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Ciao

by Joanna Brooks

Morning and Torino.

Last night—Barcelona.

And before that, Valencia, where days began at midnight with music and *tapas* for our hot stomachs—*chiparones en su tinta*, octopus in its ink. Adolfo was a good host, yes, introducing us to friends who offered *horchata*, guiding us through the mobbed streets of his resort town, streets littered with thrown tables, a night distorted by blaring American pop and yellow light. A night so hot the ceiling tiles dripped.

That was nights ago, Valencia; now it is morning, Torino. All we have to show for time is a line on the timetable, an overnight train. My two sisters and I reclaim our passports, strap on our packs, and go stiff-legged down the train steps. New money, new language, new system. Short women with sharp voices quaff smallest cups of black espresso. We take large bottles of mineral water, miss our train, tie our backpacks together, put them in a phone booth, and sit in front of it.

A dark-haired man in a rumpled drab linen sports coat and tropical print tie passes. Slowly.

He's browsing postcards. He passes by again.

He's reading newspapers. Slowly. Finishes. Walks by.

We watch him. This is Italy. He is an Italian man.

He walks to the phone booth next to us. We are laughing. We are holding our heads in our sweatshirts. We are trying to hold our

water. He pretends to make a phone call. He puts his thumb against the token slot, fakes a 200 lira piece, glances at us, pretends to press numbers, glances at us, hangs up.

He crosses in front of us, walking heels first. His shoes are shined, his socks argyle. He is grinning, a flat skinny grin. His hands are in his pockets to his elbows.

This is a bad sign. People have warned us, warned our parents. How can you let two eighteen-year-olds and a twenty-year-old travel alone in Europe? In Italy?

The Italian man goes to the booth on the other side of us, fakes another 200 lira, thumbs wrong numbers, breathes into the receiver. He is watching us, smiling, talking to himself. In Italian. We are squatting on our packs, pulling our hats down over our eyes, dissolving onto the floor in laughter.

He makes five more phone calls over the next ten minutes, and we decide it is time for a location change. We remove to a far corner of the station, hide behind a pillar. MaryBeth reads an English-language magazine.

I get up to check the timetable. There he is again, crossing the platforms, smiling, hands in pockets.

This is a sign from God. We have heard bad things about Torino, great black industrial city. We've heard bad things about Italy, about Italian men, about Italian men in train stations. We've been here two hours, and already it's true.

Oh, Italy. Already surpassing our expectations.

I find my sisters. We pick up our packs, sight him, elude him, collapse laughing in a second-class compartment, and go on to Genova.

We meet Americans on the steps in front of Columbus's house and trade the obligatory travel talk over pizza margherita. Never take the night train into or out of Rome. Lash your backpacks to the luggage racks. We trade tips about how to escape the gypsies. Keep

your money in your shoes and watch out for the kids, the *zingarelli*. It is getting dusky in Genova. Buses come full from the docks and women take their groceries home.

Our friends teach us phrases in Italian—"Where is?," "What time?," and "How much?"

We also learn that *basta* means "enough," *socorro* means "help," and *va scfuzzi* means "go away scumbag."

Our friends are leaving Italy, going north.

We are going south.

"South," they say, laughing, shaking their heads.

"South," we say, eager, novice. We still have clean laundry. They look hard-traveled, seem old as they laugh, recalling Naples, the ports. Their shoes are broken; their backpacks locked.

"Keep that vocabulary list handy."

By week three, we have devised systems for deterring those legendary scissor-wielding pickpockets who cut travelers' clothes to get to their secret money neck pouches. We have figured out how to knot our packs. We have come safely from Genova to Milano and now we leave Milano for Venezia.

We shut the glass doors to our train compartment, put our feet up. Melissa passes out breakfast. Bananas. We are moving.

The door flies open.

"*Banana! Buon appetit!*"

He is tall, black curly hair, bad clothes. He is an Italian. He's coming towards me. My sisters grab their backpacks.

"*Italiana? No? Americana? Bella*—beautiful. I like it. Hold still."

He kisses my cheek.

"You like Italy? You want to stay here? We'll talk later. Okay."

The door slides back. The sun comes full strength now. He's gone.

I look at Melissa, who looks at MaryBeth; MaryBeth looks at me. We laugh. Then we check for our money. Nothing's gone.

Where did he come from?

Italy.

It's too early in the morning for this.

In Florence, we pass through narrow streets lined with leather sellers—dark-haired men, sunglasses, leather jackets. It's July. The salesmen touch MaryBeth's arm as she passes. They call "*Ciao! Bella! Ciao! Bella!*"—the Italian national anthem.

We pass up the leather, pass fruit markets, on to the Uffizi, the Duomo, the Gates of Paradise. It's a warm day, and we go without maps. We see Giotto frescoes, the finger of St. John the Baptist, the grave of Machiavelli.

At night, we sit on the steps of the great blue Duomo and eat lemon gelati. MaryBeth brings out cards for gin. Within three rounds, we have five Italian coaches, advising, accusing, colluding. Teams form. Ten rounds, and Melissa wins. They kiss her, offer her drinks, dinner. Maybe later, we say. That taverna by la Chiesa Santa Maria della Croce? Yes, maybe later. *Ciao! Bella!* They cross the cobbled piazza. We go to our room, to sleep.

Our first night in Rome we rely on old Florentine tricks, and MaryBeth deals gin on Bernini's marble at the Trevi Fountain. It is a warm night, a blue night. Trevi is flooded with lights, tourists, stray cats, Indian immigrants selling roses. Young Italian soldiers, stationed in Rome for their obligatory year of service, come to the fountain in busloads.

A group of five approaches. They are laughing, lighting Marlboros with fake Harley-Davidson lighters. Four talk to one, and that one steps forward. He's wearing Converse tennis shoes.

"Hello," he says.

We say hello back. This impresses them thoroughly. They consult, laugh, gesticulate.

"Want to walk?" he says, struggling.

"Walk?"

"Yes," he says, his friends nodding. "*Andare*." He makes step motions with his hands.

"No," MaryBeth says, then deals me ten cards.

The speaker turns back to them, reaches at words. His t-shirt is printed in English. It says: "Young U.S.A. The Best for Fun and Winning." It makes, of course, no sense.

"Disco?"

"No, thanks," I say. This alarms the group greatly.

"Why?" the leader asks.

"We have a language barrier," MaryBeth says loudly, as though she were speaking to the hearing impaired.

"*Italiano*," I say, pointing to them. "*Americana*," I say, pointing to us. I am laughing. "No." I move my hands like puppets, talking, to indicate that verbal communication is virtually impossible between us.

The soldiers squint, prod at their friend, make motions.

"Disco?" he asks again. We laugh, wave them on.

Further conversations this night are similarly two-word affairs. Every Italian soldier, it seems, has learned how to say "walk" and "disco."

There are the more enterprising types who try to join our card game, buy us flowers, propose marriage.

Luigi is five foot five, missing teeth. He moves his hands like a gangster, a Gambino crew member planning a hit. Luigi is from Naples.

"Napoli," I say.

"Napoli," he says. He is immensely pleased—I know his hometown. He makes motions like an airplane. He will come see me in the U.S., he says. Next year. When he is released from the military. When do I leave Rome?

Two days, I tell him. He looks to heaven, clenches his fists. He wants to meet me, tomorrow, here. His friend in an orange shirt is

playing poker with my sisters. I tell Luigi that I'm engaged. I point to my ring finger, draw a heart on my chest, and put my hand flat on it.

He wants to meet anyway. I say no. He touches my hands, relents, it's late, their bus has arrived.

When the soldiers leave the fountain, we leave the fountain, buy more gelati, go to sleep.

In the morning, we ride the bus to church. We have 7,000 lira in cash—about seven dollars—to get three of us through the day. We buy one bus ticket, head up past Barberini, along the Via Settembre XX. Again, soldiers, in uniform. They talk among themselves, look at us, move to the back of the bus. “*Ciao! Bella!*” one says to MaryBeth. He asks her where she is going. Church, she says, putting her hands together in prayer. He asks us if we are nuns.

A gray-haired woman watches and hurries ahead of us when we get off the bus at Station Termini.

“Pretty young Americans,” she worries in perfect English. “Don’t talk to them.” She says she’s from New Jersey, married an Italian. He promised to go back to the States, but never did. “Don’t fall in love with an Italian,” she says, hurries on, clutching her string sack of fruit.

They’ve cleared the gypsies out from the front of the train station. Now, Africans sit, sell postcards in their bright green and gold *daishikis*.

We leave Rome, unattached, the next day.

Further south, lemons grow as big as two fists, black dogs run uncollared in the streets, the locals laugh and sip *grappa*, and the Mafia is back, killing judges now. Jupiter smiles from souvenir store fronts, terra cotta with shame.

The trains grow crowded in Naples, and we sit in the aisles. People carry boxes of olive oil, bundles tied with twine. The conductor climbs through, checks passes. We pass churches, and

the women cross themselves. Graveyards. The women cross themselves. We meet, of course, more soldiers. They too are going to port, faster, through drier country, to the very boot heel of Italy, bound for Greece. MaryBeth speaks to them in Spanish, with an Italian accent. She speaks loudly, maximum inflection. Strangely, they understand. It is a trick she picked up in Rome.

Hours later, we arrive in Brindisi, register, pay port tax, and wait. Backpackers line the streets, fill the small piazza, drink wine, and throw trash. They are the rough kind who sleep in the plaza during Pamplona's San Fermin and stay among the bushes at Rome's Villa Borghese. They wear ten countries on their clothes, sit in circles, play guitars, knot each others' hair, pass more wine.

Our dinner is bread, cheese, juice. More soldiers—Sicilians—nudge each other. We talk. They have nice faces, short haircuts. We are leaving Italy, now. They know this. No marriage, no meet me here tomorrow.

We board the ferry for Greece, deck class. The captains are slick Southern Italians who say "*Bella*" under their breath.

My sisters lay out their straw mats, and I watch the Germans, the Danes, the Swedes. One curly-haired blonde man approaches me, wearing an American flag t-shirt. He wants to practice his English. He says he hates America. I am cordial. He offers wine.

We leave port, pass out of Italy. The night comes quickly. Everything is black, and the sides of the ship fall away black into the ocean. The moon is orange over us, all we can see.

It makes one crazy—this black and black, this empty full of all. It makes words seem tinier, more essential. Americans next to us are passing a flask of Johnny Walker's. We talk travel, God, nothing. Keep Johnny walking. It is too wet to sleep.

We make words across the Ionian sea. In Italy, words came in thrashing hands, loud from women in laundries, like water from Bernini fountains, red as tomatoes. We lay a thin stream of smoke across the ocean now.

I am always glad for things to end.