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Constructing Italy

Professor Wolk

Shhhh

A little more than a year ago I was accepted to the University of Michigan study abroad program in Florence, Italy. I remember the day distinctly, sitting at the office phone in the Henry Wellman Psychological Lab. I was impatient. I was far too anxious to get out of town and far too anxious to find something new for myself and for my life. So, I called. I made-up some ridiculous story about how I needed to know as soon as possible about my admission to the program so that I would have ample time to apply and receive scholarships for the trip.

(Needless to say, I never did get around to applying for those scholarships.) The secretary (whom I would later come to know all too well after multiple visits with checks to fork over) left me in suspense while she went to “check the status of my application.” Upon her return she almost whispered the good news of my acceptance, as if I was privileged to know the secret of my success so early in the game. I have never cried tears of happiness in my life (I assumed I’d save that for my wedding day, or the birth of my first child). When I called my parents to tell them however, my eyes welled up, because with the whisper of her words, I had been granted my escape.

Nothing about this is meant to be a sob story, or a moment of pity for me (although I do love to relish in emotionally charged adolescent mini-drama), it is simply that when I turned in the application, my own secret was the hope of finding deliverance from a life in which I had allowed too many bad patterns to develop--a life that I pretty much hated. The story is all too

familiar: first love gone sour, but not sour enough to recognize it as unhealthy as it was. When Italy came to me through that phone call, I had an excuse to leave. As life would have it though, that relationship ended and my life improved. I was happy. I did well in school. I slept at night. I got a new (and better, and nicer, and blah, blah, blah) boyfriend. Then, I got on a plane to Italy. Go figure.

For the entire first month, I walked blindly through Florence. I don't remember how I felt the first time I saw the Duomo soaring into the sky. I *think* I was shocked when I walked down the cobblestone street, and stumbled upon the gigantic architectural structure that was like none I had ever seen. But, it is possible that *that* was an experience of Barbara C. Harrison, or one of Henry James daring and rebellious female characters. I was numb to the taste of sweet raviolis bursting with ricotta cheese and wading in pools of transparent golden, melted butter. I would use the technique I learned at a session of wine tasting in Florence to decipher what fruits had been used to make the wonderful (amazing, succulent, delicious—have I covered all of the things I was *supposed* to think about wine? And to think, I really don't know more than when I came) bottles of Italian wine. Swirl, sniff. Swirl, sniff.

I earned the nickname “Sunny” within a few weeks of being here. (In case the sarcasm doesn't translate: I was as cloudy as the weather in Florence for the first two months.) Nothing was as it was supposed to be. My expectations were not met. I wasn't in the midst of Florence; I was in a small town outside of Florence where the shops closed about the time I woke up everyday and reopened as it got dark. The dollar was next to worthless, and I missed home. Some people came to escape, find themselves, turn over a new leaf or make new friends. Well, *my* best friend was lying next to me in her own villa bed and my life (and it was finally a really good one) was back in Ann Arbor. I thought the only thing I had was Lizzie, and a computer lab

full of available computers with speedy internet that kept me in constant contact with home. My life just wasn't better here, and it was hard to contrast that with all the "beautiful experiences" I was supposed to be having.

I was waiting and waiting for the moment when things would finally look up for me. I felt like I had the first few times I went to sleepover camp as a kid. The feeling of homesickness was so great that it was hard to enjoy the sweet sticky s'mores or the warmth of the campfire. Then during some night it became physically impossible to fall asleep because I was too hot (or too cold) and it was too loud (or too quiet), and I felt like everyone in the whole world was asleep except for me. Usually one morning near the end of camp things felt better, and as much as I couldn't remember exactly the point in which I fell asleep the night before, I couldn't remember the exact reason that I hated sleepover camp so much to begin with. It is only then that the s'mores, and the fire and the bed were all comfortable, so that, by the end, I never wanted to go home. So, I was waiting to taste Italy so to speak. I was waiting to taste anything, or to feel anything that wasn't the nausea accompanying the lingering question I asked myself at least once everyday: Was this the right choice, or would another semester in Ann Arbor have been just as good?

The goodness finally came. It came the same startling and unexplainable way that sleepover camp always got better. We climbed Mount Morello for an hour before we finally reached the plateau that was to be the smooth spot on the otherwise bumpy road that had been my experience so far. I admit I was hung over. I admit I was frustrated and annoyed by Professor Gaggio's less-than thrilled translation of the lengthy Italian explanations of Mario, the tour guide, who explained, it seemed, every moss patch on every Italian rock on the property of every country villa, owned by every famous count that was somehow or another connected to

someone in the Medici family (sigh! A name I recognized). I was feeling as *sunny* as the day was. Things did eventually brighten that day. I found myself facing the spread of the Florence (and Sesto Fiorentino) skyline. Don't get me wrong, it was all still slightly masked by that haze or fog that seemed to land many villa-habitants in Milan, Pisa or Bologna just a few weeks before. It was beautiful, and to risk being clichéd and too general (I will get these writing taboos out of the way early on.), it really was an "unexpected wonder." At that point, upon gazing at a scene that I had never witnessed before, and never would again (unless of course I ventured up the mountain again), I realized that this was what it was all about. It was this moment of sheer awe, the shivers that ran up my spine and through my limbs (and are again as I write this), the way my eyes locked onto the horizon and didn't move until someone pulled me in for a group picture, that made it worth sometimes crying at night, and sometimes sitting in front of the computer, realizing (shamefully) that I was checking my email for the 8th time that day (and usually, it was still before noon). Only as I felt myself getting warmer, both from the sunshine above me and from my own heart opening for the first time this semester, did I understand that I would be forever changed by this experience, and if not by the scenery or the food or the language or the culture, then by the simple way that I was finally "tasting" Italy, something *new*. It tasted damn good.

Coinciding with my newfound fondness of study abroad I went to Greece for spring break. The first time we drove our rented cars through the valleys of the island I got the same sense of awe that I felt on Mount Morello. As we drove along the coastal roads the mountainside went up at an almost 90 degree angle to my right, making it seem like a man-made stone wall had been put up beside the road. Out my left window was the same wall, only this time, we were on top, looking just as far down on the left as we could look up on the right. The view was vast.

Looking over the edge of the cliff (cliffs are what we drove along each day, fists clenched tight to the seat in front of us, praying nothing would cause us to drive over the edge) we saw the Ionian sea, spread for hundreds of miles, with the mountainous peninsulas of our island and others of the Ionian chain dotting the ocean spread before us. The water was a vibrant aquamarine, just as travel guides and past visitors said it should be, and even in the blackness of night I swore I could see to the bottom. As I looked out onto the horizon I got the sincere feeling that this could only be made by God

It rained everyday in Greece, at least for a few hours, but being in our new “Italian mindset,” sour weather was no match for late trains and delayed flights. We decided to watch Cast Away, a movie starring Tom Hanks. Fitting, we thought, since he gets stranded on a beautiful island in paradise, sort of like us stuck in our village due to the rain. There is a scene where Hanks’ character, Chuck Noland, after 4 years of being away from civilization, has finally found the means to make a raft that is sea worthy. As Chuck is paddling away from the island, there is a moment of nostalgia as he looks back. I think the entire group felt what Josh said: “That’s how we’ll all be feeling in a few months, when we leave the villa. It will be bitter-sweet.”

So I finally made it. I am at that point when it is actually painful to think about going home. I came to Italy, originally to escape, but by the time I had to leave I was apprehensive about moving. The escape was necessary it seems, because through this experience and my separation from “real” life, I have been able to step outside my reality of home and come to terms with myself. So, what have I learned from being here? I’ve learned that insalata caprese and bruschetta are my new favorite appetizers; I’ve learned that I prefer to eat my salad after my meal as opposed to before; I’ve learned to savor the taste of blood oranges, each sack of fluid

within bursting with juicy flavor (don't they put Florida's best to shame?); I've learned to be patient when trains strike or buses are late, and to run efficiently in stilettos so that I can catch the few that are early; but most of all, and I think most importantly, I have learned to appreciate home. I miss Ann Arbor, and in the future when I am sitting at a party full of Ann Arbor Pioneer graduates, feeling like I am unable to escape my younger years, I will remember that I once did, and for almost 2 months I wanted nothing more than to go back.

The question was posed in class: What will we take home from this experience, and how long will it last? The things on the surface (i.e. pasta and wine, the Italian language and my new-found slowness) can be packed in a suitcase, so to speak, and taken home to be easily explained to those family and friends who weren't here. It is the memories and the moments that can only be understood by the people that were here that can not only not be packaged, but can also not be explained. I can never again recreate the dynamic that I have established here with new people, new scenery and a new and different mindset. And those things that I *can* take home are the thing that will be replaced rather quickly by what I miss from home while I am here (burgers and fries; English; and deadlines, deadlines, deadlines). So, I imagine that what I will take home, that which will last for a long time, will be similar to what I brought here: A secret. It won't be a secret like the one I came here with, which was an intentional plot to keep anyone from knowing I needed to get away. Words cannot do justice to what I have learned about myself and about the home I made in the last 3 months. Words can describe scenery and the senses, but they cannot convey how it *felt* to finally taste Italy, and this will be my secret. So with that, when I am asked how my semester was, I will say the things most people want to hear (it was beautiful, the food was great, the language-barrier was hard, the wine was cheap and smooth), but the things that matter will be kept a secret. Not by force, but by necessity. It will be the

secrets of Italy that will live on, and with them come the deepest emotions and sadness for leaving what I have here, and at its polar opposite the most joyous anticipation for what I will go home to.