

Il nuovo Van Gogh
Roman Bacchetta, College of Arts and Science

“Mi chiamano l’Artista di Somerby,” Nonna brags.

She sits in her foldable lawn chair outside the door to her suite at the Somerby retirement home. A pot of plastic flowers sits on a table beside her. Her patio overlooks the parking lot, and she likes to wave and call out to comers and goers like she owns the entire subdivision. They all know my name, she says. She used to tie her dog Pepino to her chair outside too, but the vet put him down two weeks ago. He said the dog was morbidly obese from too many treats and too much human food. This seemed fitting in a morbid way. Nonna’s life revolves around food, not any food but *good food*. And *good wine*. I remember sitting at my parents’ kitchen table with her as she grabbed my wrists, judging their circumference with her fingers. “You’re skinny,” she said. *“Mangia!”*

Nonna’s apartment is speckled with eclectic paintings: a giraffe with a human face, a colorful fairy in a forest, a young girl with a blue face, disordered clusters of shapes. She used to paint only portraits of Italy, her hometown, the Pantheon, the sea, colorful little villages, but now her paintings have taken a spontaneous turn. “I am like Van Gogh,” she says as she walks from her kitchen to the sofa, a clunky little respirator on wheels trailing from behind. “Didn’t he cut his ear off and send it to a lover?” I reply. She snarls back. Her apartment is an atrocious mess, and while my brother and I have cleaned it for her, she insists there is order amidst the madness. “I know where everything is,” she huffs. Her stories are also disjointed, but she always finds a way to the end, the purpose of each one: most of the time, a scathing attack. The employee she swears stole a painting. The man who had all ten toes amputated, who cut her hair outside her apartment once and did a shitty job. Anyone Greek or French at Somerby, whom she curses in Italian.

When she came over on a boat, she was a young woman. Her parents didn’t speak any English, although her dad learned tiny bits. She was teased in high school for being different, talking weird. After high school she did not go directly to college, but started working until she reached the age of marriage. She married my grandfather, an Italian but college-educated man, whose parents didn’t speak English either. He worked as a mathematician. “I married him for the money,” she tells me, “Foul man.” When they divorced, she married a rich American, but that marriage would also fail. Finally, she called it quits and saved up to attend a small city university in New York for a few years, where she earned a B.A. in Literature. She was in her sixties and is very proud of this accomplishment. “Do you know I have a degree in *letteratura*?” she asks me each time I visit her.

Raw meat sits on a plate atop a stack of magazines on her kitchen counter. She is making a pasta sauce, but has thrown proper sanitation to the wind. It’s about the product. “It will taste good,” she always says. And I will agree, after a coerced, reluctant bite. I have been food poisoned by her before.

“Sei uno stupido,” she mutters when I leave, before hugging me. She stands in her doorway, waving, raw meat on her hands, surrounded by random items spilling out the door. She slams her door, or tries to. It’s been broken. She curses and slams it again, before letting it stay open.