

My Writing Life

January 2007

Dear Friends,

My countdown has begun! It's only one month to the publication date of *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons* (February 1, 2007) and I am feeling as anxious and hopeful as a new mother-to-be. I am so grateful to all of you who have been supportive and enthusiastic during this long journey.

Over the Christmas holiday Stephan and I took the kids to New York for our annual outing to a Broadway play. On our way to the city we stopped at Gate of Heaven Cemetery, where my parents are buried. The only disappointment I have about the publication of *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons* is that my parents and my Aunt Susie are not alive to witness it and see their parents' love story in print. If they had not saved the letters, there would be no *Dancing*! While at the cemetery, I tucked one of my bookmarks into the evergreens planted in front of the headstone and noted the engraving.

Forever in Our Hearts

Reviewer Comments

A few pre-publication reviews have appeared in the last few weeks and I'm delighted to share them here:

"...Based on her own family history, Cardillo's beautiful love story will be cherished by readers."
Patty Engelmann, *Booklist*

"...Linda Cardillo brings the time and place to colorful life through her words, allowing the reader to step into Giulia's shoes as a young girl through her elderly years. The retelling of her love story with Paolo and then with Salvatore is emotional and realistically portrayed, leaving the reader with a tear in the eye. A fresh and original storyline makes *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons* a "must-read" for anyone who enjoys family drama. In the style of LaVyrle Spencer, Jude Deveraux or Danielle Steele, author Linda Cardillo has penned a wonderful debut novel. From the new Harlequin Everlasting imprint; *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons* is a grand way to begin a new line." Letitia Elsasser, *Contemporary Romance Writers*



Reader Comments

Even more than what reviewers are saying, the words of individuals who have read the excerpts on my website are especially meaningful to me. Here are a few:

"...You clearly have 'that gift' to see into the eyes of others and to keenly empathize. You express and bring to the surface emotions and thoughts that most women place in their denial file... you captured the spirit of many Italian Americans of years ago. You clearly understand the nuances...the roses, the fruit trees, the role of family opinion, the dance between men and women."

"I've just finished reading everything on your website! It's beautiful...I'm having a strangely emotional reaction—laughing and crying and missing my father right now!"

Excerpt

From *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons*

Chapter 2 Journey to the Mezzogiorno *Cara Serafini Dedrick*

The cacophony of the Naples train station assaulted me as soon as I stepped off the express train from Rome. Announcements of departing trains reverberated across the vaulted space; mothers scolded misbehaving children; whistles shrieked; a group of yellow-shirted boys shouted as they kicked a soccer ball near the far end of Platform 22.

I adjusted the strap of my bag as rushing travelers jostled past me. I adjusted my mental state—from efficient New York manager and organized mother of four—to Italian. It was more than pulling out of memory the lyrical language that had surrounded me in Giulia's house. I knew I had to pour myself quickly into the fluid, rapid, staccato pace of Campania in August or I would be trampled—by the surging population, the Vespas leaping curbs, the suspicion of strangers, and my own sense of oppression.

I knew this because I had been here fifteen years before, a bright-eyed art student who had spent the summer in the rarified atmosphere of Florence, living in a cinquecento villa, painting in the Uffizi on Mondays when it was closed to the hordes of summer tourists, reading Dante and Boccaccio, attending parties with boys who drove Ferraris. I had thought that I knew Italy then. I had prided myself on the look and sound of Italy that I had embraced. No one took me for an American. And then I had come south, to visit Zia Letitia.

I had traveled by rail then as well, through Rome to Naples. An increasingly oppressive heat encroached upon the overcrowded train as it made its way further south, towards an Italy that I had found more and more difficult to recognize. The blue-greens and purples of the Tuscan landscape, warmed by a honeyed light, had given way to an unrelenting sunshine that seemed to have seared the earth to an other barrenness.

Everything I saw seemed to be the same color—the rough-hewn cliffs, the crumbling houses, the worn faces.

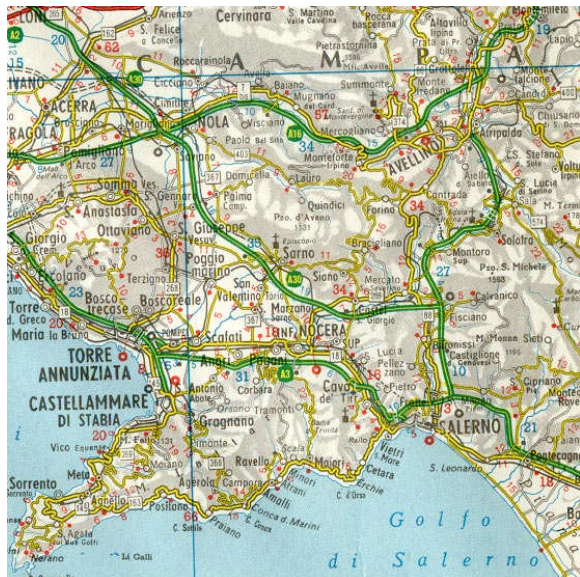
When I had arrived at midday in Naples—sweaty, dirty, cranky—I felt myself to be in a foreign country. With dismay, I had watched the bus for Avellino pull away from the chaos in front of the train station without me. I had had to wait two hours for the next one.

For the first time in my life, I had felt menaced—by the drivers in minuscule Fiats who ignored traffic signals, by the barricaded expressions of the people massing and knotting around me, by the heat and clamor and stench that had so unraveled the beauty and civility of this once-splendid city. The life of Naples was in the streets—raw, intemperate, flamboyant; and yet, to the eyes of strangers, it was emotionally closed, hostile.

I had seen Naples then with the eyes of such a stranger, a Northerner sheltered behind stone walls, in the shadows of cypresses. And so I had failed to recognize in its streets, its people, its surging movement, the seeds of the resplendent artistry that coursed through my veins.

I had escaped to Avellino on the two o'clock bus, a ramshackle vehicle populated with sour-faced nuns, wailing babies, an extremely pregnant woman who required two unscheduled stops to relieve herself, and a restless chicken.

At four-fifteen I had been deposited on a modern piazza below the center of town in front of a bar named the Arcobaleno. The Avellino that had resided in my imagination eluded me in its post-war reality of concrete high-rise apartment buildings. In contrast to the press of humanity in Naples, a melancholy emptiness greeted me. In the bar, where I bought a Coke and sought a telephone, I was the only woman. Two old men in the corner interrupted their card game to stare openly; the younger men, playing pinball, were more surreptitious, but watched just as closely. I had felt myself unprotected—a word I would not have used in the context of my life in America. A word I would have scoffed at in any other place, at any other time, in the years since I had left my family. But something primitive and archetypal accompanied me on that journey. I called a phone number given to me by Giulia. The woman who answered was a distant relative who, Giulia had told me, would take me to Letitia. But the woman



who answered had no idea I was coming—the letter Giulia had written to her had somehow never arrived, and she had no time to drive me to my great aunt. She was irritated at the imposition of “gli Americani” who thought that any time they arrived in the old country she should jump to accommodate them. No, I would just have to manage on my own. Take the bus, she barked. Which one, I asked. I don’t know the number, she said. Tell the driver you need to go to Ventecanno. And she hung up.

I went outside, pushing tears away with the back of my hand, and watched in gratitude as a bus pulled up. I asked the driver if he could take me to Ventecanno. When he nodded, I boarded and sat close to him. Later than I had hoped, he cranked the door closed and began the climb out of the valley. I had dozed intermittently, lulled by the rumbling of the bus as it laboriously ascended the mountain. It made two stops before reaching my final destination, identified for me abruptly by the driver as he brought the bus to a halt in a deserted piazza. Within seconds, the bus was gone; and I stood alone in the road, facing shuttered houses and my own overwhelming sense of abandonment. Why had I even considered making this journey? I had friends waiting for me in France, with whom I could have been sitting in a café discussing existentialism over a bottle of wine. Instead, I had naively traversed half the length of Italy expecting to be welcomed warmly in my ancestral home and finding instead the doors locked and no one willing to acknowledge me as their own. Even though I was twenty years old, I felt like a child who had lost her mother in a crowd and was surrounded by strangers.

I had only Zia Letitia’s name—no address, no photograph, no knowledge other than the stories told by my grandmother of the sister who had run from her life in America by returning alone to Italy when her husband had deserted her.

In the doorway of a house not far from where the bus had deposited me, I had seen a woman darning. She was the only other living thing in sight, so I had approached her, aware that the woman’s keen and wary eyes had been upon me since I had descended from the bus.

“I am looking for Signora Letitia Rassina,” I had explained, proud of my flawless High Italian and the only thing that stood between myself and panic. At least, I told myself, you can speak the language.

“You come from the North.” It was a statement, spat out in distrust and contempt, not a question requiring confirmation.

“I live in Firenze, but I come from America. I am the granddaughter of Signora Rassina’s sister.” Unwittingly, I had uttered the magic formula.

The guardedness and suspicion with which the woman had first silently confronted me fled from her face. She took me by the arm.

“Come, I’ll show you where the Signora lives.”

As we turned to walk down the hill, I saw faces appearing at suddenly unshuttered windows, heard voices calling out to the woman, who had linked her arm with me.

“To Signora Rassina,” she called back to her neighbors’ queries, “the niece from America!” She patted my arm and marched on with me, proud, proprietary.

Within minutes, the faces that had surfaced at the windows emerged from the houses and joined my escort and me in our promenade through the village. A young boy, at the direction of the woman, relieved me of my suitcase. By the time we reached the house of my great aunt, there were perhaps thirty people crowding around us, jostling for a glimpse of the Americana.



The house—ancient, once elegant—presented a silent facade to the tumult in the street below. No one responded to our energetic knocks and calls.

“She must be sleeping, although how anyone can still be sleeping in this village now, with all the excitement, I don’t know. Giorgio, go around and get Emma.” The woman leading me was clearly relishing her role as director.

“Emma takes care of your aunt, and she has a key to the house,” she explained to me.

A few minutes later, smoothing down what appeared to be a hastily donned black dress, a middle-aged woman hustled breathlessly after Giorgio with a heavily laden key ring in her hand.

The arrival of Emma caused a realignment in the roles in this theater piece being played out on the street. Not content with the second-hand information brought to her by young Giorgio, Emma conducted her own inquisition of me.

“No one sent me word from America that someone was coming! “ She was both suspicious and injured to have been left out of the preparations for my visit.

I explained in detail who I was, and that the letter announcing my arrival had somehow gone astray. Emma, horrified that I had been allowed by my family to travel alone, was nevertheless satisfied that I was indeed the granddaughter of Giulia. With a shriek of pleasure, she took possession of the role of escort. Only then did she insert an iron key into the massive arched doorway of the house.

Inside was a musty vestibule, lit by the late-afternoon sun streaming through a window on the rear wall. Climbing that same wall was a stone staircase leading to a landing on the second floor. Emma led me by the arm up the stairs. Behind us, my original escort in the lead, came the rest of the villagers.

Once again, our knocks were met by silence. Emma called out Letitia’s name in a loud voice.

“She’s old. She doesn’t hear so well anymore,” she murmured to me.

Finally, the door opened and a woman appeared, her face marked by confusion. She stared uncomprehending into my face.

I stared back at a woman whose face echoed Giulia’s. For the third time that afternoon, I identified myself by my relationship to my grandmother, a woman who had once lived in this house.

Letitia’s confusion slowly receded as she listened, concentrating on me and ignoring the commotion that surrounded her. Then, she reached out and stroked the opal hanging from my ear. It was Giulia’s, given to me by her on my sixteenth birthday. I had been wearing the earrings all summer, and they had become so much a part of me that I had forgotten their origins.

“Giulia’s earrings,” she whispered, “You are my blood.”

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Upcoming Appearances

February 4

Philoptocos

[St. George’s Greek Orthodox Church](#)

Springfield, Massachusetts

February 10

[Toadstool Books](#)

Peterborough, New Hampshire

February 11

[Hendrik Hudson Free Library \(Community announcement calendar\)](#)

Montrose, New York

February 17

[Barnes & Noble](#)

Holyoke, Massachusetts

February 21

[Barnes & Noble](#)

Newburgh, New York

What’s Next

I’ll be spending the next month working on my new book, tentatively titled *True Harvest*; scheduling more appearances; pitching ideas to the media to cover *Dancing*; updating the website (www.lindacardillo.com) and checking for new reviews. It’s an exciting time!

“The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.”

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Dancing on Sunday Afternoons

On Sale

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