditional seven fishes at Zio Ernesto’s and played cards and *tombola* late into the night; for Christmas Day we headed down the street to visit Zio Totò, the greatest of the joke-tellers; we stopped into Zia Clara’s for her famous *pizza sfogliata*, rivaled only by Zia Carolina’s *crepelle*; in the middle of the day we found ourselves dancing across Zia Maddalena’s concrete basement floor; and on Saint Stephen’s Day we gathered at the home of Zio Nello, the oldest and the keeper of the family history. We were never alone. At meals, on car rides, on walks up and down the village street, my aunts and uncles surrounded us. They seemed to have one hand on my mother at all times, on her shoulder or her lap or the small of her back, as if to keep her from leaving them again.

This month of feasts did show me who we were, both as a family and as a people: we loved each other with abandon. Of all the ways of expressing love that Italians have in their repertoire, the feast, with food and stories at its center, is among the most powerful. Knowing this, seeing it up close, made me less afraid of the future. No matter what, I thought, I was rich in love and would never be poor.

Within a year of that trip to Sant’Elpidio, Zia Maddalena and Zia Clara both passed away, and my mother vowed never to go back to Italy. She couldn’t bear the country without them, she told me, and so she turned her back on it completely. *All This Talk of Love* is about a woman much like her, someone who was born into the riches of family and then renounces it. I named her Maddalena and gave her two lives: the one she left behind in the village and the one she built with her husband and children in the United States. What would happen, I wondered, if the two lives collided?