From a young age I can remember waking up Sunday mornings to the smell of tomato sauce simmering. I remember my grandma’s couches covered in plastic and the crucifixes hanging from gold chains that my uncles and father always wore. I remember double kisses on both cheeks as hellos and goodbyes, noise and energy, too much love and too much food, and the knowledge that even if it were a cousin I had only met once, there would always be somebody looking out for me.

Italians are known for their large families, and mine is no exception. There are the cousins in Australia who came to visit one Christmas baring jars of vegemite and cheerful accents. There are the cousins in Brooklyn, who talk a mile a minute, never forget the cannolis from the good New York bakeries, and would do anything for a fellow Coluccio. And then, there are the great aunts and uncles in Calabria, who live in letters I’ve never been able to read and answering machine messages we’re never allowed to erase. These are the oldest living relatives and the most direct link I have to my grandfather, Vincent Coluccio, who immigrated to the States as a young man, built a life for himself and his family with the gifted, callused hands of a
landscaper. He ((, and)) was taken from us one month before I could ever see his face. His story is one of spirit and endurance, extreme love for his family and his country, and a pride in the Coluccio name that he passed to my father, who then passed this pride to my sister and I. My grandfather embodied the meaning of being a Coluccio, and fought to maintain the strength of its firm Italian roots even while trying to assimilate to the American culture he soon found himself mixed into.

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“Al vento lui innalza la sua vela”
“It carries a memory of a long life”

The Coluccio name can be traced back as far as 1271, a time of both economic and religious prosperity and cultural expansion. According to “The Ancient History of the Distinguished Surname Coluccio,” the name first emerged in Aquila, capital of the Abruzzi Province of Italy. Spelling variations of the surname include “Colucci, Coluzzi, Culozzi, Coluccia, Collucia, and Colucci. It has been suggested that the name was given various forms from century to century, sometimes even from generation to generation, following the development of a region’s language and dialect. From our origins in Aquila, my ancestors migrated to Ascoli, Naples and Velletri, and other parts of Italy- such as Calabria and Sicily where my direct familial roots lie.

Of great importance, however, to the history of the Coluccio name, is a fact relayed within the historical description of the name: “In those ancient times only persons of rank, the podesta, clergy, city officials, army officers, artists, and landowners were entered into the records. To be recorded at the beginning of recorded history, was of itself a great distinction and indicative of noble ancestry.” Records indicate that Angelini Colucci was a prominent writer in the 12\textsuperscript{th} Century,
residing in Acoli, Italy. In addition, Leonardo Coluzzi was a soldier who fought for Pope Urbano VIII in the mid-17th Century Battle of Castro between the papacy and the Farnese dukes of Parma, who controlled the ancient city of Castro and surrounding area. The battle led to eventual destruction of the city and subsequent reconstruction into the present day city of Lazio, Italy.

Aside from this, dignitaries bearing the name were noted on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as many other distinguished contributors to world culture, science, and society. This official document, also baring the Coluccio family coat of arms, was discovered by my grandfather and displayed proudly on the walls of his home. My father now has the document tucked safely away in his office, a silent tribute to all that once was and all that has become since.

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“Di tanto in tanto quaiche nave appare/ e tu la segui verso il suo cammino”
“Every now and then some ship appears and it leads me towards your sea”

Memories have always been my way of understanding my grandpa’s story—though these are not memories of my own. These are other people’s memories, other people’s stories. Yet, these are what I have to understand my grandpa’s life and the strong ties to Italy our family still has. According to what I gather from my own father’s re-telling of it, my grandpa found himself docked in New York due to his time spent in the Merchant Marines. His ship, The Destroyer, had seen stories of its own; torpedoes that missed it by a hair’s length, sending a neighboring ship into explosions, constant fear, death, and grime, and the strength of camaraderie and self-perseverance. My grandpa was a small man, as many Italians are, but still possessed great strength. Aside from his active time with the Marines, he made it
through a year as a prisoner of war in Spain. This fact led to an interesting incident in my sister’s third grade class when, during a family tree project, she told everybody that her grandpa had been in jail. For what it’s worth, he may as well have been. According to my father, my grandpa never really spoke about that year, except that they were fed lentil soup every day, oftentimes with maggots and dirt floating in the broth, and from that point forward he developed an aversion to the soup that he took with him to the grave.

Yet, for all its turmoil, it was that time spent in the Marines that brought my grandfather to New York City, and then to visit relatives in Newburgh, NY, where he met my grandmother, and the rest of our story began. Moving to America wasn’t easy. Grandpa didn’t have a firm grasp on the English language, and, therefore, struggled with the most basic reading, writing, and conversation. He knew very few people and had very little money. What he did know of America was that there were opportunities. My father remembers stories my grandpa would tell him about growing up as a young boy in Rocella, a small, seaside town in Calabria. When people there would talk about America, they would talk about how the streets were paved with gold. This is a thought that never strayed too far from my grandpa’s mind. Years later, shortly after making the move to America, my grandpa was walking down a street and noticed a stray coin littering the sidewalk. When a man went to pick it up my grandpa looked at him with a wink, saying, “Don’t even bother picking that up. There’s plenty more where that came from here.”

Throughout my life I’ve been told stories about those years my grandpa spent making a life for himself and his family as a landscaper. Landscaping was a
skill he brought with him from Italy, where everybody who knew him knew his abilities to transform a piece of land into something spectacular. It wasn’t long before most of Newburgh knew him for the same, and he began landscaping for the highest ranks of the city’s citizens, as well as for the city itself. To this day, his stonework remains along the sides of the road in certain neighborhoods. I was told stories about how, when my oldest cousin was born, he would transform his backyard into a playground for her—hanging toys from strings off the trees and going as far as to install a see-saw from a local park into his own property. There have also been stories about how his love of family could not be broken, whether he was in his hometown of Calabria or across the seas in the States. And while we all knew how much he loved Italy, I never fully knew how much until just recently, when this project prompted me to translate a poem that has been in my family the past 26 years—a poem written by my grandfather, in honor of his hometown.

“Rocella Paese Mio” was written in 1985, as my grandpa was thinking back on his youth in Italy, the life he had left there, and the love for his country that even American success could never take away. In the poem, he relates his memories of sunlight streaming down to the marina, the hills that led to a now abandoned castle where dignitaries once lived, and the spirit of his own ancestors and all those ancestors of Italy herself, who still remain in the town’s, the country’s, and in his own heart. The poem was praised by the Mayor of Rocella, who on my grandpa’s next visit home, awarded him the key to the town, had the poem framed and hung in his office where it remains today, and worked to publish the poem in all the local school textbooks. My father remembers how proud my grandpa was of that poem,
making thousands of copies and handing them out to everyone—whether they wanted them or not, going as far as to copyright it, should anybody ever feel the need to steal his words.

It’s funny the relationship my grandfather had with these words—and language in general. My father recalls my grandpa’s broken English, his soft-spoken nature, and his quiet shame when misusing the language. My father grew up thinking his own father to be a man of few words. Truth is, he was a poet in his native language, though the barrier of his Italian pen kept his depth concealed for years.

Though all four of my grandparents spoke Italian, they were adamant about their children growing up speaking only English. That being said, since my parents could hardly speak it, my sister and I stood little chance learning our native language based on family help. Most of my family that speaks fluent Italian have either passed or are too elderly to fully grasp the act of translating to a person unfamiliar with the language. So, the translations that are scattered throughout this paper were done with the help of Italian-American dictionaries, online translation sites, and my own reconstruction according to family instinct and the little bit of Italian my parents were able to decipher. It wasn’t an easy task and all the while I was incredibly sensitive about butchering my own grandfather’s words. Yet, when it came down to words with multiple meanings or odd sentence structures, something inside seemed to direct me towards the correct translation. It was as though my grandpa was speaking through me, helping me through the translation process as though he was sitting in the living room next to me. Even still, I was
skeptical of the work I had done. It wasn’t until my parents read the translation that I knew I had done grandpa justice as best I could. “For years we never knew what those words meant or how deep of a man he actually was,” my father told me, “it’s incredible to read this all these years later and finally know.”

I always found it interesting how I could feel so connected to a man I never met, just as I could feel so connected to a place I had never been, and I don’t think it was until this project that it all came together for me. My entire life it’s like I’ve been chasing his ghost, putting together the fragments of stories about him that would allow me to know him, when all along, it was through his poetry that I would finally be able to find him. Reading his poem, I am not only able to read his direct thoughts, but learn about his Rocella and hear what family meant to him. I now understand how familial bonds and the love of one’s culture can far surpass distance and even death. Because, to quote my grandfather once again, what I, and every other Coluccio will always have is “il ricordo del paesa e’ un dono naturale/legato cosi’ forte al cuore che non si puo’mai dimenticare” (The memory of the country and a natural gift/a legacy of strong things that the heart did not ever forget.”)