

Susan Wiedel

Concetta

Sitting on my host sister's bed, I was excited to finally be able to Skype with my mom and my brother David. I looked at the Andes Mountains through the bedroom window as I waited for the connection to reach New Freedom, Pennsylvania. Notoriously slow and unreliable, the Internet made these calls to home rare.

When the "ring, ring" finally stopped, I turned my face towards the screen and saw my mom's and David's faces in the warm yellow living room. I felt relief that they were in my presence again: their faces, on a computer screen surrounded by the llama wool blankets on my bed, were a reminder of my life in the United States. I had been living in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Although it felt good to see home, I did not want to be reminded that my six weeks in Cochabamba continued to dwindle.

For the past three days they had postponed this Skype session for a variety of reasons: Mom had to work late; David had plans with friends. We had some catching up to do. I asked about work. "Busy, as usual," said Mom. An accountant at a local accounting firm, my mom never had a shortage of work. David continued to spend most of his days playing League of Legends with his friends. Not much seemed to have changed back home.

"How is Aunt Concetta?" I asked. One thing about going home that I most looked forward to was a visit with Aunt Concetta. I had tried to see her during the week between the end of the semester and my flight to Bolivia, but she

was not well enough for visitors.

They both became quiet. They averted their eyes from the screen. Silence.

“What? How is she?” A hint of panic began to creep into my voice.

My mom looked back at the screen, and said, “I’m sorry Susan.”

My head felt heavy. Thunder sounded in my ears, and water filled my eyes.

“She died on Friday. That is why we couldn’t Skype with you yesterday evening; we were at her funeral.”

For a few moments, I couldn’t say anything. My face quickly dampened with snot and tears. “I’m so, so sorry,” repeated my mom. “I wish I could be there with you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me when you found out? When were you going to tell me?” I asked between gasps.

“We wanted to wait until you got home, since you’ve had such a rough year and are enjoying Bolivia so much. I didn’t want you there by yourself when you found out.”

“I’m not by myself,” I argued. “I have Alana, and my friends and my host family.”

“You know what I mean,” she said. And I did. My instructor, Alana, and my fellow Pitt classmates were a link to home; my host family was generous and inviting, but they were not family. I became slightly indignant. But I just let it go.

We talked about the funeral. “She was laid out perfectly bald, just the way she wanted.” For a woman in her seventies, Aunt Concetta had had naturally thick, dark hair that hid her age. Only slight slivers of gray said otherwise. I tried not to imagine her in a casket.

The conversation eventually diminished, and we exchanged our goodbyes. The video call beeped off, and they were gone.

The sun had set behind the mountains. The room was lit by the yellow-hued streetlight across from the bedroom

window. I got up, closed the curtains, slapped the laptop shut, and buried myself in the pile of llama blankets.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.



“Dr. Foerster's conclusion is that Italians should stay at home, and that conditions should be improved so as to keep them there...It should be a paramount policy of the Italian government to remove those disabilities, social and economic, which have led to the depopulation of entire regions of Italy and the ejection into a mainly unreceptive world of masses of predestined derelicts.”—Dr. Dino Bigongiari, Professor of Italian at Columbia University

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the port city of Baltimore, Maryland was known as the “Other Ellis Island.” By some estimates, Baltimore’s port claimed the second largest number of immigrants to walk off the boat. Poles, Russians, Czechs, Ukrainians, Germans, and Italians arrived every year by the thousands. To most, Baltimore was the “beginning of the end,” the first stop of many before reaching their final destinations; but for some Southern Italians (especially Sicilians), Baltimore was the last stop. Vincenzo Frettita D’Anna—Aunt Concetta’s grandfather—made the trip from the town of Cefalù, Sicily to Baltimore in 1900, when he was just 18 years old.

Cefalù, like Baltimore, was on a coast and therefore had a visible fishing industry, but that’s about where the similarities end. Looking at up-to-date photos of the ancient town, which is situated between turquoise water and the edge of a behemoth rock, I feel as if I would be less inclined to leave than my Sicilian predecessors were. But the Cefalù of their day shares little resemblance to today’s touristy, Mediterranean paradise. The agricultural industry that the people of southern Italy so depended on could no longer support southern Italian families; drought, disease and the

misuse of land brought agricultural production almost to a halt. Animosity between the northern and southern regions of Italy did not help matters. Not content with a divided nation, northern Italians had been attempting to unify the country since the 1860s. The North, with modernized and industrialized economies, contrasted to the South, with almost feudal-style systems of landownership and laborers that left little room for middle class growth. In order to unify the Italian states, Northern Italians wanted to bring “civilization” to a South that to them was “a perverse realm of social disorder and moral degradation in which human existence cannot be conceived of according to the standard measure of European civilization.”

So instead of remaining in an Italy where their place of birth made them socially inferior and economically paralyzed, thousands of Italian immigrants like Vincenzo D’Anna decided to give life in the United States a go. Like many other southern Italians, Vincenzo came to the Port of Baltimore in search of better economic opportunity, and while other natives of Cefalù also settled in Baltimore, no family joined Vincenzo on his journey.

Luckily, Vincenzo did not get caught up in the “masses of predestined derelicts.” On the contrary: he sold produce at the Lexington Market, where he would chastise customers for squeezing his tomatoes too hard; he found a wife, Rosaria Marguerite Glorioso (a first-generation Sicilian-American whose parents hailed from Cefalù); he had, with Rosaria Marguerite, seven sons and two daughters: Maria, Pete, Sam, Carmen, Joseph, Vincent, Angelo, Anthony and Concetta.

The D’Annas lived in a row house at 503 W Mulberry Street, in downtown Baltimore. Although Vincenzo only completed his education through the 8th grade, he was hard-worker who took pride in his work and became known as the “Tomato King in Maryland.” Vincenzo’s success as a businessman allowed him to buy his own house (in 1930 the house was worth about \$10,000 dollars).

Less than a block away, at 515 W. Mulberry Street, lived Vincenzo Alascio, another Italian immigrant, who

arrived in Baltimore in 1910. Along with his wife, Minnie, who emigrated from Italy in 1908, he had three sons and three daughters: Shaif, Anthony, Celia, Joseph, Theresa and Samuel. According to the 1930 U.S. Federal Census, Vincenzo Alascio had no years of education and occupation; despite this, his industry of work was denoted as “Fruit.”

In large Italian families, frequent repetition of names is an unavoidable, albeit sometimes confusing, phenomenon. (In fact, the more generations that separate you from your ancestors, the more confusing it gets.) So Concetta (daughter of Vincenzo and Rosaria) is the aunt of my Aunt Concetta (who was actually my great aunt).

Two large Italian families with first-generation American children who live less than a block away from each other on the same street are bound to cross paths at some point; and cross paths they did.

Pete D’Anna grew into the body of a stereotypical swarthy Sicilian man: a full head of dark, greased back hair, a strong jaw, and skin that appeared darker than it actually was because of his thick arm hair. With his brothers Joseph, Carmen and Angelo, Pete worked as an executive at Mars Supermarket (named after the airplane the Mars Flying Boat), which Joseph founded. Pete’s area of expertise was the produce department. In his time off, Pete enjoyed spending time with women.

Theresa Alascio was very concerned with appearances; her clothing always reflected the style of the day. She had attended school, but she was not the brightest flower of the bunch. By the age of 18, Theresa became the young bride of Pete D’Anna, and gave him their first child: a daughter named Rosaria. Four years later came another daughter, Concetta. And a couple years later, a son named Vincent. Together they lived at 314 Greene Street, about seven blocks west from their families on Mulberry Street, until 1948, when Theresa and Pete got a divorce.



My first memory of Theresa “Grandmom” D’Anna is from my fourth birthday party. I sat at the oval wooden table in the kitchen with my brothers; surrounding us were many elderly, unfamiliar faces. But the most distressing to me was that of Grandmom D’Anna; although she was in her 70’s, her concern for looks had never faded. Her long hair was dyed bright red; matching her hair were her lipstick and manicured nails; light-blue eye shadow dusted her eyelids; her customary high-heeled shoes made her tightly-panted legs seem intimidatingly long.

As we sat there waiting for the cake candles to be lit, she thrust her face in mine, touched my hair and squeezed my cheek. Up close, I could see her eyes slightly drooped with age and her slightly slanted smile. Disturbed, I began to cry.

Her kids and grandkids were used to it. As children, they would get their cheeks pinched and their faces kissed and their stomachs full of completely homemade pizza (hers was the best). All Grandmom D’Anna wanted was to love and be loved...and look good doing it.

For the last 30 years of her life, Grandmom D’Anna went out dancing every week with her boyfriend Mr. Howard. (She never married Howard after her ex-husband Pete died; as long as she remained unmarried, she received his social security payments.) On weekends, Howard and Theresa would get all dolled-up and go to a big band club and dance. At family weddings, Howard spun Theresa so that her body was parallel to the ground (a photo of them from Theresa’s grandson’s wedding verifies this fact).

She died of a heart attack at the age of 81. At her viewing, her bright red hair sat perfectly coiffed on her shoulders; the shiny casket covered the bottom half of her body. As a four-year-old, I did not understand the situation in which I found myself: an odd smelling room with that scary red-haired lady lying down in a box.

I did recognize her daughter (my great aunt) Concetta from the throng of well wishers. She kneeled down in front of me and reached out her arms to me. “Please give me a hug, Susan. She was my mom. Please, I need a hug from

you.” Her voice slightly quivered and her eyes filled with water. I shyly retreated into the protective folds of my mother’s skirt.



As a little girl, Concetta grew up without a father in her life. As a young wife, Concetta lived in a once-but-no-longer-comfortable house in the D’Anna’s Villa—a house long neglected by her relatives and infested with rats—while her husband, Ken DeCrette, was in the service. After Ken returned home, he and Concetta bought a small one-story house at 3456 Liberty Parkway. As a new mother, Concetta took in her father and two half-siblings, Pete Jr. and Patty, after her stepmother tried to hurt them in a drunken rage (Concetta was only about 21 at the time).

“I remember every second of it,” said Patty, Concetta’s half-sister. “It was a Thursday night. Before we went over there, I was home with my father and my mother—my mother was an alcoholic. She was drunk at dinner, and she threw a glass at my dad and then she pulled out a knife; he got us out of there. When we got to Cetta’s, *The Untouchables* was on TV. The next day was my birthday, and John F Kennedy’s inauguration day, and it was snowing. We went out that night in the snow. Saturday, I was supposed to have a birthday party at home, but Cetta had it at her house and all my friends came over.”

Ken, Concetta and their daughter lived in the small one-story house. After Ken and Concetta had three more children, nine people (including Pete, Pete Jr. and Patty) were living in a two-bedroom house. Butting-heads were all too common. “Daddy tried to rule the roost, but that wasn’t his job,” remembered Patty. “Daddy was tough; he’d tell Cetta what to cook, and if she didn’t get it right he’d yell and scream; they had had just about enough.”

But they all managed to stay together. Pete expanded the tiny kitchen, and refurbished the attic and basement into bedrooms and extra living space (as a child, I was unaware that the basement playroom was my great-grandfather’s

domain back-in-the-day); he taught Concetta how to cook. Family dinners were a daily occurrence.

Concetta absolutely adored her father. She used to say, “Nobody loves Daddy like I do; nobody loves their father like I do.” She admitted later on that she raised Pete Jr. and Patty for her father, to have her father in her life again. Patty believed “She would do anything for him,” even raise his children.

According to Patty, Pete did not know how to be a father; he could not easily show affection for his kids. She remembers him crying only twice. “One night before we broke up as a family and my mother threw him out of the house—she threw his clothes out in the snow—and I saw him crying when he had to leave us.” The second time was after he returned from the hospital where his eldest daughter, Rosaria, died of cardiac arrest.

Like her father, Concetta had a hard time expressing herself; even with her kids, it was hard for her to show her emotions. Only years later, after her grandson Aaron died young of cancer, was she more outwardly loving; the latter—the sweet great-aunt who lived in the little white house on Liberty Parkway—was the only Concetta I ever knew.



I knew Concetta as a woman with whom I shared some genes; I knew her as a woman who had my photograph on one of her living room shelves; I knew her as a woman who gave me love that I didn’t quite understand, and also happened to make incredible pasta (that for some reason she called *basta*).

In most respects, Concetta—and by default my Italian predecessors she represented—were strangers to me. My dad never told me stories about his dance-loving Grandmom D’Anna; Concetta never told me about the struggles of her father or the achievements of her grandfather Vincenzo, the “Tomato King of Maryland.” So when I found myself ambling around the massive Loudon Park Cemetery—350-acres, to be exact—with my dad, looking for Aunt Concetta’s grave, I felt out-of-place. The cemetery did not have a map or guide to help point us to her, and my dad could not

remember the grave's location from the funeral. The grass had been cut recently, and it had rained earlier that morning. We had been walking in circles, looking at graves, for the past 45 minutes. My gray canvas shoes had become green; the multi-colored flowers in my hand had not yet wilted due to the gray moisture in the air.

I was beginning to give up; there is only so much death you can look at in one morning. Frustrated, I wandered into another section of graves: nuns, priests, firefighters, and eventually servicemen. Each branch of the military had a flag flying on a flagpole. Below them rested men and women distinguished by partially grass-covered plaques. Flowers at my side, I perused the rows of names and dates. In the second row near the grassy edge, I was surprised to find "Kenneth Lloyd DeCrette, 1937-2003."

"Hey Dad," I said. "I found Uncle Ken."

"You did? You found her!"

"...what?" I did not understand.

"She was buried with Uncle Ken," my dad said. "That is how most servicemen and their wives are buried. Did you not know that?"

I cleared some of the wet grass covering the bottom half of the plaque with my free hand. It read, "Concetta Theresa DeCrette, 1939-2014."