Travel Writing

**Pacentro: Living the Italian Dream**

I’ve always wanted a nonna. I don’t know why the prospect of a snappy old Italian grandma has such a hold over me, but it does. It could be my love for true Italian forms of carbohydrates, paired with the idea of being taught how to make them by hand from a secret family recipe dating back to pre-Roman times, but, really, I think it’s just the whole vibe. Now, I’ve also considered the modes by which I can obtain said nonna, and I’ve narrowed it down to two options: be reincarnated as an Italian or marry an Italian man. Since I do not believe in reincarnation, and have not yet found a suitable Italian bachelor, I was definitely not expecting to find a nonna in the small, medieval town of Pacentro, located in central Italy. But, dear audience, this is what I’m learning from this trip, isn’t it? Expect the unexpected.

After a two-hour taxi ride from Rome, I arrived in the quaint town of Pacentro at dusk. The town’s 1,139 inhabitants were nowhere to be seen as the taxi dropped me onto the main street. The town seemed to be trapped in the medieval age – not unwillingly, of course. It was perfectly content with its circumstances. The lumpy cobbled street was bordered on either side by a façade of tall stone buildings, sparsely covered by branching vines, and divided into two or three shopfronts.

Since I was trying to coax a bit of spontaneity out of the void that is my anxiety, I had decided prior to find and book a room on arrival. I firmly regretted this frivolous decision as the sky darkened from the romantic pinks and oranges of dusk. Apart from the pitifully dim streetlamps situated sparsely along the side of the street, the only light source I could see was from a little restaurant about 50 metres from where I was standing. This journey looked an easy feat, considering I’ve climbed Everest’s base camp. However, it seems that cobblestoned streets were replaced for a reason, as I was tripping on the audacious stones the entire dark walk to the restaurant, topping it all off by completely stacking it just as I approached the restaurant’s glass door.

The red of the blood on my knees was nothing compared to the shade of my cheeks as a large woman rushed out of the door towards me, babbling Italian words at me much faster than my two months of Duolingo permitted me to translate.

“Sei ferito? Ecco, vieni dentro. Hai un posto dove stare? Siete soli?” she questioned fiercely.

Seeing my inability to answer, she sighed heavily, wiped her hands on the floral printed apron stretched over her ample girth, and helped me up with surprising ease for a 70 something looking woman.

After a flurry of activity, I found myself with a pleasant room above the restaurant booked for 3 nights and a steaming bowl of pasta in front of me. My knees had also been cleaned and bandaged, although the fiery woman’s benevolence did not stretch to heal my bruised ego. This, however, was quickly remedied by a bowl of Maria’s – my Italian angel’s name as she later told me – Cacio e Pepe. With each bite of the creamy pasta, I felt lighter and lighter, until I was pretty sure I could levitate if I tried hard enough.

Maria then rushed me to bed, but, just as I was about to close my door, she caught me and asked in heavily accented English, “Vat is your age, eh?”

“I’m 23,” I replied, not making prolonged eye contact in case it turned out that she did in fact bite. I had my suspicions.

“Hmmm … yes is good. You –“ she says, pointing at me with a gnarled finger, “- meet my son tomorrow. No good alone”.

And with that, she closed the door in my face. Well, at least there was now a prospect of an Italian bachelor.

I was reluctant to leave the small, homely room Maria had put me in the next morning, but the day was dedicated to exploring the village of Pacentro. I spent the morning meandering through its tight, winding streets, visiting small cafes, and meeting the locals. The latter was not exactly planned, but a young, Australian girl visiting the tiny town was quite the commodity, and, naturally, brought plenty of attention. Before 11am, I had already been offered the hand in marriage of five or so women’s sons, but, since I was already betrothed to Maria’s, I was inclined to politely decline.

I bumped into Maria and her equally boisterous friends at the third café. As soon as she saw me, she jumped up and dragged me over to the group, proudly showing me off like a trophy. The women gushed over me, picking up my hands, pulling at my linen dress and feeling my hair. It was, of course, quite mortifying, but I’ve come to learn that this is a consequence of having a nonna, and a burden I’m happy to bear. After I had sat there silently looking pretty for who knew how long, Maria bade the women goodbye, and pulled me back to the restaurant.

In the tight kitchen, I could see that two areas had been set up for cooking. Fresh ingredients lined the bench, and I was almost buzzing with excitement. This feeling didn’t leave the whole time as Maria guided me through the process of kneading the pizza dough, rolling out and drying the pasta, and plating the fragrant dishes on yellowing crockery.

It also didn’t leave as we turned the “open” sign on the restaurant’s door to “closed” and laid a table with our creations.

Maria turned to me.

“Georgio and Matteo coming; they bringing the wine,” she explained.

Georgio, it turned out, was Maria’s downtrodden, silent husband, whose eyes twinkled every time Maria clipped his ear.

And Matteo, well, Matteo was Maria and Georgio’s son. Their single, 40-year-old son, who burned red with embarrassment as Maria introduced us.

And, despite the fact that Matteo couldn’t be my dreamy Italian bachelor, I realised that family does not have to be made by blood, but it can be created out of nothing but love. And it was through this revolutionary and unexpected method that I crossed off my bucket list item: “acquire a nonna”.

**Word Count - 1062**