

“We travel to find someplace new, but we also travel to find something to hold on to, a moment, a place, a view from a hilltop that stays with us when we have returned to the mundane familiarity of our lives”

By Dawn Terrick

Sitting on the Alitalia plane, I could barely contain myself. Every few minutes, I would catch myself looking at the small computer placed in the seat in front of me that mapped the plane's progress. I would watch, with anticipation, the hundreds and then thousands of miles we traveled. It felt like I was holding my breath until the blue line made contact with the red dot that marked Rome. As soon as Tim and I stepped off the plane, I felt that we were far from home. And as we drove from the airport to our hotel in the heart of Rome, I knew that we were far from home and in a new country, emerged in a new culture and way of life.

When I read on our itinerary that we were headed for Assisi, the only thought that came to me was St. Francis; with uncertainty, I remembered religion school lectures about the saint and, for some reason, pictured him with cats and dogs at his feet and birds on his shoulders. However, I had to wonder why we would waste our time in Assisi. Weren't there other, more grand and exciting places to visit? However, as I witnessed the hilltop, walled city of Assisi for the first time, I was amazed and shocked. Much larger than I had expected, it was a beacon on the hill. Its high, medieval walls running along the sloped hills and the grand white marble cathedral called to all visitors. It truly called to me.

Due to Assisi's in accessible location and its even narrower streets, our bus dropped us off and we had to walk to the entrance of this beautiful walled city. As we followed the winding cobblestone paths up the hill, we drew farther from the valley. I could feel myself being lifted and being just a bit closer to the heavens. And when we finally entered Assisi and caught the sight of the cathedral, I felt at home. It was an odd feeling that I could not yet explain. But would become clearer to me as I spent even a short time in this miraculous place.

It was Christmas Day and the churches as well as the shops and apartments above the shops were simply decorated with wreaths and nativity scenes. As we walked along the steep narrow streets, I studied each shop and one in particular caught my eye. The shop window was adorned with rounds of fresh Parmigianino reggiano and the entrance welcomed me with its hanging meats – salami, prosciutto, cappicola. And the aromas that greeted me were not only appetizing and alluring, but familiar. They reminded me of Santo's, the deli that was up the street from my childhood home, the deli that I visited with my grandfather on a daily basis to buy our chicken cutlets, sausages and mozzarella and bring home to my grandmother. Tim and I entered for lunch. As I looked at the stainless steel bowls of roasted red peppers and the baskets of hard rolls and bacala, I felt homesick. This small deli in Assisi could have been my deli on South Regent Street in Port Chester, New York. Growing up, I listened to stories from my grandmother about the “old country” and how the food we ate and the customs we practiced were authentic,

were, as she put it, “real Italian.” I just thought that these statements made her feel better, more connected to her ancestry, but I realized I had been wrong for all of those years. These two places could hardly be further apart yet they were so similar and one brought me back to the other. After we had ordered our eggplant, mozzarella and basil sandwiches, we headed out the door, to eat our lunch al fresco, amidst the crowds of true Italians and tourists and the bells of the churches. And as I turned to say a silent good bye to my deli, I noticed the large boar’s head mounted over the door. Boar’s Head – the name of my favorite cold cuts, the only cold cuts my grandmother would eat. Hmmm . . .

After our lunch, we meandered through the town and strolled through the other, smaller but no less amazing churches, urged on by both the beauty of the town and the brisk, winter air. We then decided to settle into our hotel and prepare for our Christmas Day Eve dinner.

Seated at the table with our friends, we sipped wine until our server appeared with two large bowls of soup and pasta. She nimbly filled our bowls with each and disappeared and then quickly reappeared with a large gravy boat filled with a deep, dark red tomato sauce. I took a deep breath as I picked up the sauce and poured the dark red, shiny sauce over my pasta because it looked and smelled just like my grandma’s gravy (yes, in my house and for my ancestors, tomato sauce is gravy). And before I could say anything, Tim looked over at me, with a slight smile and we both dug in and found we were right. Tim said, “This is Rosie’s gravy!” And everyone knows that my grandmother makes the best grave. Our friends did not understand this comment, but they did understand that this was the best meal they had had in Italy. As the server passed our table, Al beckoned to her and asked if we could have more pasta and she obliged. “Al, I am so glad you asked because I wanted more, but felt awkward,” I said. “I don’t care; this is the best dinner I’ve had!” “I agree and, in fact, it reminds me of home.” “Really,” Al responded, “I sense there is a good story here.” And so with that, the flood gates opened and I regaled our friends with stories of home, all centered around food, as we dined on pasta, bread and wine for the rest night. My stories grew longer, our discussions grew more animated and louder and our Christmas was complete.

How is it that although I was so far away from home and had not even been home in almost a year, I felt so close to my childhood, my family, my neighborhood and my house? The pride I felt for my grandmother’s stories, my family was so great it was palpable. And it took a journey of thousands of miles away from my home to discover this. It was at this dinner table in Assisi that I, the traveler, the one that bolted from home after high school, deeply missed my home – the physical the yellow house on South Regent Street that was a block away from Santo’s Deli, Cassone’s Bakery and Corpus Christi Church where my entire family would gather around the kitchen tables for every meal, for every celebration.