The Long Family, Charlie Mohl

There I was. Sitting in the upper level of a train car as it clattered from Florence to some northern Italian town that sounded like Pescia over the phone, two hours late and praying to my passport that I was headed towards the right place. While I worried, I doodled a hasty family tree into my leather-bound notebook in an attempt to find out—to the best of my knowledge—where certain branches intersected. I was about to meet some people that my grandfather had assured me I was related to, and I had heard too many horror stories featuring the “lone traveler in Europe” to squelch any lingering hesitation. It was six hours by train from where I was living in Rome at the time as a study abroad student for five months, but as soon as my grandfather dropped word to the family that I had set foot on the same continent, they were on me like unduly hospitable wolves, pressing me for a visit.

The PA crackled to life and the conductor said Pescia—or something close enough to that. I stepped off the train. My heart skipped a beat as it began to slide away with an electronic ding. What if this station isn’t the right one? I may have just stranded myself in totally alien territory, and after my two hour ordeal at the train station in Florence, lost and accosted by gypsies, my nerves were well beyond frayed at this point.

As the last train car cleared my field of vision, I saw a trio of people peering at me quizzically from the steps of the station. I sidled over and unfolded the crude sign I’d made on the trip out. It read, La Famiglia Baldacci—the Baldacci family, the relatives I was supposed to have met here hours ago.

Magrini was a name my great-grandmother married into. In the Italian, it’s a combination of the words magro, for thin, with the suffix of -ini, meaning short. That’s as much as I had to work with regarding my preconceptions of what they might look like. There were three of them
at the station: my teenaged cousin-to-some-degree Elisa, her 10-year-old sister Chiara, and Mauro, their dad. I had been told ahead of time that Elisa spoke the only English in the family. She was to be my primary lifeline for communication.

Approaching them, smiling awkwardly, I presented the paper, chauffer style, and mumbled an unsure *ciao*. They looked me up and down, and they laughed. As if it were hilarious to them that I failed to greet them with booming familiarity. Then they hugged me, took me home. As we drove there, Mauro gave me a tour of the scenery as it rolled past on all sides; talking about the beautiful rolling mountains in rapid Italian while Elisa did her best to translate with his pacing. I caught a few of his words here and there with my linguistic skills that scrape conversational at the best of times. Italian is a gorgeous language.

Their home looked quaint and beautiful. It was as much a part of the landscape as its inhabitants, with the fields on all sides—olive trees, I was told. I was reeling over how authentic it looked before it finally struck me that it was, in fact, the real deal. Amidst cheek-pinching and comments of “*Che magro—how thin you are!*” I was fed like I’d never been fed before. Though it was only 11am, early for most Americans (outside of a college) to begin drinking, Mauro popped the cork on a bottle of local Tuscan wine, which flowed like water around these parts. And the family showed me how a meal can be an art form in itself.

I’m Italian, I swear. A mutt, among other things, with an uncharacteristic pallor for a man with roots that hark back to the Mediterranean, but I still manage to hold tight to my boot-country heritage.

Though I missed a few words in the conversation, I found that most everything that can be said in Italian can also be done through emphatic hand gestures. I inhaled fish pasta and salad (vegetarian, for the observant Italian family’s Lenten Friday), and a simple joke about Americans
that turned into a dish of French fries because I’m convinced that Italian matriarchs can cook anything at the drop of a hat. In the meantime, Elisa’s grandparents—a jovial elderly couple who came up from downstairs to eat and drink like the best of us—told me about when my grandfather last visited a decade ago and teased the old woman about her slippers.

My grandfather (affectionately called Babo in a bastardization of the Italian moniker for dad) is a first generation American who grew up in a Chicago speakeasy. He’s a sought-after orator at gatherings, family or otherwise, and he’s the ancestral basis for my developing sense of humor. To say that he speaks his mind would be an understatement, and I’ve sometimes found it difficult holding a conversation with him in a public place at anything above hushed tones due to his candid use of certain unutterable words and phrases. But for a man who wears his prejudices out on his sleeves, I’ve never seen him commit an act of unkindness in his entire life towards anyone, regardless of race or creed. The Italians, for the most part, are like that.

Still, the cultural barriers I feared were broken by familial hospitality. This became painfully apparent when I was brought to hang out with Elisa’s friends later that night. She told me I’d been invited to her friend’s birthday party. They were all “going out to a pizza.” I was treated to dinner at a long table where people shouted with waving arms, seemingly to the point of an outright brawl. My cousin assured me it was perfectly normal. After the dinner, as if on cue, everyone lined up at the door in some kind of double-cheek-kiss gauntlet. Being from America, where we have things like personal space and social anxieties, I wasn’t entirely sure what to do. I was exhausted from travelling since the sunrise and the wine and good company were starting to weigh on me a bit.

I watched my cousin and her boyfriend navigate the gauntlet with total ease. Then my turn came. The young woman I’d been speaking to throughout dinner in broken English, some
Italian, and spastic arm movements, leaned in for the traditional sendoff. That’s when I realized I had no idea which side of the face I was supposed to start with. We knocked heads. Nothing doctor-worthy, but the hollow clunk of skull on skull practically echoed around the restaurant. It was horrifying to me, and I turned marinara-red, hurrying through the door.

My family never stopped teasing me about it, and when Babo caught wind you can bet I got another battery of ruthless mocking. But in the end, it felt better than having it brushed under the rug. For a faux pas as flagrant as mine, it was nice to know I wasn’t being quietly despised; just openly mocked and loved all the more for it. Maybe it’s just some gene, or the Italian way of life, but they manage to flawlessly balance their abrasiveness and welcoming natures, making you feel not like a guest, but well and truly at home in their presence.