

## The Biggest Surprise of All Mou Sengupta

I've loved London since I was eight years old. I fell in love with Heathrow airport the first time I flew through there some twelve years ago; I loved the fact that people had British accents, that there was a Harrods department store, and most importantly, that the airport had the best coverage in terms of Prince William news. To my twelve year old heart, this was of utmost importance, and Heathrow airport as well as the nearby city of London became a fantastical place for me. Over the years I visited or passed through Europe several times, but only made it as close to London as Heathrow airport's Terminal B. In fact, one of the reasons I was most excited for this trip was because of the easy access I would supposedly have to London (I thought I would be able to visit at least a couple times; heck it was only a two hour flight and I could go two weekends a month if I chose...right). So you can imagine my surprise when I walked to the computer lab three weeks ago with my credit card in hand, ready to purchase my tickets for the ever so anticipated trip to London, and came back *sans* purchase because I wasn't sure if I wanted to go. I came back to my room and wrote off the incident as the side effect of a bad and probably expensive day and resolved to purchase the tickets the very next morning. When I tried again at 8:30 AM the following day, this time with a different credit card to better my chances of going through with the purchase, I was once again turned away from the computer by some inner demon. This incident repeated itself until I finally gave up in exasperation last week. I had tried several times to purchase airline tickets to London, and each time some metaphysical block prevented me from doing so. At this point, I sat down and tried to figure out what inner anxiety was keeping from going to the city I wanted to visit more than any other place in Europe. I checked

my bank account, exam schedule and return flight home and found none of these to pose even a remote problem. What I found surprised me: the answer lay in the proposed dates of the trip. I was planning on leaving the villa on April 27<sup>th</sup>, spending three nights in London, flying back to Florence on April 30<sup>th</sup> and flying out to the USA the very next morning. What was the problem with this one might ask? As it turns out, I wouldn't be able to spend our very last night *ever* in the villa that had become so dear to me together with the people who had come to mean so much to me. Apparently this was enough to keep me from my long overdue date with London.

One can imagine just how surprised I was when I figured this out. I even tried to put myself back in the mindset of early January that had almost allowed me to leave the villa only one week into the program; I figured that if I could recapture some of the hatred I felt for the villa, Italy and even my fellow residents (I know this is hard to believe considering my constant sunny disposition) saying goodbye in the early morning hours of April 27<sup>th</sup> wouldn't hurt as much. I tried to remember how miserable I had been the first week, especially at meal times when everyone was together, laughing and having a good time and I was sitting at my seat ever so casually tilting my head back from time to time to hold in the unceasing tears. Did this tactic work? Not at all. What actually came to mind were all the lunches or dinners that I had spent laughing until I couldn't breathe, either because of the unnaturally slow rate at which Brandon consumed his food, Francisco's unorthodox methods of peeling oranges, or the stories that made me first realize how much the people around actually meant to me. I couldn't get the images of birthday lunches with Nino's short and stout figure serenading the dining hall with "Tanti Auguri" and the whistles, cheers and clapping that came after he attempted to pronounce

each birthday girl or boy's name, only to elaborate odd syllables and make the name sound as if *we* had been mispronouncing it all along. When this line of attack failed, I tried to tell myself that I would be really angry if I left Europe for the umpteenth time without having seen Big Ben, the London eye and Prince William (as I would naturally run into him on the streets). This myth was immediately debunked when I realized that the night of April 28<sup>th</sup> I would be miserable in the most magical city in the world (at least to me); I knew on that night, I would only want to be at 460 Via Gramsci, eating our last dinner together, saying goodbye to Nino and Lucia and spending the last night in the "library suite" with the roommates who had made me realize that having my own room was vastly overrated. So I decided to give myself the ending I truly desired from the very depths of my being, rearranged my travel plans and found a bittersweet medium: I now leave for London right after my exams are finished on April 26<sup>th</sup> and fly back to our beloved villa on April 28<sup>th</sup> just in time for a proper ending to a semester that turned out to be better than I could have ever expected.

One of the main complaints I had about the semester at the beginning was that I wasn't having fun as I was experiencing villa life: I was waiting for the trip to end so that I could begin to enjoy it. The first few weeks of the semester left me desiring the end of April and my return home so I could sit in the comfort of my apartment in Ann Arbor, surrounded by my "real" friends, and think about the great times I had gone through. At some point in March, after our return from spring break and the mood altering shift in weather, I realized that I was indeed having a fantastic time and that my fellow villains had actually grown on me. After the initial moaning, whining and judgment that I had passed on many a person (most of which I am truly sorry for), I realized that when I left

for the weekends I missed many of the people I wasn't traveling with. I sat and thought about how my ideal Villa Corsi Salviati experience would be constructed and concluded that it would be absolutely no different; each person in the villa had come to be a part of my everyday life, and the thought of replacing any of them upset (in my mind) the delicate but tenuous balance we had managed to create after a good amount of time in such close quarters. I couldn't imagine the dining hall and the dinner tables with anyone but the current villains; I even imagined how different class dynamics would be if different people were present in each of them, and I didn't like either one of these thoughts. The only thing I would have probably changed would have been my initial misery, but I'm not even certain of this because I think the pain of the beginning is what made the rest of the experience even sweeter by means of contrast.

I realized that most people's complaints about the distance between the villa and the actual city of Florence didn't even truly resonate with me. Even though there had been a few times when I wished that I didn't have to leave the bar at 12:15 just to catch the last bus home in order to save myself 6 euro, this inconvenience was far outweighed by some intangible but ethereal and wonderful nature of the villa. In some ways, I had come to love the routine that had been established. For example, I could anticipate where most people would be throughout the day; I knew exactly who would be in the Egyptian room on their laptops with their headphones on, and I could venture a pretty accurate guess about who would be watching Fashion TV downstairs or occupying the coveted "good computers" in the basement. I loved the time we gained with each other from the sheer inconvenience of going into Florence, and jealously guarded every moment of it. One of the most interesting occurrences was the strange disruption that friends' visits

caused. I had finally managed to establish two separate spheres: my real life at home in the US and my new life in the bubble we called the villa. The mixing of these two spheres originally felt as destructive to me as mixing napalm and gasoline, and this may have been one of the first times I noticed how jealously I actually shielded our experience. I was thrilled to see my friends and to finally be able to live out the fantasies of rendezvous in Florence, coffee in Rome, and “spritizing” in Venice. But at the same time, seeing them allowed a torrent of both new and old emotions that I had locked up and put away for four months to come rushing back. The most surprising thing about this, however, was that many of the emotions I expected to feel simply didn’t resurface. When my friend Sarah came to visit, I expected to see her, be reminded of Ann Arbor and immediately be plunged back into the homesickness of early January. Instead I found that I just wanted things in Florence to go back to “normal,” and I found myself missing the villa and my new friends as Sarah and I gallivanted around Italy. I loved seeing my friends from home, but I only wanted to see them in the context they fit. That’s another one of the lessons life at the villa taught me: the context is always stronger than the concept, and the right context can make or break an experience.

As I re-read this paper in an effort to proofread and make some sense of what I’m writing, I find that the thoughts are completely connected in my mind but that there exists no linear or even rational progression between them on paper. I’ve had such difficulty in writing this paper because, as our time at the villa comes to an end, I’m experiencing an entire spectrum of emotions simultaneously. On the one hand, I’m so thrilled to go back home, see my parents, eat Indian food and then head back to Ann Arbor for the summer. I miss my friends and above all my roommate, and I can’t wait to sit with her in our

living room on our perpendicular green couches, drink Diet Pepsi with tons of ice (not Pepsi Light!) and try to make sense to her the life I just led for four months. At the same time, the thought that the 70 or so of us will never again all be together after a few weeks tears at my heart in a way I couldn't have anticipated. Like many others, I came into this experience expecting to obviously get along with the people here and maybe make a few decent friends, but not feel much sorrow at leaving them. After all, I had "my people" back in Ann Arbor and they had been "my people" for almost three years now; how much sadness could I feel at leaving a group that I had only known for four months? As April 29<sup>th</sup> looms closer on the horizon, I find that my heart breaks (in such a good way) so many times in just one day from witnessing the events around me. This heartbreak is the utmost proof of my attachment to the people in this program. I remember one of the very first days that the weather was good; it was the hour before dinner, and a group of us decided to revert back to second grade and play tag. Not just ordinary and boring tag, but the "fastest tag in the west" (thanks Amanda Buhmann). I remember running around in the semi-darkness, feeling the soil and grass underneath my bare feet, running into anyone and everyone, slipping and sliding out of control on the mud like mixture that had formed from the dampness of the night, and feeling pure, unadulterated, uncomplicated and innocent joy. I was happy with the moment in that moment, and that's when I realized that I loved my life at the villa. Another day that will stay in my mind as evidence of the villa at its best was the day the courtyard of the villa was turned into Central Park. Almost everyone was outside; a group of girls were reading *People* magazine and sunning themselves in the middle of the courtyard, while several other groups were playing Frisbee, hacky sack, or football. I remember sitting on the bench

closest to the door leading to the 17<sup>th</sup> century table room, listening to Ben playing Dave Matthews Band on the guitar, hearing the trees and the snippets of conversation the wind brought me and just feeling my heart break from the simple beauty of it all. I don't mean this in the clichéd *American Beauty* way (I don't like to videotape plastic bags floating in the wind), but the villa *was* enchanted that night; I wasn't the only who felt it, and I know the others around me shared my opinion that something had just clicked. The fact that I can explain so clearly what I miss about home, but that I find such trouble in articulating the wonders of life here is further evidence of the fact that I am being forced to address a range of emotions never experienced before. I feel a sorrow of an unknown nature at the prospect of having to leave behind a life that I could have never dreamed; all my thoughts are rushing around in my head, running into each other at full speed, and then pouring out onto this paper. I can't control this barrage of thoughts any better than I can control the barrage of emotions driving them. My thoughts and emotions are messy and tangled and nebulous at best. But the most I can hope to convey is that this entire trip has been one of non-linear emotions and irrational progressions, ranging from crushing homesickness to delirious joy (whether at the sight of gelato at dinner, the introduction of lemon and orange trees to our villa courtyard, or the excitement surrounding VCS matches). No equation can calculate the meaning of this semester; no line of best fit can summarize it; no five-paragraph, introduction, body and conclusion form can fit it.

So how will all this end? This is where the biggest surprise of all comes. My trip will end just as it began: with homesickness. I came here and missed my home in America; I will return to that very same place with an equally profound homesickness for the place my physical and emotional being has called home for four months. I will go

home to my own bed, my parents, my friends; I'll return to State Street, Espresso Royale chocolate chais, football Saturdays and combing the sale racks at Urban Outfitters. I'll go home to my car, my speakers for my computer, and five dollar sushi rolls from Sushi.come. And while all these things will feel familiar, they won't feel as comfortable, at least for some time, because of all the things I'm leaving behind here. I'll be leaving behind Nino's zucchini with red sauce, Picchiani's cappuccinos with the world's best foam, and fragola and limone gelato from Mandorla e Limone. The children we teach will stay here and grow up, and by next year might not even remember the two girls who flew ten hours just to get to their hometown. I'll leave behind sitting in the villa courtyard before, during and after classes, the Frisbee with "psycho" stamped on it, Campo di Bruno, my classroom with frescoes on the walls and ceiling, and the Egyptian room window that made me feel like a herd of elephants every time I walked across. I'll give up hacking to the Boondock Saints theme on repeat, partying on the terrace, joyously running to "the Lunga" for 39 cent Fidels and squealing with glee at the signature rattle of the dolce cart. I wonder if the irreproducible nature of my experiences here will make the inevitable homesickness any more potent; I can only imagine that it will because unlike ordinary strains of the disease, this homesickness will have no cure. The villa can never be what it once was, but I'll move past this and find solace in my memories.