

On an Italian Island, How He Met My Mother

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By JESSICA SILVESTER MARCH 8, 2016



The port of Ponza, on the island of Ponza, a two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride from Naples. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

When you pull into the port of Ponza, a tiny Italian island between Rome and Naples, you can see my grandfather's childhood home. Position yourself outward from the terra-cotta wall of the harbor, which is shaped like a crescent. Glance across the ombré Tyrrhenian Sea and up the western hillside speckled with pastel doll houses. Look closely and you can spot one outlier, an eroding whitewashed facade haunting the cheery amphitheater like a holy ghost. There it is.

I don't know when exactly I decided Ponza was the place where Dan would connect with my dead mother. When we first started dating, I told him about the house as a way to impress him. Technically I was a part owner, along with a handful of both Italian and American relatives. In reality, this meant very little as a potential real estate inheritance — it had been abandoned for decades, and the family here and abroad seemed doomed to fight over it forever — but these were just details.

The house and the island were also a sort of indirect, nondepressing way of talking about my mother. She died of colorectal cancer a few months before Dan and I got together, when I was 23 and she was 55. I was wrecked with grief, a zombie covered in artificially bronzed skin and warm blond highlights, trying desperately not to seem like a downer. (Guys liked the girls who were all sunshine and travel stories.) I brought up my mother only in breezy contexts, such as the enchanting island where her father grew up: It was a mini Nantucket for Romans; it didn't appear on most maps, and the houses didn't have addresses.

I recounted moments from a family trip we took in 1996 — my parents and their only child, my Uncle John and Aunt Anne and two cousins — when we rowed through blue grottoes and all but bathed in squid ink risotto. Even though that trip was the one and only time she visited Ponza, my mother never let me forget, "That's your *heritage*." If I won a swimming race at our town pool, she'd fold over me with her glossy black perm and say, "That's your Ponzesi blood!" If I seemed to be enjoying her stuffed calamari and oven-baked blue crabs on Christmas Eve, she'd squish my cheeks with her smooth acrylic nails: "My little Ponzesi." To this day, I'm not certain whether I really liked the taste of seafood or just how pleased my mother looked to see me eat it.

As the years went on in my relationship with Dan, I of course expanded talk of my mother far beyond the subject of Ponza. Dan usually got quiet, blushing across his wide neck; he grew up in a movie parody of an Irish-Catholic Massachusetts household where emotions were best reserved for Red Sox games. But even had he emoted like an Italian, it wouldn't have changed the fact that he would never know her. He would never taste her food, never see her manicured-hand gestures, never hear us laugh as we did in Ponza at the rooster who terrorized my snoring father from outside our unventilated pensione.

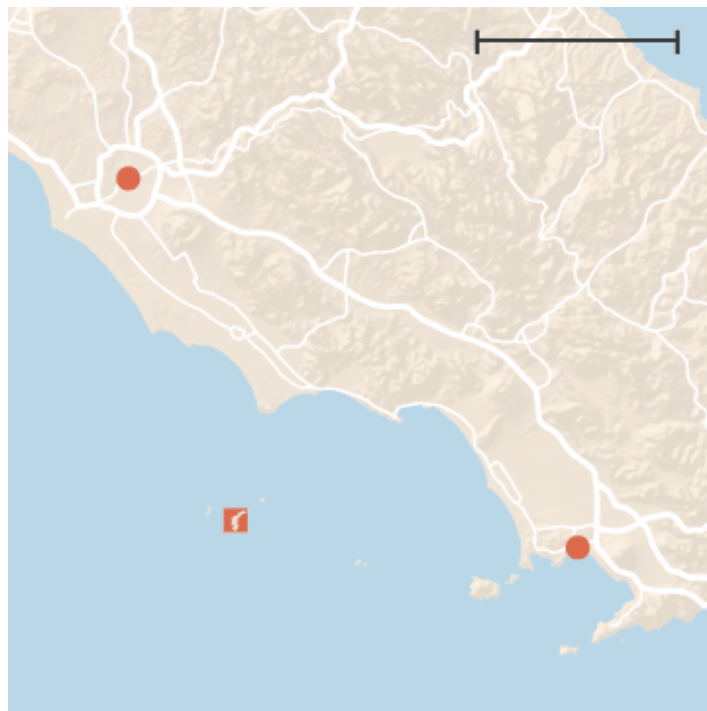


Seashells collected from the beach. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

I thought about all this not-knowing on the night Dan proposed one early December. (“We’re going to turn Christmas around for you,” he said hopefully, after years of me more or less refusing to celebrate the holiday without my mother.) I thought about it on our wedding day, which came and went without any of her homemade biscotti for dessert. And I thought about it on our honeymoon, when we headed to Ponza.

On the bumpy two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride from Naples, I tried and failed to picture my grandfather’s house — I guess I was a typical, preoccupied 14-year-old during that 1996 family vacation. I also acknowledged, maybe for the first time, how little I had actually researched this honeymoon, too wrapped up in the wedding and the fact that my mother wouldn’t be there. Other than my Uncle John’s hotel recommendation and my risotto memories, we were going in blind. As the ferry slowed and a dreamy Wes Anderson palette of painted houses emerged, all I knew was, Ponza was a Very Meaningful Place.

We waited close to an hour in the summer sun for our transportation to come and barrel us up to the Chiaia di Luna hotel. There, as advertised on the [website](#), the property looked out onto a spectacular sheer tuff cliff bleached by the northwest winds. Inside, the 230-euro-per-night room had barely enough space for our luggage and a purely decorative air-conditioner.



40 miles Rome ITALY Ponza island - Naples Tyrrhenian Sea - By The New York Times

Then there was the challenge of finding my grandfather’s house. All I knew was that it was on the Via Sopra Giancos, a street above an imperial Roman aqueduct. Contrary to Uncle John’s promise, nobody at the hotel seemed to know what I was talking about — mostly because they did not speak English and I, unlike my mother, could not speak Italian.

Between that afternoon and the next morning, with each failed attempt to get someone to point us in the right direction, the house began to loom larger and larger in my mind. Our hazy plan in coming here seemed to crystallize as a mission on which Something Meaningful must happen — a chance to find my mother’s spirit, and for Dan to finally meet it.

At last, the hotel managed to call us Joe Mazzella, self-proclaimed as the island’s one English-speaking taxi driver. A man who would fit right in with my movie parody of an Italian-American family, he shared the Mazzella name with my mother — it’s the Ponzesi equivalent of Smith. He grew up in the Bronx like her, too (though he said they never knew each other), before moving back to the homeland (“paradise”) nearly 30 years earlier with his parents. He had a vague sense of which house I was talking about — “the abandoned one” — just not exactly how to locate it.



The abandoned house of the author's grandfather. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

Joe's mini-S.U.V. chugged farther and farther up the five-mile island's main road, terraced vineyards and fig trees sloping off to one side, religious statues and thatched-roof food stands lining the other. In our series of false starts and hairpin turns, Joe pointed out other notable residences. One belonged to Anna Fendi, that high priestess of all the pebbled-leather purses my mother could not afford on her teacher's salary but occasionally bought herself anyway. "Fendi, baby!" she had stage-whispered when we were there so many years earlier and heard about the brand's Ponza connection.

A string of locals guided Joe closer and closer to our target. Finally, he parked on an incline and said we had made it. Before Dan ducked his oversize head out of the car, he squeezed his clammy forefinger around mine. Joe led us up a steep flight of concrete steps and through a narrow dirt path, and there it was: a weather-beaten block of stone adjoined to a much shorter hunk of stone, which was the original house; my ancestors carved it directly out of the cliffside over a century ago.

There was a curved roof designed to collect rainwater, shattered pieces of ceramic tile, a dried-up well, boarded-up doors. In the front yard, tall bristle grass that I'd been told my grandfather once used to sweep the floors gave way to overgrown grape vines alongside spurts of wild fennel and licorice. Dan's mouth, like mine, was agape, but he didn't say much. He snapped pictures, offered hard numbers about how many hundreds of feet above the sea the house might be.



Ricciola marinated in oil, rosemary and chile, at Oresteria, a seafood restaurant in the port. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

We looked onto the port below — it turned out the house was visible from way down there — and I wanted to feel as if I was standing in my mother's light. I wanted to sense a recognition flickering in Dan's hard-to-read green eyes, a sudden release of the torso under his Red Sox tee, a narrowing of the gap that separated him from all my greatest memories. But I'm fairly sure that didn't happen.

Why had I decided Ponza was such a Meaningful Place? Yes, I liked saying I owned property on a little Italian island that no one had ever heard of. Yes, my mother talked about it, felt proud about it. Yes, we'd been there together. But we went lots of places together. We went to Ponza only once; *she* went to Ponza only once. Her father left in adolescence for a better life and died before I could meet him; on his last visit back, his family shunned him for abandoning them. And our Ponza relatives now wanted nothing to do with us other than to fight over the house. In the early days of dating Dan, Ponza was simply a vessel for talking about my mother; there was no reason it should have brought him any closer to actually knowing her.

All the same, it's pretty cool to spend time on a little Italian island that no one has ever heard of. We've returned twice since the honeymoon.

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Anna Fendi once said Ponza “is the only place in the last 30 years that has stayed the same.” Indeed, most things haven’t changed on the island since I visited with my mother, and probably since my grandfather lived there. The drinking water still comes off barges from Naples; there are no movie theaters or proper hospitals (even though there are four churches); they use fig’s milk to treat foot fungus and wear unironic Ponza-shaped choker necklaces. A banner stretched across the main church features San Silverio, the island’s patron saint, atop a world globe — except in this version of the earth there is only one landmass, and that is Ponza.

But some parts of the island have progressed. Most recently, they’ve gotten their first spotlight, their first Williamsburg-inflected beer bar, their first school curriculum teaching tourism (and English!), their first D.O.C. seal on a crisp local Biancolella wine that tasted a little like apricots and didn’t leave me hung over. There’s a new mayor, who is trying to make people get serious about paying taxes and who plans to install a [desalination](#) system by the end of 2017.

The way Dan and I see the island has changed, too. On our most recent trip, last June, we went for the San Silverio festival — its Bronx iteration is where my mother could once be found all dolled up in her white lace communion dress with a zeppole-smear on her face. Dan and I took part in the whole centuries-old ritual from start to finish, joining the procession by land and then on a dinghy out to sea, surrounded by some 18,000 people (the island’s population is only about 3,000 in the off-season, but on this holy day, it reaches peak tourism). Swarms of boats sounded their horns while fireworks and red carnations hit the air like exploding shrines. People cried in remembering the miracles the saint performed in their own lives: healing a sick child, clearing up a violent storm.



Cliffs along the sea on the western side of the five-mile island. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

In our case, nothing especially magical happened. The sky did not crack open and rain my mother's biscotti into Dan's mouth. Ponza still has not, as far as I can tell, become Dan and my mother's metaphysical bonding place. But it has become *our* place.

The day after the festival, we took a boat ride with a fisherman named Paolo. We passed volcanic-rock beaches, and ruins of Augustan-era villas, and Duomo-like natural arches. Dan and I snorkeled through rays of light while Paolo dove with his hunting knife to slice snails off the rock. We gorged on them between sips of cold prosecco.

As a parting gift, Paolo gave us each a seashell necklace. I assumed that Dan would conveniently leave his back at our Fendi-owned bed-and-breakfast, but in fact he put it around his big neck and didn't take it off for months. He wore it to work under his gingham shirts; he wore it on weekends under his merino wool sweaters. He only recently removed it because the rope started to smell like mildew, but he still sometimes kisses it for luck. It is a gesture so out of character I have to wonder whether he truly loves the necklace or just loves how happy it made me to see him wear it. Maybe he doesn't really know the difference.

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