We used to take the 15-minute drive west into Pittsburg every once in a while. I brought a book with me even though reading in the backseat made me carsick. My brother took his CD player so he’d have an excuse not to respond if anyone tried to talk to him.

Pittsburg is a small California city, notably distinct from Pennsylvania’s more famous Pittsburgh because of its lack of the letter “h,” whose population used to be largely Italian and is now almost 50 percent hispanic, although some of the old Italian families are still there. I know this because my grandparents update us on their whereabouts at Thanksgiving dinner: the Aiellios, the Romanos, the Davis, the Tarantinos, Ben’s sister was sick but she’s doing much better now and his grandson is starting middle school and his daughter still doesn’t have any kids, etcetera. When you drive through Old Town Pittsburg, you pass by Italian delis in brick buildings advertising sausage and salami and fresh mozzarella. Just down the street is The Mecca, known to locals and intrepid Bay Area foodies for their burritos and delicious Spanish rice, known to me as the steaming dishes of refried beans and heaps of enchiladas my aunt used to serve at all of my cousins’ birthday parties. It used to be a hole-in-the-wall place, but they remodeled it and it’s stylish now, all modern tan painted over the brick and murals of men in sombreros and women in floral dresses of orange and blue lining the walls. Only the foodies sit down to eat at the crowded tables in the dining room with the dusty red floor. The locals stand in a line at the register, waiting to receive their glorious burritos and bowls of beans and rice in unassuming plastic bags and enjoy them in more private and better air conditioned locations.
My great grandmother lived in a neighborhood nearby, little rows of one-story houses. There was a single mother living across the street, with an old stroller with a missing wheel on her front porch. She used to bring my great grandmother freshly baked corn tortillas on Sunday afternoons.

There’s a giant tree in Nana Theresa’s front yard that blocks the light from coming in through her front window. Maybe this is why her house was so dark, or maybe it was because of all the dark wood furniture, the mantle over the brick fireplace, the bookcases against the walls, the wood paneling along the walls, the cardboard boxes, the canvas lampshades with heavy fringe and tassels that provided more shade than light. I remember the ceramic statuettes on her mantel piece, a healthy mix of angels and cats, and I remember the framed pieces of cross stitching on the walls (wood frames the exact same shade of brown as the paneling), bows, flowers, children playing with beach balls, crosses and Bible passages, inspirational quotes (“take time to stop and smell the roses”) and more cats. I remember Nana Theresa sitting in her armchair, faded and threadbare velvet, wearing a sweatshirt with the names of all of her grandchildren written in cursive pastel puffy paint, each framed by their own puffy paint balloon. She owned several versions of this sweatshirt, with Easter eggs or kittens or cupids instead of balloons, some with the same puffy paint and others embroidered. I never learned whether she bought them or made them herself. I remember her couch that sagged to the floor when sat on, upholstered with an unpleasant pattern that was both floral and brown, and I remember the piano, pushed against the wall under the lightless window, draped with a lace table runner and adorned with more angels and cats.
That piano is in my parents’ living room now, next to the guitar I inherited from one of my grandfathers and the wire music stand leftover from my brother’s and my brief stint as a flautist and an oboist, respectively. My mom suspects that in the sixty-or-seventy-plus years Nana Theresa owned the instrument she didn’t get it tuned once; according to her, my great grandmother was highly concerned with appearances and probably only bought the piano to impress Pittsburg’s high society ladies and make jealous the other Italian housewives living on her street. As a result, the thing sounds absolutely terrible. It’s a player piano, which means you can put a piano roll into a slot in the upper section and the piano will play itself, keys depressing as if pressed by invisible fingers. They were popular in the 1910s and 20s before the invention of the phonograph, and I can imagine that when Nana Theresa bought it, it was quite the novelty, undoubtedly impressive to the other Italian housewives at luncheons or tea parties. As a kid, I was fascinated by it, never quite able to shake the impression that the piano was being played by a ghost and not an automated mechanism. I wouldn’t let my parents get rid of Nana Theresa’s 100 or so piano rolls, although we can’t use them; the instrument, when asked to play the Godfather theme song, for example, will spit out some grotesque and haunting version of it instead, with gaps in which keys get stuck in their depressed position and refuse to play for the rest of the song. Now my mom and I just play Canon in D major and songs from Disney movies, and lament the fact that still no one has tuned the piano.

I don’t remember what we talked about during those visits, but I imagine it may have been some variation of whatever was going on with the the Aielllos, the Romanos, the Davis, the Tarantinos, along with our own family, the Ferraris (Nana Theresa’s maiden name), the
Costanzas (the last name of Nana Theresa’s late husband, and consequently, my grandmother), the Abitzes (my grandfather’s name, and consequently the name of most of my uncles and aunts and cousins). Ann Costanza, my grandmother, broke the chain of full bodied, flowing Italian last names by marrying a German, although I think Ann Abitz has a nice sound anyway. The only of her grandchildren who are not Abitzes are my brother and I; my mom married an Englishman and her children were born Thompsons.

In May we’d go out into her backyard and pick her oranges for her; she demanded that we do so, as there was no way she’d ever be able to pick all those oranges by herself and they’d all just fall to the ground and rot, and she hated that. She was probably right; the tree was downright explosive, easily three times as tall as the house and bursting with oranges nestled in the shiny, deep green leaves. My brother and I would climb onto a little terrace at the back of the yard so we could reach the fruits from taller branches. We collected several paper grocery bags full of oranges, and reluctantly took them home with us at Nana Theresa’s insistence. They were delicious, juicy and sweet oranges, but one could only eat so many. My mom made my brother and I fill our backpacks with oranges when we went to school so we could pawn them off on our friends. Come next May, Nana Theresa would call our house, asking, “When are you going to come and pick my oranges?” The other Abitzes were coerced into picking oranges too; we rolled our eyes at the oranges, threw up our hands at the sheer number of them in our houses, but every year we took them, ate hundreds of oranges between us.
Pittsburg, situated at the point at which the Sacramento and San Juaquin rivers meet, was first a fishing town, then it was coal mining town, then it was an industrial manufacturing town, and now the majority of jobs in the city are in the Pittsburg Unified School District. It was once called the “New York of the Pacific,” although I’ve never heard anyone call it that now. A lot of the old Italian families moved in when fishing was still prominent; my Ferraris included (I say my Ferraris, because as I learned after believing for years that I was the heir to a great vehicular empire and that I would one day receive a free sports car, there are many, many hundreds of thousands of millions of Ferraris). My great grandmother was a member of the first generation of her family to grow up in California, and the last to be fluent in Italian (my mom tries to retain some Italian flare by saying moh-tzer-ay-lah instead of math-zer-eh-la and ree-coh-tah instead of rih-cah-da and grazie instead of thank you). The Ferraris before her lived somewhere on the East Coast — New Jersey, I’ve been told — and those before that, Ferraris and beyond, lived in Italy. I know hardly anything about the generations preceding Nana Theresa, but I have been told the story that my Italian ancestors were living in New Jersey, and one of them got involved with the mafia. Their dealings went bad, somehow, and one of his cousins was mistaken for him in a deli and got “whacked.” He then moved his family across the country in an attempt to save his own life.

I have no way of knowing whether this story is true or not. Perhaps mob violence brought my ancestors to the land their descendants now inhabit, or perhaps it was the promise of leading a prosperous life as a fisherman and they were passionate either about
leading a prosperous life or about fish. I’d really rather not find out; I think it’s infinitely better to have a mafia story in your family’s past than to not have one.

Driving to Pittsburg to visit Nana Theresa’s house was different once she wasn’t in it anymore. First it was just us 4 Thompsons on a reconnaissance mission, then we were joined by the Abitzes at large—my Nana and Grandpa and my mom’s three brothers and all of my cousins. We were suddenly no longer confined to the stuffy living room, and my brother, cousins, and I took advantage of the opportunity to explore the other rooms and peep into the cardboard boxes and dresser drawers, many of which contained either newspapers or magazines or nondescript envelopes. We found a box of books of unfinished crossword puzzles, a box of markers, and a box of utility bills dating back to the 70s. We found an organ in one of the back bedrooms sandwiched in between piles of moth-eaten blankets. We found several old toothbrushes with hair stuck in the bristles and a dead rat in the pantry. We found china dishes, an old radio, and sixty-year-old mouth wash in the bathroom. Everywhere we found musty old-person smell, we found tripping hazards, blankets of dust, unstable piles of rotting cardboard, and mysterious carpet stains. My parents suggested, “Maybe you kids should go outside and help your grandpa clean out the shed, because at least out there you won’t be breathing anything poisonous.”

The shed stood in the back corner of the yard, a little white building with the cracks between wooden boards showing behind the white paint, ivy clinging to one wall and the branches of the ubiquitous orange tree brushing against another. The lock was rusted shut but a firm shake proved to be more than the door could handle, and it swung open. Dust
particles floated in the beams of light slanting through the window. In the shed, we found rusted gardening tools and a thick pair of gloves, shelves of old books and 2 paper grocery bags full of yarn. I took possession of the yarn, surreptitiously stowing it in the trunk of our car even though I’m sure no one would have challenged me for it. Upon closer inspection a couple of weeks later, I discovered I had also acquired about 100 crochet hooks and a pair of Nana Theresa’s glasses. Some of the yarn in the bag she had started to make things out of, little lacy squares of crochet that were never given any real form and something that looked like it would have been a jacket for a baby had she finished it. Who knows which baby it was intended for; there’s a possibility it was for me, or one of my cousins, some other Costanza of Ferrari, or maybe one of the many Aielllos, Romanos, Davis, or Tarantinos. Considering the fact that she locked it in the shed, however, I don’t think she ever planned on finishing it. I quietly added her set of steel crochet hooks, with tiny points like sewing needles, to my own collection. Most of the yarn is old, low quality wool, scratchy and practically torn to shreds by moths, but I salvaged what I could and used some of it to make a pink and purple bear with googly eyes and a lopsided nose. This was before I learned how to embroider properly.

My cousins and I spent the rest of the afternoon in the back of one of my uncles’ identical SUVs testing Nana Theresa’s markers on notebook paper. Our parents emptied out the water heater onto the sidewalk. Instead of water it spewed foul grey sludge. After that they decided that house wrangling was more of an adult activity, and they left us all at one of their houses in a nearby neighborhood. That was the last day I ever saw the house, although I still go to Pittsburg to see my Nana and Grandpa and my aunt and uncle. The rest of the
Abitzes have relocated to Sacramento, and my parents brought the Thompson further inland to Oakley, even smaller than Pittsburg and with less crime and more grapevines. Perhaps we are one of the old Pittsburg Italian families that the other old Pittsburg Italian families talk about at Thanksgiving dinner, even though our name is no longer Italian and many of us have left. Maybe the Davis or the Tarantinos talk about what us kids are up to, maybe they told their children when Theresa Costanza passed away, maybe they heard that Ann and Bill Abitz are planning another trip and this time it’s to Israel to be baptized in the Jordan River, this Abtiz is graduating and that one is starting a new job and that one is expecting their second child in the spring.

After the adult Abitzes felt as though Nana Theresa’s house had been satisfactorily tamed, they joined my cousins and me and we had a Pittsburg meal of Mecca delivery and beer from the fridge in my uncle’s garage. That night we didn’t talk about the Aielllos, the Romanos, the Davis, or the Tarantinos. Only about Ferrari’s, Costanzas, and Abitzes.