



Spello Flower Festival

The envelope shook in her hands as she attempted to open it. A month had passed since Jessica had sent away her DNA. Now she was about to discover her true identity, her history, her origins. Adopted at birth, she always wondered about her birth parents' ethnicity. So many other adoption records were becoming unsealed, but not hers. What would she discover about her ancestry?

The pie chart showed that she was 35% Italian, 24% Scandinavian, 27% Austrian, 10% German, and 4% Native American. Jessica simply stared at the results, imagining the two people who joined to create her thirty-three years ago. She pictured a strong, dark Italian man and a fair, light-haired Scandinavian woman. The mirror told her that her dark hair probably came from her Italian or Native American ancestors. Her blue eyes and fair skin that easily burned came from her Scandinavian, Austrian, or German ancestors. Her love of flowers likely came from all nationalities. Her little flower shop attested to her devotion to the aromas and kaleidoscope of colors.

It was time to act on this new information. Since she was mostly Italian, she decided to travel to Italy first. A central location would be good. She searched for a small town in the middle of the country. Somewhere that would be attractive to her current interests, since she truly believed that a person's life was molded by ancestral activities.

She found a virtual tour of central Italy on the Internet and fell in love with the little town of Spello. Medieval stone walls, Roman gates, and the remains of an amphitheater called her name. Church spires rose like ancient cell towers calling the residents to worship. As if by providence, she found that the little town held a late spring flower festival called Infiorata, which

means floral display in Italian. Perfect! She had more than enough time to arrange for her assistant, Amy, to take over the shop for a week, find a place to stay, get a passport, and secure the best rate for an airline ticket.

Over the next few months, Jessica imagined meeting long-lost cousins. Although without a last name for reference, she realized that her daydream was nothing more than an intense longing for blood relatives. And because she was such a genetic mutt, the chances of finding someone with the same facial features were slim to none. Still, she could daydream until she arrived at what she had come to consider her hometown.

Jessica researched Infiorata and found that it is held each year near the feast of Corpus Domini (the Body of Christ). The little town of Spello transforms into paradise of flowers. The streets are painted with flower petals of every imaginable color. It seemed like Spello became a two-dimensional Rose Parade! However, pageant rules prohibited any materials but flower petals, both fresh and dried. Teams of workers from churches and other organizations labor for months to create horizontal floral mosaics that would be better than the previous year's images. The day before the feast, the groups sketch their designs on large paper sheets or directly onto the streets. Hidden beneath tarp-covered tunnels, the artisans work throughout the night to create elaborate designs. Jessica looked forward to seeing and photographing what the floral artists developed.

She couldn't imagine how the artists felt when, after all their hard work, the bishop led a holy procession through the town, over all the delicately-placed petals, thus destroying the artwork. Forever preserved in photographs and videos, however, the artists, she would come to discover, feel honored and humbled to have the procession walk over their artwork.

On the flight to London, then on to Perugia, where she had reserved a hotel room, Jessica tried to sleep, but sleep eluded her. She knew she would regret getting little rest on the flight, but her mind raced through images of flowers, stone towers, and long-lost relatives. It was almost overwhelming.

After settling into her room in Perugia and catching a bit of sleep, she rode the rattly train to Spello to reconnoiter the area before the festival. *Smart move*, she decided, as she mentally patted herself on the back.

When she arrived at Spello, a chill passed down her spine, as if she felt she had stepped into her ancestor's town. It was obvious that the town was planning something huge. People sat along the streets plucking petals from flowers in preparation for their evening creations. Others erected Quonset hut style coverings to hide the designs until the morning's big reveal. Jessica wanted to be part of the preparations, so she approached a family who was surrounded by baskets and flowers. "May I help?" she asked, hoping they understood English. They did not! So she motioned to herself and plucked one petal from a daisy. All five heads eagerly nodded up and down, indicating their gratefulness for her help.

The aroma that floated through the town as she helped the family prepare for their masterpiece reminded Jessica of her own flower shop. A breeze gently blew down the street, and everyone immediately covered their baskets with towels to prevent their hard work from escaping. Her "adopted" family had left a small opening for the addition of the petals. When the daisies were denuded, the family brought out another basket and a bunch of roses. They sent the oldest child home with the basket of daisies. He returned several minutes later with an empty basket. It all seemed so organized! Jessica stood and thanked the family with a simple "grazie"

which she had learned from some audio tapes she had gotten from her local library. They all stood and hugged her. Jessica decided that she loved her 35% Italian ancestry.

Jessica continued to tour the town, sample the food, and photograph the overflowing flower pots that lined every side street. One side street seemed particularly well-maintained. As she stood with camera in hand, an old lady approached. She carried a bag of groceries and walked with a slight limp. At almost the same time, a teen busy texting on his phone inadvertently bumped into the lady, causing her to drop her bags so she could steady herself against a wall. "Mi dispiace," he muttered as he continued up the hill without even a glance back. Jessica figured his comment roughly translated to, "My bad!" as she helped the old lady pick up her oranges, onions, cans of soup, and the bags that held them.

"Grazie," the old woman said as she steadied herself, adjusted her black skirt, and rearranged the scarf that protected her hair from the breeze. Lines crossed her face as if she carried a road map of her entire life there. But those lines bespoke of years of laughter, not sorrow. She went to take the bags from Jessica, but Jessica refused, saying, "Let me help you to your house." Jessica had no clue if she would understand her.

"Thank you," she said again in broken English. "You are kind."

Finally! A common ground of communication with someone here. "I'm glad you can understand my English," Jessica said as they traveled up the hill to a small, flower-lined cobblestone alley.

"I know a little English. It is helpful sometimes... like now." Her toothless smile gave the impression of a hag, but her words and gentle voice were that of a princess. "My name is Maria."

“I am Jessica,” she replied, immediately taking a liking to the old woman and wondered if they could be related. There was simply no way of knowing.

Maria led the way to a small door at the end of the alley. Care had been given to the shiny brass hinges and all the flowers looked well-tended and healthy. This obviously was Maria’s domain. She ruled this alley with her flowers throughout the growing season, not just during Infiorata.

Maria stopped in front of her door, took her bags back and said, “Grazie, Miss Jessica. Come back tomorrow at about the same time and I will give you something special.” The broken English made it difficult to understand her, but Jessica knew to come back for a treat from Maria, perhaps a home-baked cookie or a hand-knit cap.

The next morning, Jessica took the first train from Perugia to Spello, arriving shortly after the tarp frames had been disassembled from the floral masterpieces all over town. Geometric shapes gave way to religious themes and larger than life size bouquets. Fortunately, the wind had abated, but the heady aroma of flowers lingered everywhere. Jessica took many pictures to put up in her flower shop at home, as a reminder of her magical days in Spello. She even found “her” picture that she helped the family prepare. It was the image of a stained-glass window that depicted a nativity scene.

Soon enough, the crowds arrived and lined the streets behind ropes, in preparation for the procession. Priests lined the streets in front of the ropes as a color guard for the bishop who raised the monstrance, a gold vessel carrying the consecrated host. Only he and the priests carrying his canopy could walk over the beautiful artwork commemorating Infiorata until the procession was over.

Adding to the aroma of the flowers and the amazing images painted by petals, was the music that accompanied the procession. Several bands played background to the priests singing religious hymns that were unfamiliar to Jessica, but obviously known to the locals who all sang along. She changed her camera from stills to video while the procession passed before her. It was a magical experience she would never forget.

Later that afternoon, Jessica knocked on the old woman's door. Maria emerged with a pot filled with geraniums. The crockery pot looked like it could have been used in 30 B.C. Maybe it was! Maria placed it against the wall. "This is yours," she explained.

"But I live in the United States! I couldn't possibly bring this home with me on the plane."

"Not home," she said. "It stays here."

"I don't understand," Jessica said, confused how a gift would stay with the giver.

Maria turned over a pot containing pansies. On the bottom in hand-written letters was the name, Antonio. "All of these people show a kindness to me." She turned over *Jessica's* plant and there in the same hand-written letters was her name. Tears sprang to Jessica's eyes as she realized that all of the flowers on this little alley commemorated a person who had shown some kind act to Maria. She was proud to be part of her permanent collection.

"Antonio – he fixa my sink." Maria turned over another pot with Angela's name on the bottom. "She come with her children to visit. They make me happy with their laugh."

What an awesome way to repay a kindness... and to remember that person's kindness forever. "But what happens in the winter?" Jessica wondered.

"I bring them in and clean them. The pots go in the cellar. Georgio helps me. His pot has violets. Then next spring before Infiorata, he help bring up and I fill them again with beauty."

“Wow!”

Maria adjusted Jessica’s pot of flowers. Before she disappeared down her alley, she turned and winked at Jessica.

At that moment, Jessica knew that she had found a relative, perhaps many generations removed, but a relative nonetheless. She could have asked Maria for a DNA sample to conclusively prove their relationship, but she didn’t want to be disappointed. It was better to assume they were related than to be denied that connection. She also knew that she would return to Spello someday to visit Maria and her alley of kindness memories. Jessica had found her birth family in a little Italian town where the people loved their flowers, just like her.

