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# Asciugare e Parlare: a Short Story of San Nicandro Garganico

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## Asciugare e Parlare

### A Short Story of San Nicandro Garganico

I have no washing machine here in my little Italian town. People have them, but the history of the town dictated for a long time that all washing of clothes be done by hand. I have kept up the tradition and have been washing all my things by hand. The most difficult are the bed sheets and the towels. Very difficult to wash by hand, believe me. The secret to success in hand washing is to do a little each day. So I do. Each day a few articles of clothing and a towel or two. The bed clothing is done once a week. A younger woman in the supermarket helped me discover the right detergent for “a mano.” It is called *Presto*, and it works very well. The directions have three levels: one set of instructions for light washing, then for the mediocre, and for the really dirty. The secret is to let the items to be washed soak in either hot or cold water for at least a half hour or more depending on the level of cleaning needed. The really dirty should soak for a couple of hours or so....I never understood what “mediocre” dirty is ;-).

Everyone hangs their laundry out to dry. No one seems to have a dryer. The old sun is the drying stand-by...it is so hot here and it is sunny virtually every day. The drying time is usually just a couple of hours. The real problem is finding a place in the sun that is available for that length of time. Everyone knows where and how long the sun will shine, and most of us who do not have an outside balcony are keenly aware that we need to share the drying spaces that are available with all the others out to dry their laundry. It can be very rewarding in a strange way. It builds community. You get to talk to people, to interact over when you can use the space, and while waiting, discussions take place over a variety of issues. Of course, it is mostly all women, except for a couple of single men, like me, who do their own washing. It is a great way to learn the language, for me at least. You get to hear all the idiomatic expressions, and though you are usually confounded by them, one writes them down and then asks a sympathetic listener, such as an uncle or a cousin, what the phrases might mean.

I also heard a couple of women talking about my recently hung wash. One says to the other, “Gee, he does a good job, and his wash really smells great...”

I joined in the discussion by stepping outside my door and commenting, jokingly, “Hey it is my turn to dry clothes, do not disturb my wash!”

They laughed, and the one who liked how my wash smelled, asked what I used and noted how good my work was....I of course ran inside to get the bottle of detergent I had used, because I couldn't remember the name off-hand. She smiled and said, “I thought so, it is the same brand that I use.”

The interaction made me feel like a superstar. Can you envision all this? A conversation hundreds of miles away from my little home in southern Rhode Island taking place about washing clothes, and what products one uses to do the best job!

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As I walked proudly back to my little casa I couldn't help but laugh out loud at the importance and significance a simple every day act like washing clothes and hanging them out to dry takes on under certain circumstances. Such simple acts of just living can become so prominent in not only how you perform everyday tasks but also in how you can successfully interact with others and build significant community links. The near to trivial becomes socially and even politically striking. Life is so remarkable when you pay attention.

michael vocino

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