



Splendor in the Hills

Italian landscape designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd and her family retreat to the "peasant palace" where she was raised, in the Sabine hills outside Rome. **By Natasha Fraser**

W

e must shut the doors—there's about to be a storm," warns Arabella Lennox-Boyd. The Italian landscape designer is standing in the middle of her terrace and looking toward the Sabine hills of central Italy as the clouds gather, a purplish-black bruise on the horizon. The air grows thick with menace and the rumble of thunder. "You can just imagine the rape of the Sabine women... Gladiators running up these hills in the search of their prey," says Dominique

Lacroche, Lennox-Boyd's elder daughter.

The drama reaches a climax during lunch. Suddenly, the skies break and the rain pelts down almost horizontally onto the furniture outside. Family members and guests, abandoning their pasta, run outside to save the pillows and English Sunday newspapers. They return to the dining room soaked but thoroughly amused.

Lightning strikes nearby, but there seems little to worry about: The thick, fortified walls of Lennox-Boyd's Palazzo Parisi (family members call it simply Oliveto, after the village nearby) have stood firm since the 16th century. "Up until the 19th century," Arabella explains, "this place used to be part of the Vatican, where officials would come and deliver the law." That accounts for the dungeons—and the courtroom, now converted into a billiard room.

When Piero Parisi, Lennox-Boyd's father, bought the place—situated an hour outside Rome—during World War I, it had already served as a residence since the 19th century, when the interior was brightened with the murals that cover nearly every wall. "My father had some cash that he had to invest," she says. "He was in North Africa, and so he bought the place sight unseen."

It was Lennox-Boyd's mother, Irene, who really took an interest in the house. She was the daughter of one of Italy's great heroes, Field Marshal Armando Diaz, who had defeated the Austro-Hungarian army at Vittorio Veneto and was created *duca della Vittoria* (the Duke of Victory) for his efforts. Elegant and beautiful, Irene Parisi had Roman society at her feet: Dressmakers gave her clothes just for the honor of her association, while admirers would fight to stand close. But one day she left Rome, never to return. "My mother never saw anyone again," says Lennox-Boyd. She used to say, "These are my real friends," meaning the people in this village.

As a result, young Arabella was raised entirely in the country. Her mother became a farmer of sorts, rearing ducks and pigs. "She became increasingly eccentric, and at one moment she started to grow chickens with the idea of selling them," Lennox-Boyd recalls. The incubator was kept in Irene's bedroom, and when the birds got ill, she gave them names and allowed them to run around the room pecking at the walls. "After that, it became very difficult to eat them," her daughter now admits.

Irene also ran the estate and saw to the welfare of the villagers. "She had the children baptized and played the role of midwife because there were no doctors," Lennox-Boyd recalls, adding that the environment was feudal in more ways than one. "It was only possible to get here

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by donkey," she says. "There would always be lots of cooks bent over wood fires, which they would wave over with feather fans. There was no electricity, so we lived by candlelight."

The only contact she had with the outside world was through her father, who lived in Rome. "He used to drive here for dinner, and since he was the only one with a car, we'd see his lights bobbing up and down," she recalls. "It would be, 'Quick, quick, put the pasta down. He's about to arrive.'" Parisi would then park his car below the palazzo and ride a donkey to the house. If he came during the day, the denizens of Oliveto would follow his progress by the clouds of dust that his automobile raised.

The place still has that air of rusticity. "A peasant palace," is how Mark Lennox-Boyd, the designer's husband, who was a member of John Major's cabinet, describes it.

During her childhood, Lennox-Boyd grew interested in the wildflowers that abounded nearby, although there was no formal family garden to speak of. "My mother was stubborn," she says. "She would try and grow geraniums, petunias and zinnias—and every year there would be a disaster." But trips to Renaissance gardens in the vicinity, like those of the Villa Lante, Caprarola, Bomarzo and the well-known Villa d'Este, piqued the young girl's interest in landscapes.

It wasn't until Lennox-Boyd moved to England in the mid-Sixties, though, that she pursued it. "Frankly, I had to work," she says. "I was separated, with a daughter at school, and I needed to earn my keep." This led to a four-year course at Thames Polytechnic's school of architecture and landscape. She launched her business in 1971.

Since then, Lennox-Boyd has also written two books—*Traditional English Gardens* and *Private Gardens of London*—and has been awarded three gold medals from the Chelsea Flower Show. Her clients include the Queen of Belgium, the Duke and Duchess of Westminster, Lord Palumbo, Conrad Black, Alain Wertheimer and Rothschilds from Evelyn and Victoria to David and Olympia. Now she's designing a line of garden furniture called A.L.B.

"England has always been very important," she says of her work. "When I first went there, I did a lot of looking and listening." Aristocratic estates kept by Clare Ward, the mother of actress Rachel Ward, and Mary Manners, the sister-in-law of the Duke of Rutland, made a particular impression.

It was during her first marriage to Philippe Lacroche that Lennox-Boyd came in contact with what she considers true style—her own mother, she notes, "simply wasn't interested. She really had given that all up." But her mother-in-law, Lili Volpi, excelled in that arena. "She lived for taste," Lennox-Boyd says, adding that Lili never used a decorator. "Everything was beautiful and done with great grandness and never with a lot of money," she recalls.

Lili Volpi's dinners were especially memorable. "All her butlers were good-looking and had to be the same height. Wherever you looked, there were oil dishes burning and huge pots of geraniums and scented jessamine."

Later, Lennox-Boyd came to know the legendary English decorator, Geoffrey Bennisson, whom she first met at Olimpia and David de Rothschild's house. "He showed me how to make curtains, how long the fringe should be when taking in the height of the window," she says. And she can still imitate his affectations wickedly: his "No dear, no dear" for when he thought she was making a grave error, "Mother says" preceding a piece of advice and "not one to open the handbag, Duchy" to describe someone with a tight grip on the purse strings. The famed decorator once stayed with her, and since he only wore caftans, certain servants called him *rigorant*. "I loved spending hours going through materials in the den



The dining room



A view of the town of Oliveto, with Palazzo Parisi in the background



The Fella by Dominique Lacroche

“There was no electricity, so we lived by candle



Arabella Lennox-Boyd's bedroom, where the Louis XIV chandelier hangs above an 18th-century bed and a pair of semi-circular chairs from the court of Naples, built in celebration of Napoleon's return from Egypt.

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19th-century terra-cotta pots stand in the sitting room alcove, flanking a 17th-century painted clay chicken; the china cupboard in the dining room; Lennox-Boyd's bathroom. The fixtures are 1920s, and the wallpaper is Colefax & Fowler from the 1960s.

of Geoffrey's shop," she says. "When he saw something that he liked, he used to touch it, rub it near his mouth and he would literally salivate."

Bennison also taught her about overdoing it—using oversized furniture—and not overdoing it: When she and her husband bought a Gothic house, Gresgarth Hall, in 1982, Bennison advised them not to use Gothic furniture. "Geoffrey was also insistent about having some sort of bad taste in a room," she says.

Lennox-Boyd now often works with Peter Marino, David Mirvick and John Stefanidis, among others. "I work very well with John because he doesn't try and project himself onto you, and he doesn't need to shine like some decorators do."

At Oliveto, the 19th-century murals were restored in the 1960s, but the house's style is far from a period re-creation. "Think of three generations of taste," says Lennox-Boyd referring to her mother, herself and her daughters. Each time a change is made in the decor, all family members have to agree. "Just deciding on a new shade of paint takes us three weeks of discussion, but my mother has the final word," says Dominique.

Both daughters—37-year-old Dominique, an artist, and 17-year-old Patricia, her daughter with Lennox-Boyd, who wants to be a poet—are extremely creative, a fact that their mother admits makes her anxious. "What you have to realize is that my mother would have preferred me to be someone's secretary rather than be a painter," her elder daughter teases. Her mother begs to disagree. "It's not that, but I just wanted Dominique to have a proper job. I was terrified of drugs and all that," she admits.

"I'm much more of a drug addict now," Lacroche teases. But she does admit that at the age of 18, she attended a secretarial course. "Because I knew that it would please Mum."

Lacroche is, in fact, a successful artist whose work has been acquired by the younger generation of well-known collecting families, including Mark Getty, Geraldine Harmsworth, Olivier Berggruen and Atalanta Goulanchis. Marika Fiennes, the director sister of Ralph, also has several paintings. Lacroche has shown at London's Agnew's and Cadogan Contemporary art galleries, and last summer, she had a sell-out show in Paris and is now preparing for an exhibition that will travel from New York to Los Angeles. Just recently, she completed a huge canvas depicting the Palo, the famous equestrian event in Siena, a commission from Domitilla Getty for her husband, Mark. "Dominique has demonstrated a real depth of understanding, and has allowed the subject to speak through her rather than using the subject as a vehicle for her own voice," Mark Getty says of the painting, which Lacroche finished in her studio in the family house, though she admits, "I find it hard to concentrate here because the temptation to run outside and sunbathe or take a dip in the pool is rather strong."

Lacroche and her mother don't come to Oliveto, or Oli Polly as they affectionately call it, during the winter. "It's too cold," Lennox-Boyd says, adding that they used to come for Christmas, before they had their house in Lancashire. "We would burn a whole oak tree and still freeze to death," the designer remembers, while Lacroche recalls wearing four pairs of socks, two hats, several sweaters and a coat in bed. "Whatever our efforts, it simply wasn't comfortable, which I couldn't stand," says Lennox-Boyd.

Perhaps because of her rustic upbringing, Lennox-Boyd has become an advocate of luxury, firmly believing that, however grand or modest the house, there have to be certain essentials such as lots of hot and cold water, comfortable beds and linen sheets. "And Floris bath oils," she concludes, "are a must."

Her next project will be to finish the pool changing rooms with tile she found in Paris' Galerie Farnese. When her family balked at the price, she responded, "I don't care. I like to be extravagant." ●



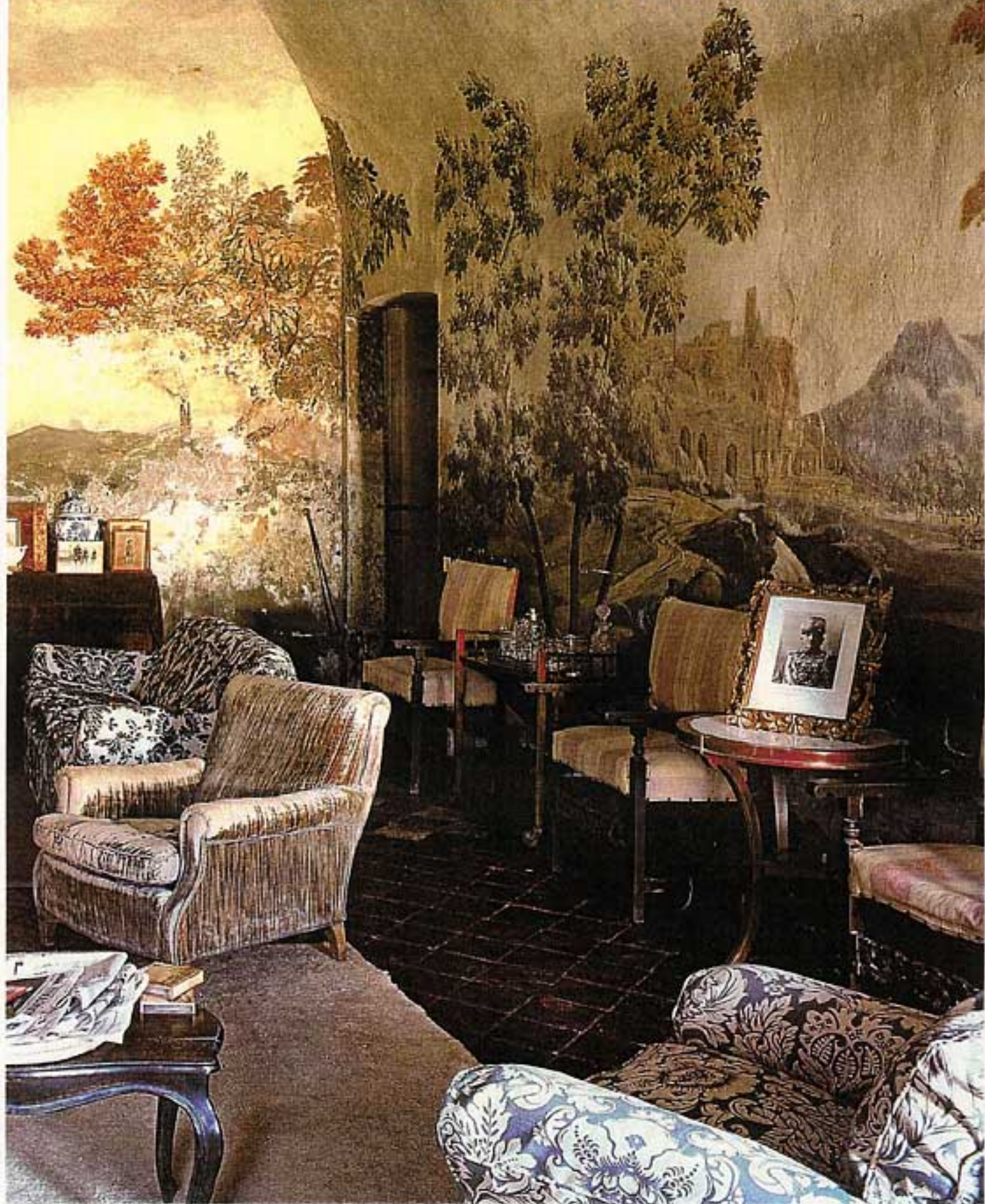
Dominique Lacroche on the palazzo's terrace

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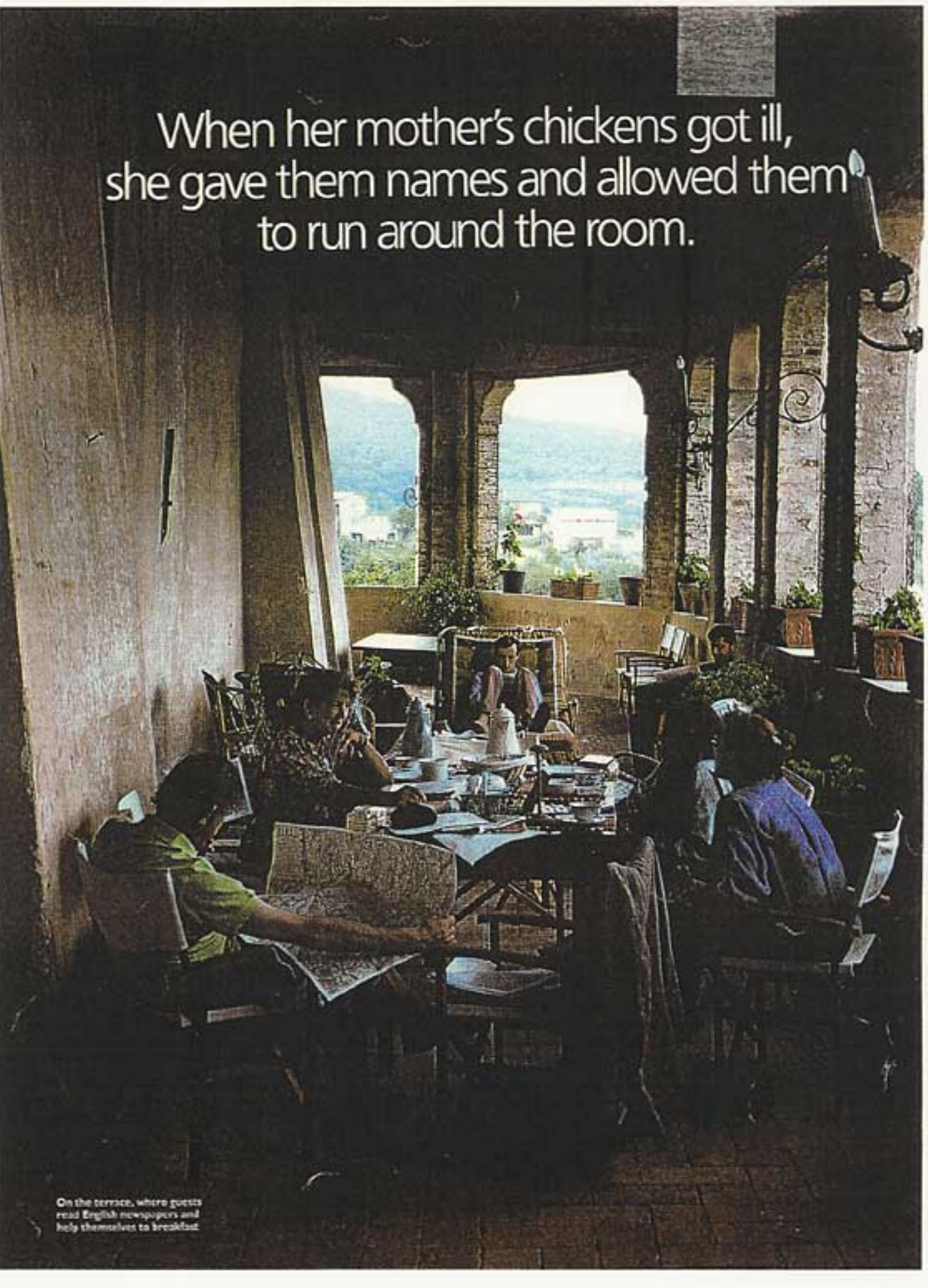


The sitting room, a mixture of furniture from Italy and England collected over the years. In the background are Parisi family photographs and to the right, a portrait of Armando Diaz.

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When her mother's chickens got ill,
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On the terrace, where guests
read English newspapers and
help themselves to breakfast.



The billiard room, previously a courtroom, is covered in 19th-century murals. The gold chandelier is Louis XVI. The trophies were shot by Arabella Lennox-Boyd in Africa.