

**ON AND OFF THE BEATEN PATH: A YEAR IN  
FERRARA, ITALY**

by

**BEAU BATTISTA**

A THESIS

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and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
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Bachelor of Arts

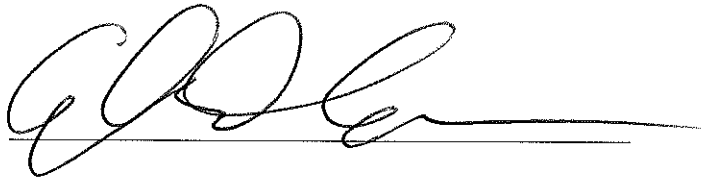
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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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Travel and its accompanying literature have long been popular in modern societies. Early forms of the genre reflected attributes of the anthropological ethnography and were focused upon educating and informing their readers of foreign lands and cultures. During the eighteenth century, however, there was a significant shift in the genre as more travel writers focused their literature on their own introspective journeys alongside their physical ones. Today, the most widely accepted form of travel writing involves such a personal, philosophical journey through time and space in a foreign land.

After an introduction that covers the history of both travel and travel writing, this work includes a travelogue of my year in Ferrara, Italy. In the process, this thesis attempts to reconcile the historic roots of travel writing with ethnography, as I reflect upon both Italian culture and my own place within its context over the course of my year in the country.

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## Introduction

When I was twenty years old, I was fortunate enough to study abroad in Ferrara, Italy, a small northern city nestled 30 miles north of Bologna. What started out as a short three-month jaunt through a country I had visited once before quickly became something much more substantial as I felt the tenuous connection to the country from which my family emigrated grow into an unrelenting pull. The culture that awaited me, the city that welcomed me, and the host family that greeted me left such an impression that I had little choice in my mind but to extend my three-month stay into a 10-month one.

Between the fall of 2012 and summer of 2013, I lived with a host family comprised of a middle aged married couple, their eighteen-year-old son Ettore, and the cat they called “Gatto” (literally the Italian word for *cat*). In addition to the time I spent with the family, the majority of my nights out were with Ettore and his friends. Throughout the year, I recorded my stay with frequent blog entries that documented my experiences – both of real and perceived significance. The body of this thesis attempts to convert those scattered and sometimes inane moments into a more cohesive travelogue that reflects both my personal experiences abroad and the ways in which they impacted my own outlook on a number of things. A primary thrust of this project is to consider those experiences within the context of anthropology and Italian culture and history.

Considering that I was fairly well equipped to immerse myself in Italian culture because I speak the language and prepared to study the culture in an ethnographic sense as a cultural anthropologist, my project may offer itself as distinct from most existing

examples of Italian travel literature. In this sense, my interactions with Italian people, places, and practices at the time as well as my subsequent cultural observations may provide an unusual lens through which American readers can relate to my experiences. That is not to ignore the fact that my presence as a young, white American male defined major boundaries of my experience – it certainly did. As I will expand upon shortly, who we are fundamentally plays as large a role in our travel experiences as what we do and I, regardless of my own intentions to the contrary, unavoidably represented and reflected a massive demographic with every step I took during my year abroad. What I consider to separate me – and by extension this project - from many other Americans, though, is my ability to view different cultures in relative terms rather than hierarchical ones and appreciate them in their own contexts. That is, my own guiding principle as both a traveler and a writer is cultural relativism.

Franz Boas, widely regarded as the “Father of American Anthropology,” established the concept of cultural relativism in the late nineteenth century as the principle that an individual’s beliefs and activities should be understood in terms of that individual’s own cultural foundation rather than be compared to ideals and standards of a different culture (Boas). The implication here is that there are no ‘superior’ cultures: each society offers its own reality that is both self-created and self-sustaining and cannot be completely understood outside of its own context. At the very least, understanding the basis of cultural relativism discourages prejudice and xenophobia toward other cultures. This philosophical foundation is apparent on several occasions throughout my travelogue. Smoking cigarettes is among the clearest examples: While I myself do not smoke, I did pause when I noticed how many of my Italian peers did and

write that I would have been far more likely to have picked up the habit had I been raised in Italy.

In general, the understanding and tolerance that are the primary tenets of cultural relativism are more widespread in today's world than in the past. This is largely a result of travel by the masses and subsequent travel writing that document stories of organic interactions between different cultures and help chip away at negative connotations attached to foreign cultures and people. In the last decade in particular, travel blogs and other forms of social media have helped expedite the dispersal of these cross-cultural experiences.

The trend of increased travel dates back further. In the Epilogue of *The Beaten Track*, James Buzard labels the post- World War I era as the birth of widespread tourism. At the end of the war, European nations “signaled their willingness to organize *themselves*, to array a part of their economies and their cultural self-representations according to the presumed or inferred interests of foreign visitors” (Buzard 332). For the first time in history, countries not only accepted visitors but also embraced them. F.W. Ogilvie writes in *The Tourist Movement* that “there is hardly a country in the world which does not devote public money in one way or another to the development of tourist facilities” (332). *The Tourist Movement* was published in 1933. More than eighty years later, the tourist economy continues to grow, in large part due to open international borders between countries and more disposable income for the general public than ever before.

Alas, understanding the genre of travel writing is more complex than recognizing an increase in commercial flights and bookmarking a few travel blogs. As

such, any discussion of the genre can be at once illuminating and overwhelming. To narrow our focus, we must first answer the most basic of questions. What is travel writing? What qualifies, even, as travel? Carl Thompson attempts to define travel in the early chapters of his 2011 book *Travel Writing*:

All journeys are...a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed **alterity**. Or, more precisely, since there are no foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity, and probably no environment on the planet for which we do not have some sort of prior reference point, all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity *and* identity, difference *and* similarity (Thompson 9).

Difference and similarity. As Thompson writes, there is no situation in which we find ourselves without a point of reference. Thus, travel is at its most basic level a practice in identifying and recognizing the similarities that span physical, linguistic, and cultural borders. And yet, “to begin any journey...is quickly to encounter difference and otherness” (9), meaning that even a journey within one’s own cultural boundaries can be fraught with difference. At its core, the tension between similarity and difference is what defines travel and, ultimately, attracts so many to it. The negotiation between the two results in an odd mix of adventure, intrigue, and uncertainty.

The appeal of this juxtaposition drives the travel writing genre in much the same way that mystique and secrecy fuel the popularity of the mystery novel. Centuries of travel and its corresponding literature – from Marco Polo’s travels through Asia to Bill Bryson’s trek through the United States – have left an extensive and diverse catalog on which armchair travelers can draw and with which they can reflect. But what actually



counts as travel writing? As Thompson writes, “The genre is perhaps better understood as a constellation of many different types of writing and/or text, these differing forms being connected not by conformity to a single, prescriptive pattern, but rather by a set of what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would call ‘family resemblances. (26)’”

Passionate and logical arguments have been made for inclusion of maps, guidebooks, photography, and many other forms of creation into the genre of travel writing. Rather than be sucked down the endless rabbit hole by such a debate, I will acknowledge the wide scope and splintering nature of the genre and focus my own discussion on its most widely accepted form: the autobiographical travelogue.

In the *Norton Anthology of Travel*, Paul Fussell focuses on the journey of the author in his definition of travel writing. To Fussell, a travel book must offer a first-person account of the author’s journey and, perhaps more importantly, emphasize the author’s response to the place in which he finds himself by revealing personal reflections and discussion. By decree of Fussell, good travel writing extends to its reader an offer to partake vicariously in the author’s own “interplay between alterity and identity.” The reader is given the opportunity to both appreciate the author’s own negotiation between differences and similarities and simultaneously reflecting on what would be her own. Fussell quotes Norman Douglas, a noted travel writer in his own right, as saying, “the reader of a good travel book is entitled not only to an exterior voyage, to descriptions of scenery and so forth, but to an interior, a sentimental or temperamental voyage, which takes place side by side with that outer one” (Fussell 15).

Yet the definitions proposed by Fussell and Douglas are not without their faults. They are, in some ways, oversimplifications of what it even means to travel. By

expecting travel writing to reflect an author's personal evolution alongside an exterior voyage, Fussell restricts the true definition of travel itself to the select few who undertake such a specific type of journey. His definition identifies by default two groups - the traveler and the local – and implies that all travel fits within the contractual relationship between members of each. It is implied that the traveler immerses himself in an isolated, stagnant culture that awaits him with open arms and bestows the opportunity for self-reflection. James Clifford challenges this clean depiction of travel in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*.

For someone like Fussell, the traveler, “by definition, is someone who has the security and privilege to move about in relatively unconstrained ways” (Clifford 34). Naturally, the true traveler – and by extension the true travel writer – is granted this freedom to explore a completely foreign world and, in the process, his own internal existence. The former is rarely the case, Clifford argues, as the vast majority of travelers *do* often find themselves on the beaten path. In fact, most modern travel is the antithesis of venturing into uncharted territory. Despite all of the lengths to which I myself went to immerse myself in Italian culture (learning the local language and living with a host family in a relatively small Italian city) I still could not completely cleanse myself of American influence as I was ultimately a part of an study abroad program established by my own country. The fact remains that despite our best efforts, attempts to completely avoid the beaten path often amount to a fools' errand.

Does this, therefore, disqualify my experiences as travel literature? I believe not. Interestingly enough, Clifford identifies similar patterns throughout the history of travel, citing studies like those of Mary Louise Pratt as “showing, most bourgeois, scientific,

commercial, aesthetic, travelers moved within highly determined circuits” (34). Consider the longevity of the Grand Tour, the traditional European trip associated with a standard itinerary that was undertaken by young, upper-class European men throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Grand Tour, from which an endless stream of canonized travel literature flows, is hardly an example of unconstrained movement. Rather than discard such literature, as strict adherence to Fussell’s definition would have us do, I contend that we widen the scope further than Fussell’s definition to appreciate the complexity of travel. In this vein, Clifford also argues that there is no clearly defined ‘local’ to separate from the ‘traveling’ culture. Rather, the two are intertwined in more complex ways than at first noticeable. Clifford labels this as a “traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling”(36) dynamic that clouds any neat picture of travel. Such a complexity means that travelers often find themselves in precarious situations when it comes to representing what is ‘local’:

There is no politically innocent methodology for intercultural interpretation. Some strategy of localization is inevitable if significantly different ways of life are to be represented. But ‘local’ in whose terms? (19).

The question with which Clifford finishes the above passage is particularly important. Fussell’s definition, once again, rests on the notion that the traveler finds himself in a new world that offers an isolated culture of sorts. Clifford uses the example of the Patuxet man Squanto aiding the Pilgrims in 1620 in Plymouth, Massachusetts to explain how problematic this assumption can be. Squanto spoke English and had experienced more of the Pilgrims’ world than they had of his. So the bridge between the Pilgrims and Native Americans was immediately constructed by an “insider-outsider,”

someone who himself had experience as a traveler. Clifford points out how frequently this is the case: “A great many of these interlocutors, complex individuals routinely made to speak for ‘cultural’ knowledge, turn out to have their own ‘ethnographic’ proclivities and interesting histories of travel” (19). The line between ‘native’ and ‘traveler’ is hardly ever as clear as Fussell’s definition leads us to believe.

If the earliest New World interactions between Pilgrims and Native Americans fail to comply with a clean traveler/native dynamic, we can begin to recognize how convoluted the modern picture of travel becomes. There is no escape from “the wider global world of intercultural import-export” (23) for the modern traveler. My own experience in Italy is flooded with examples of this intercultural import-export that blurred the lines between the cultures of the native and the traveler. My host family had already hosted an American. My host brother and his friends all spoke English to varying extents. Some had traveled to English-speaking countries. The reciprocal influence between Italian and American cultures was omnipresent throughout my stay as interests in films, food, and music were often shared. It is vital we recognize that in much the same way our own biases and cultural lenses are constantly guiding how we interact with our environment as travelers, the ‘local’ environments we experience are equally influenced by the import and export of culture. Therefore, reading any travelogue as a pure representation of a culture is inherently dangerous and fails to account for the inevitable cultural overlap that blurs the boundaries.

With that in mind, how does my work bridge the gap between the contrasting views of Clifford and Fussell on travel and its literature? Despite his limiting definition, I did rely on Fussell while writing the body of this work insofar as he identifies the

internal journey as an integral component to travel writing; as I will discuss momentarily, this played a large role in my creative thought process when producing this work. Clifford reminded me of how ignorant it is to assume a traveler's journey is in a purely foreign land, something I also incorporated into the themes of my text.

One luxury for the modern traveler that stems from centuries of intercultural mixing is the extensive library of existing travel literature to reference. The modes of travel and specifics of description have varied through the centuries, but a steady wave of travelers has written of their experiences abroad. The histories of modern travel and travel writing in Europe and the United States have roots in nineteenth century forms of entertainment. As James Buzard writes in the body of *The Beaten Track*, "travelling and reading were seen to complement each other, constituting a cyclic ritual in which readers both shaped their expectations and relived their past travels, through texts" (Buzard 160). This cycle simultaneously piqued readers' interests in travel and created successive travelers' expectations for their own experiences abroad. While the travel book may not be as popular as it once was, this cyclical relationship between media portrayal and expectation remains a foundation of travel. Expectation is what drives modern travel. Gone are the days of explorers venturing into uncharted territory without any idea what they would encounter. In their place are modern travelers anticipating trips with planned itineraries, constructed around their expectations.

Many examples of travel writing reflect the author's tendency to drown the reader in romanticized depictions of grandeur. Henry James wrote in 1877, "our observation in any foreign land is extremely superficial, and our remarks are happily not addressed to the inhabitants themselves, who would be sure to exclaim upon the

impudence of the fancy-picture” (155). James raises an important, if obvious, point. Whether it be our undivided focus on the renowned monuments, our preconceived notions of the idealized land in which we find ourselves, or some other distraction from reality that comes with modern travel, a large chunk of travel and travel writing in recent western European history emphasizes the beauty a location has to offer. We are often left without a grounded view of reality in the country.

I myself reflected this mindset in the months preceding my arrival in Ferrara. I chose to study in Italy because it has long been a country I have romanticized. At the forefront of my mind when I made my decision were visions of delicious pasta dishes, beautiful sand beaches, and preserved Roman monuments. When I sat down to write about my travels after a year filled with equal parts excitement and mundanity, I still had to battle the temptation to romanticize each and every moment. Considering most travel comes in more cursory ventures through a country, it is predictable that travel writing is often centered on fulfilled expectations and images of splendor, often at the cost of reality.

This mediation between the romanticized ideal and the reality of a location is often an overlooked aspect of travel literature. Buzard identifies the theme of *picturesqueness* in nineteenth century travel writing as a major development that led the genre to where it is today. The pursuit of the *picturesque* began merely as travelers seeking out beautiful landscapes and views to describe in their writing. Before long, it quickly expanded to other realms to include charming cultural buildings, animals, and even local people among the “picturesque.” This pursuit of and focus on such “picturesque” elements of a culture works to both romanticize a land and distance the

narrator and his readers from it. Despite the problems that Clifford notes in such a polarized separation between traveler and local, this sort of representation has become itself rooted in the travel writing genre. Buzard concludes that “the great importance repeatedly attached by travel-writers to the impacted meanings and pathos of history they found in antique settings seemed to militate against any precise observances of the actually existing life in those settings” (187). The nineteenth century in travel writing marked a major shift in how the genre depicted and represented a culture.

This is, however, a two-way street. As F.W. Ogilvie’s above comments on the matter show, countries have been pumping funds into their tourist economies for nearly a century. This creates an interesting dynamic between a traveler and his destination: both are inclined to construct and experience an appealing “reality.” Travelers hope to fulfill the romanticized expectations while the country’s tourist economy obviously stands to benefit from such a result. One of my own experiences in Italy is a good example of how this continues today. Early in my second term a handful of my American classmates invited me on a weekend trip to Cinque Terre, a beautiful stretch of cliffs on the Ligurian coast. When I told my host family about my classmates’ intentions, their response was essentially, “Of course they want to go there. All of the American do.” When I indicated with a confused look that I didn’t understand what our country of origin had to do with the desire to make the trip, they continued: “Every American that comes here goes straight to Cinque Terre. There are probably more Americans that visit it than Italians.” The steady stream of Americans to Cinque Terre is an example of how the pursuit and depiction of the *picturesque* by travelers and the encouragement of such expectations by a host country can often cloud the picture of the

existing truth of a country. Fittingly enough, a few months after returning from Italy in 2013 I struck up a conversation at a Christmas party with a gentleman who had just returned from a two-week trip to Italy. His first question was, “Did you make it to Cinque Terre?”

Buzard writes of nineteenth century travel writing: “The mundane unpicturesque, irrelevant or intrusive to picturesqueness, was what travelers sought to elide from the pictures they savoured” (190). Extrapolating his observation to modern travel and travel writing, we see a similar affinity for the picturesque, romantic representation of a country’s people, customs, and physical environment. When we factor in the cyclical structure of travel with media portrayal and expectations of a country, we recognize how self-perpetuating the notion of picturesque foreign lands is.

This is another way in which I attempted to separate themes in my travelogue from the general tendencies of the genre in its modern form. My hope with this project was to balance the dichotomy between the Italy that modern travel literature has established as picturesque and flawless and the day-to-day reality that is often cast by the wayside in literature. While the majority of my story does smile on the Italian lifestyle, I tried to consciously avoid romanticizing the country. Furthermore, perhaps the most valuable aspect of my own travelogue is its representations of relatively bland and sometimes unappealing elements of daily life such as dinners at home and bicycle theft. Italy is a place that I simultaneously cherish, despise, and am indifferent towards, and the story of my relationship with it would be incomplete if I failed to properly express this dynamic.



It is in this way that I embraced the historical connection between anthropology and travel writing. Ethnography is “a comprehensive study of culture [that] informs its reader through narrative immersion, often using sensory detail and storytelling techniques alongside objective description and traditional interview style” (Thompson Writing Program). It is, in short, a more objective representation of a culture and is built upon unbiased descriptions within its narrative. Thus, an effective ethnography establishes itself somewhere “between journalistic travel writing and traditional scientific objectivity” (Thompson Writing Program). The purpose of ethnography is to reveal the intricacies of a culture through the voice and detail of said culture. This is perhaps the largest gap between modern travel writing and ethnography. Whereas the modern travel book is an autobiographical story that reflects the physical and mental journey of its author within the context of a foreign culture, the ethnography embraces its narrator’s role as a participant observer – not primary protagonist – in the experiences.

In many ways, early travel writing functioned as ethnography does today: as an objective, educational depiction of the author’s surroundings. As I have discussed before, the nineteenth century marked a shift in the travel writing genre toward more introspective, personalized journeys of its authors. Of previous eras in travel writing, Carl Thompson writes, “almost all travellers were supposed to set out in search of useful knowledge” (45). He continues: “travel as an information-gathering exercise was regarded as crucial arm of the New Science of the late seventeenth century” (45). In both instances, Thompson identifies the main purpose of both travel and its earlier forms of writing as an attempt to inform and educate readers about foreign cultures and

lands rather than reflect the narrator's own personal evolution. Later, Thompson points to Joseph Addison's journey to Rome at the turn of the eighteenth century as a the epitome of its era in travel writing: "It actually offers the reader comparatively little in the way of a personal narrative of the writer's own experience" (101). Addison's work is instead rich in general details of the city and its people in much the same way a modern ethnography would approach the city.

My hope is that this work ultimately draws on both forms. I did my best to maintain an objective approach with my travelogue and to balance my own introspective journey with unbiased descriptions of my surroundings. This is why I made a concerted effort to avoid over-reliance on the picturesque and idealized Italy that we so often see in media portrayals of the country. Yet the informal nature of my blog as my main source reduces the legitimacy of my work as scientifically objective and the characters as I describe them are ultimately products of my own autobiographical persona and voice. Additionally, I believe works such as Addison's that lack the introspective journey that Norman Douglas considers the reader "entitled to" are, to put it plainly, less entertaining. The introspective journey of a travelogue is part of what makes modern travel writing intriguing and I wanted to embrace that in my work.

One dilemma that faces the autobiographical travel writer more than his ethnographer counterpart is the role of truth in his narrative. Published anthropological ethnographies face rigorous standards: if they are accepted by the academic community, they are accepted as a truthful depiction. Travel literature comes with more of a gray area. To return once more to Fussell, I would like to analyze his assertion that travel

writing “claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality” (Fussell 203). At first seemingly self-evident, the discussion of truth can be one of the most complex attributes when differentiating the travel book from the novel about travel. While fiction about travel grants the author license to embellish and modify characters and events, the staple of travel writing is its claim to this “literal validity” that Fussell establishes. That is, at the core of travel writing is the contract between travel writer and his reader that the events really happened as they are depicted.

Yet, we must understand how such a contract is easily – and has been historically – a malleable one. After all, it is nearly impossible to fact-check an individual’s journey. A quick Google search of “Marco Polo” and “Hoax” reveals merely the surface layer of a deep, ongoing debate over the truth of the traveler’s claims. Furthermore, even the most honest travel writers have ways of consciously (and subconsciously) manipulating their experiences to move their story forward. Highlighting the importance of minor events or characters, exaggerating the significance of certain details, and leaving out whole chunks of a journey are just a few examples of how the writing process can be used to manipulate the scope and tone of the author’s story and guide his narrative.

Furthermore, if we remember that every observation a travel writer shares of his surroundings is viewed through his own cultural lens, we must concede that there can be no truly unbiased representation offered by an author. Thompson concludes as much when he writes, “even forms of travel writing that strive for accuracy and objectivity offer only a partial depiction of the world” (62). If the personal biases and background of the author have a permanent impact on his experiences and interpretations, the need

to recognize those biases that give the author's work structure increases. This is unavoidable and not something I claim to have avoided. The fact is my cultural upbringing has focused the lenses through which I experience my world; and those lenses are undoubtedly fixed upon this work. This just goes to show that travel writing is as much about the reader's abilities to recognize this constraint as a constant factor as it is the author's honesty.

The dilemma of honesty remains at the forefront for the reader. If at one end of the spectrum is an author's unwaveringly accurate observation, and at the other lies intentional deception, we must again recognize the inevitability that a majority of works within the genre fall somewhere in between. This can strain the relationship between travel writer and his readers. What is to be trusted at face value? In a genre scattered with exaggerated tales, readers of travel writing are trained to be skeptical. Carl Thompson dedicates a chapter in *Travel Writing* to the ways in which travel writers attempt to convince their readers of their stories' authenticity.

The first is the 'principle of attachment.' As I discussed earlier, if travel involves the mediation between similarity and difference, then travel writing brings what is different into focus for the reader. Cultural differences can be so significant that even accurate representations may actually compromise the author's credibility. That is, the first step for the author is his own negotiation with the differences in culture that he experiences; the second is to translate that negotiation into a representation that his readers can understand in writing. If the author does not sufficiently complete the second step, even a perfectly accurate portrayal of a culture may find itself ridiculed by readers for its apparent implausibility. Thompson points us to James Bruce, the Scottish

explorer who visited Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) in the 1760s when little was known in Europe of the region:

He returned with a stock of colorful stories about the bizarre practices of this ancient, complex culture, including most notoriously the claim that the Abyssinians sometimes ate meat cut from living cattle. Readers and commentators back in London, however, regarded Bruce's account of the Abyssinians as preposterous" (66).

Years later, Bruce's account was deemed to be probably accurate; yet that did not save his reputation during the time of its publishing. The written experience needs to be plausible in the eyes of the reader, a feat often accomplished by creating a relatable comparison. In some scenarios— such as Bruce's — it may be more difficult to establish this trust with the audience given just how radically different the culture in question may be. Yet the fact remains, being able to bring the experiences close enough to the culture of the audience so that they are relatable is essential in gaining the trust of the audience and producing quality travel writing.

At the same time, though, bringing the subject matter too close to the readership's culture can create its own problem, as the readers may lose the sense of foreignness at the heart of the author's experience. When Lady Mary Wortley Montagu writes of Turkish bathhouses that they are "In short...the Women's coffee house, where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented, etc." (Montagu 102) she does wonders for putting her depiction in relatable terms for her English readers, but perhaps compromises her experience by trivializing her surroundings. Would making the representation any less relatable leave the reader unconvinced of its viability? Would

making it any more relatable compromise its legitimacy? These are among the most important questions a travel writer must answer when deciding how to represent their experiences.

Obviously, my own experiences in Italy never ventured into James Bruce's territory but I too was forced to make decisions in this area, notably regarding language. I wanted to emphasize how my interactions with Italians were in my second language – something that acted as a communicative barrier at times – without slowing the narrative down with excessive translations. Ultimately, I decided to directly translate my first meeting with my host family in my text before eliminating Italian from most successive interactions.

Beyond the vital 'principle of attachment,' travel writers have several tools at their disposal. Thompson writes that they may "present their whole narrative as just a lightly edited transcription of notes and journal-entries made 'on the spot'" or "insert into a more obviously polished and written-up account just a few sections marked as 'from my diary' or 'from my notebook', thereby emphasizing to readers that the narrative as a whole is grounded in personal experience. They may even incorporate "any number of tables, lists and graphs, so as to suggest that they are giving us plain facts, rather than a more subjective viewpoint" (87). This harkens back to early days of travel writing, where the genre's value was perhaps more weighted towards objective representation of a place. Regardless of the techniques used, the travel writer must garner his audience's trust first and foremost. Cultural lenses and inadvertent misperceptions are factors to be aware of when recognizing the subjectivity of a travelogue, but gaining and maintaining the trust of the audience is the prerequisite of

good travel writing. These were all things I kept in mind during my writing process. I have discussed in this introduction how my blog acted as a basis for what was to become a more cohesive production. In this sense, my travelogue is a more traditionally edited narrative.

Beyond establishing trust between author and audience, the travel writing process shares several elements with fiction writing. Depicting the passage of time, creating and developing characters, and using rising and falling action are all key components in both genres, but establishing the persona of the narrator is most significant. Thompson writes of the “growing tendency in the [travel writing] genre, from the late eighteenth century onwards, to foreground the narratorial self, so that the traveller becomes as much the object of the reader’s attention as the place travelled to” (99). Again we see a split in the genre around the eighteenth century: previously masquerading as an impersonal representation of a place before evolving into the more autobiographical and personal account that Fussell and Douglas now view as the staple of the genre. It is in this more modern autobiographical form that I tried to construct this travelogue in an effort to reinforce my own personal journey. To do so, I needed to create my own character, something I consider among the more difficult tasks this project offered. When I wrote my blog entries, I had a very small and informal audience - close friends and family - all of whom knew me well enough to imagine subtle personal nuances to events without particularly detailed narration or a delicately refined narratorial persona. When translating my anecdotal experiences into a cohesive narrative, though, I had to make a conscious effort to create and maintain a consistent persona without compromising my story.

Carl Thompson identifies self-aggrandizement as a common theme in the persona of travelogues' narrators. He points out that "writers frequently adopt an anti-touristic rhetoric that lampoons and/or laments the activities of other travelers, thereby setting themselves apart from, and superior to, those others" (124). The benefits in establishing a heroic narrator with a fearless demeanor and insatiable hunger to venture away from the "beaten path" are clear for travel writers and readers alike, but a primary goal of mine was to avoid such a simplistic distinction between "traveler" and "tourist." Placing myself as the heroic outsider in my own narrative would have, in my opinion, compromised the complexities of my relationship with Italy and views of traveling and local cultures in general. Instead, as I discussed with Clifford's work, I view time abroad as continuously bouncing between the beaten and unbeaten paths; I consider my own experiences to be representative of such a journey. I strove to represent this through a variety of methods, most simply by placing Americans at the forefront of several stories and completely absent in others. My time in Italy cast me on separate occasions as a tourist, a traveler, and a local. A primary goal of this travelogue was to highlight that dynamic.

In conclusion, the history of the travel writing genre is vast and its influence on this project extensive. Early forms of the genre share much in common with the modern ethnography, as their primary purpose was to educate their readers. More recent centuries of travel literature have instead valued the role of the author as protagonist in an introspective journey. I wanted to write this travelogue within the framework of the modern autobiographical travel narrative, paying particular attention to themes of similarity versus difference, my own intrapersonal journey, and narratorial persona. At



the same time, though, my goal was to offer an unbiased work that is grounded in the realities of Italian culture by using my own experiences to emphasize how my role wavered from traveler to local and back again. In the spirit of the post-eighteenth century travel writing genre, I hope that this work is both enlightening and entertaining.

## Chapter 1

My flight from the Denver International Airport to Frankfurt was scheduled to depart at 12:20pm local time. I had awoken at 4:30am PST earlier that day in Gardnerville, Nevada, ridden groggily in the backseat of my parents' red Subaru Forester to the Reno Airport an hour away, checked my surely excessive amount of baggage, said my final farewells to my family, and enjoyed my complimentary plastic cup of orange juice on my flight to Denver.

Everything was in order. My three-month study abroad program in Ferrara, Italy was set to begin the following day and I (with an extensive assist from my parents) had adequately prepared for everything. There was to be a thirty-minute layover in Denver, then an additional hour wait in Frankfurt before my final flight to Bologna, where I would be arriving right at the program's suggested arrival time. From there I would take the hour van ride to Ferrara with my fellow students in what would be our first opportunity to bond as a group.

But then there was the announcement. Upon arrival at my international gate, the Lufthansa crew informed me that there would be a two-hour delay as a part of a labor dispute. Well, esteemed mathematician I am not, but I was quick to calculate just how devastating that would be to my itinerary. The flight attendant at the counter was incredibly kind and helpful for someone who was presumed to be a disgruntled employee and set me up with the earliest possible flight from Frankfurt to Bologna...8 hours after my originally scheduled departure.

I was in an emotional state somewhere between distress and bemusement. How ironic, I thought, that an airline from a country lauded for its punctuality was the reason

that I would be arriving late in a country chided for its tardiness? Then it hit me. A John Steinbeck quotation my father was so fond of citing whenever we went on family vacations.

*We don't take a trip. A trip takes us.*

So with a deep breath, I embraced my dilemma. Instead of missing those precious early moments of bonding with my fellow travelers, I was to be the cool guy who had the thirty-hour travel day story to share when I did finally meet them. The only thing missing would be a leather jacket and a motorcycle. Or at least that's how I twisted it in my head. And as I literally sat next to the German crew who were refusing to board the perfectly functional plane, I promised myself that I would embrace every curveball thrown my way over the next few months because, after all, John Steinbeck had to know something about travel.

## Chapter 2

As with so many early European cities, Ferrara is located on a river, in this case the Po in *La pianura padana* (the Po Valley) in northern Italy. The Po River is of immense importance in the development of Northern Italy. Not only does it offer some of the most fertile lands on the entire Italian peninsula, it runs from Torino through Piacenza and Ferrara before finally emptying into the Adriatic Sea. In a historical context, the river gave Ferrara the potential to become an economic hub downriver from powerful cities.

One crucial element in Ferrara's history, however, was the relative stability and prosperity it experienced for over three and a half centuries during the late Middle Ages and into the Renaissance under the House of Este (1240-1597). During a time when the Italian peninsula was disunified and city-states fluctuated in size and shape from one generation to the next, Ferrara was in the center of one of Italy's strongest dynasties. In addition to ruling over Ferrara, the House of Este controlled Modena and Reggio, meaning much of what is the modern province of Emilia-Romagna was united under one house with Ferrara at its center.

The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in particular were a time of great prosperity in Ferrara as it was one of the epicenters of the Italian Renaissance. The Este family hosted many an artist and musician in Ferrara (Piero della Francesca, Jacopo Bellini, Cosme Tura, and Jacob Obrecht among others). In social and economic terms, the House of Este offered asylum for Jews fleeing hostility elsewhere in Europe and had as many as 10 synagogues and 2,000 Jewish people during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The infusion and acceptance of differing philosophies, both religious and artistic, created an

environment in which Ferrara thrived as an economic, cultural, and social center during the Renaissance.

What sets Ferrara apart from other powerful Renaissance cities is that it essentially peaked during this time. Once the Este family relocated to Modena in 1597 and the Papal States reclaimed control of the city, its diversity and prosperity slowed. Today, both Ferrara's population (131,841) and reputation pale in comparison to other Renaissance powers such as Florence (379,180) and Milan (1,353,882). As a result, Ferrara has a much more rustic look and feel. Together with Lucca, Ferrara has the most well preserved Renaissance walls in Italy and its city center is magnificent with its well protected *Castello Estense* and cathedral looming over cobblestone streets that feel as if they are centuries old themselves.

Of the fourteen people in our program, twelve (including me) chose to live with host families. When making our decision, we heard plenty of horror stories: tales of thirty-minute bike rides from outside of the walls to class, some host parents with early curfews, and others who demanded their students leave with them in the morning and arrive with them in the evening. There was even the rumor of a potential theft that had occurred in the past. Most of us who still opted for a host family viewed it as a calculated risk. The potential benefits of immersing ourselves in a real Italian household far outweighed the possible pitfalls, and our program coordinators assured us that they would do everything they could to reassign us in the event of a bad pairing.

### Chapter 3

In the early afternoon on day 3 we waited anxiously in our hotel lobby for our host families to pick us up. One by the one they came to whisk us away. And each time those of us who remained looked up excitedly like puppies waiting to be chosen from a litter. Each time all but one of us would drop our heads in disappointment. The group slowly dwindled until there were only two of us: a kind, cute girl from Oregon State named Krista, and me. We continued the light conversation that had begun as a larger group discussion about the best Red Hot Chili Peppers albums (Californication), the perils of Italian drivers, and how fascinating it was that our hotel rooms had had powered blinds when a short woman dashed into the lobby. Her dark complexion, eyes, and hair would make her blend in on the Italian streets outside. She looked rushed as her eyes darted around the room before landing on Patricia, one of our program's coordinators, and hurried over to talk to her. I could tell you that I just knew she was the one, how it felt right, and that I felt instantly that she would be a great host mother – but honestly, that would be a load of rubbish. I thought, “Well, the odds are 50/50. There's a decent chance she *could* be the one.” And she was.

Patricia introduced us as my host mother and I carried my bags to the street. Her name was Elleonora (“Elli”) and her husband, Filippo, was waiting for us at the car. Filippo was bald with horn-rimmed glasses and rosy cheeks. He was a shade below average height and hurried over to shake my hand. Both in personality and appearance, he seemed charming. We loaded the mid 90s green hatchback and I hopped in the backseat as Filippo started the engine and Elli started the conversation.

Elli: “Patti ci ha detto che tu parli bene.” (Patti told us that you speak well).

Me: “Si, un po’.” (Yes, a little).

I rolled my clammy hands over in my lap and regretted not spending the previous hour practicing Italian instead of arguing about alternative rock albums.

Elli: “Quindi, come stai?” (So, how are you?)

Me: “Bene.” (Good).

I paused. “*Bene?*” *That’s it? I can’t just say one word...Add something else!*

Me: “Sono nervoso.” (I’m nervous).

*Not that! Why did I just say that? Of all the two word sentences I could draw from Italian 101 I chose that? Why? Now this is awkward. Oh, god, why did I say that?!?* Filippo grinned and smiled towards Elli.

Filippo: “Perchè? Non ti preoccupare!” (Why? Don’t worry!) Even as he drove he felt the need to use his hands to supplement his speech.

I managed to connect a few words into a real sentence to alleviate some of the staleness in the air and Filippo saw to it to begin an introduction to Ferrara.

*This could be a really long, uncomfortable ride if they live far outside of the walls. I hope it’s not too far.*

We took our first right and went two blocks. Then we took a left and went one block. Then another right and about half a block up we pulled into their apartment courtyard. **Three blocks from the city center.** I could still see the definition on the brick of the castle.

## Chapter 4

The entrance to the Malagù apartment was cozy. The front door opened to a thin hallway with a high ceiling and large burgundy rug lining the way. On one side rested a broad coat rack opposite a large brass mirror while a small wooden table sat at the end of the hall. Elli ushered me down the hall and around the corner where the hall continued to a half opened door at the back of the apartment. To my immediate left was the living room adorned with several couches, chairs, and a TV with its windows overlooking the street. On the right was the kitchen and dining area, a single room with a quaint table and small window that overlooked the building's courtyard. In the back of the apartment were several bedrooms and a bathroom. It was on the whole a somewhat cramped and nondescript apartment, much smaller than the average housing for an American family of three. I was surprised at how small the living quarters were. Out of one of these came a teenage boy when Elli announced our arrival.

At the risk of sounding lazy, the simplest and yet most accurate description of my host brother is "Italian" looking. The boy's features were so pronounced that I noticed them before he even came into focus. He had short curly, black hair, tan skin and a somewhat pudgy figure. As he came closer I noticed he had a full goatee and began to suspect for the first time that every Italian boy over the age of 14 had more facial hair than I did. I rubbed the peach fuzz above my lip and tried to remember whether the infant boy in the hotel lobby had had a beard. I couldn't remember. I looked up to see Ettore smiling and smiled back.



The room at the end of the hall was to be my bedroom. There was a small bed and desk as well as a window that overlooked the courtyard below. Ettore gave me a quick tour of the apartment as we did the awkward dance of getting to know the stranger with whom we'd live for the foreseeable future.

Ettore was 18 years old and in his final year of high school. The Italian school system is extremely different from the American one. The largest difference is the specialization of Italian schools. There are three primary types of high schools in Italy: *scientifico*, *classico*, and *linguistico*. While all touch on the same general studies, each school delves much deeper into a specific field. *Liceo classico* focuses on history and philosophy, *linguistico* on second and third language acquisition, and *scientifico* on math and science. The system results in the average Italian being much more deeply educated in a specific field than their peers and far more specialized than their American counterparts. The example that would stand out to me was in the English language abilities of my Italian friends. Most *linguistico* students spoke nearly flawless English and were proficient at a third – and sometimes fourth – language. Ettore attended *Liceo scientifico*. While he undoubtedly spoke English better than the vast majority of Americans speak any second language, he had more difficulty with it many of his *linguistico* peers.

This turned out to be the primary reason why the Malagù family opened their home to the CIEE Ferrara Study Abroad program. Filippo and Elli wanted their son to experience some additional cross-cultural pollination and improve his English. Ettore told me as we sat at the kitchen table for our first lunch together that they had hosted one American student the previous semester. Sam, from Massachusetts, had never

actually studied Italian before arriving in Ferrara so the onus fell on Ettore's shoulders to fill the role of translator for his parents and Sam. Stories of just how inept Sam was at Italian helped break the ice. As Ettore put it, Sam knew only four Italian words: Pizza, Pasta, Mafia, and Bombare. The fourth one is a slang verb for "sex" and, by all accounts, Sam's favorite of the four. In fact, the first three times I spoke of Sam with any of Ettore's friends, they all shared the same anecdote: he would often shout "Bombare!" in a deep, booming voice whenever they went out in public, much to the amusement of the others. So I had that reputation to live up to as the most recent American male in the Malagù household.

## Chapter 5

Lasagna is an Italian word that Americans know and use often. “I like lasagna...My favorite dish is lasagna...would you like a slice of lasagna?” My first meal with the Malagù family was this dish, but when Elli asked me if I wanted a slice, she did not refer to it as the singular *lasagna* but rather the plural *lasagne*. This was my first experience with the subtle misuse of Italian words that is so common in America. Unlike English, or even Spanish, Italian does not use the letter *S* to signify a plural. Instead, a simple change of the final letter does the trick. Pretty much every Italian word ends in an *A*, *E*, or *O*. Most singular word ending in *A* become plurals ending in *E*. Singular words ending in *E* or *O* become plurals ending in *I*. So *bambino* becomes *bambini*, *cane* becomes *cani*, and *programma* becomes *programme*. There are, of course, occasional exceptions but that is the structure of Italian nouns.

Since this system makes no sense to people familiar with English, we’ve come to adapt most Italian words that infiltrate our culture to fit our own system. In addition to the word’s function, the cultural definition of the word changes once it is absorbed by another language. Perhaps the best example is with the Italian word *panini*. *Paninis* are, in American culture, grilled Italian sandwiches. To an American, we have the singular *panini* and plural *paninis* We have panini presses that make the hot sandwiches in our own homes. As we just discussed, the grammatical function of *panini* in English fails its Italian origins, but the modification of the word to suit our language is understandable. What is confusing, however, is that *panino* really just means *sandwich* in Italian. Thus, every sandwich, hot, cold or grilled, is a *panino* in Italy.

Singular or plural, *le lasagne* that Elli made is to this day among the best I've ever had. The flavorful white sauce and homemade ragù were enough on their own to make the dish a memorable one, but the actual pasta was cooked to that perfect *al dente* that is so challenging to reach. The temperature was just hot enough that the first dish was not too scalding to dive right into nor the second so cold that it needed reheating. And boy did I have seconds.

I started slowly, not wanting to seem as though my parents had neglected to teach me table manners. I set my fork down between bites, swallowed completely before answering the flurry of questions Filippo and Elli threw at me (they were clearly excited that they could actually converse with me once my nerves had somewhat subsided), and started eyeing the dish of *lasagne* that sat in the middle of the table once I had finished. Elli noticed this, smiled, and in one motion grabbed my plate and scooped a generous serving onto it before I could even think to object. Not that I would have, of course.

Elli and Filippo owned an interior design store in the city center that specialized in kitchens. Both were born and raised in Ferrara. In fact, Elli's parents lived less than a block from their daughter and Filippo's mother and brother lived less than ten minutes by bicycle. Elli told me that every Thursday night they all had dinner at Filippo's mother's house and said I was welcomed but not pressured to join. Even had there been no shared language to connect us, Elli's smile, laugh, and generosity would have been enough to make her one of the Italians I cherished most from my time in the city. She gave off a warmth that transcended linguistic barriers.

Once I finished my opening foray into the cuisine of Elleonora Malagù, I was struck with a sudden panic. Everyone had finished their meals, all plates were clean, and yet they all were looking at me curiously as if it were my move in a chess match. Much like Jack Dawson hadn't the slightest idea of which fork to start with on the Titanic, I realized that had no clue what to do with mine once I had finished. Every meal I had had in America either ended with me clearing my own place or a waiter asking if I was ready for the next course. I knew there was a cheese course to come – I could see it on the counter – but I needed to break the code and signal my readiness for the next course. I peeked down at Ettore's dish out of the corner of my eye. Aha! Both fork and knife were together and lying across the dish. I felt my host family looking at me, straightened my gaze, finished my sentence, and copied his form as subtly as I could so they would think I knew what I was doing. Elli caught on, smiled at me coyly and winked as she got up to get the plate of cheese.

## Chapter 6

We took intense Italian language courses with our fellow study abroad students during our first week. Our classroom was in a small dungeon underneath our CIEE building. Between breaks, we wandered out of the dungeon and into the sunny courtyard. A stroll through the streets of Ferrara was like walking through centuries of architecture, ranging from Medieval to modern. What it was not was overflowing with trees. There were hardly any trees along the streets, giving the impression that there were very few in the city. This is misleading. An aerial view of the city shows a lot of hidden green between the streets. These are private yards behind apartment complexes and office buildings that often stretch back twice as far from the street as the building itself does. The CIEE plot had one of these courtyards. In this courtyard was a bar. Similar to the way that Americans have adopted and misused the word *panino*, Italians have done the same with the English word *bar*. Italian bars are not “order three shots of absinthe at the bar” locales; instead, they’re just everyday coffee shops.

During one of our early morning breaks a handful of us wandered out of the dungeon for some fresh air. It was early. I was tired. We were in Italy. Obviously the bar was summoning me. As we entered the bar I realized I had no idea what to order. I never even drank American coffee at home. All I knew at the time was that, if I was going to get into this coffee thing that seemed to be so prevalent in Italy, I was going to have to take baby steps. I concluded that those first baby steps needed to involve lots of milk. Earlier in the week I had tried a Latte Macchiato. I could tell there was milk in it, but still, I figured that I could use a bit more. So I found a friendly name on the list and

asked the barman, “Cos’è un latte bianco?” I knew I had nailed the question when he answered rapid-fire style, “Un latte bianco è una coppa del latte caldo. Lo vuoi?”

I had no idea what he had said. I just smiled and looked at Krista, who was studying the menu intently next to me. She wasn’t really listening. Well, considering that the girl next to me was really cute and would look up at any second, I decided that I didn’t want to embarrass myself by asking again. So I ordered confidently, “Si, lo prendo.”

*What’s the worst that can happen? He gives me too strong of a coffee while I look like a badass speaking Italian with the barman in front of this girl?* Well worth the risk of getting even the worst coffee in my book. I began daydreaming of my accomplishment as the barman reached under the counter to grab an empty glass. Krista asked me what I had ordered. I came out of my daydream unprepared to answer, paused for a moment, and then came clean. “I’m not really sure. I think it’s got a lot of milk and a little bit of coffee.”

A lot of milk indeed. Before Krista can respond we both watch the barman take the empty glass, fill it completely with warm milk, and put it on the counter in front of us. “€1.20.” Krista snorted out a laugh as I grinned sheepishly and reached into my wallet.

## Chapter 7

I fell into a routine within the first week of living with Ettore. We would come home from school around 12:30 pm to eat lunch before I returned to school in the early afternoon. The Malagù's had given me an old green bicycle to use while I lived with them. Ferrara is known as *La città delle bici* because its narrow, flat streets and small city limits make owning a bicycle a necessity. Combined with how close to the study abroad building we lived, this made returning to class a five-minute ride. Then, after classes ended, I returned to the apartment to find Ettore studying. He studied a lot, far more than I did at any stage of my high school life. I would usually drag him out of his room for *una merenda* (snack). This snack was almost exclusively Nutella-based. At first I was hesitant to fully embrace Nutella as the holiest of snacks but Ettore proselytized me pretty quickly. He spread Nutella on plain white bread, a practice that usually takes minutes longer than what I would ever expect because of his attention to detail. Each stroke is carefully planned ahead of time and the hazelnut spread is always even. I can tell when I watch him that he's carefully perfected the art of the Nutella sandwich through years of trial and error.

What's difficult to explain to most Americans – and something I've committed far too much energy towards since my return from Italy – is that the Nutella in Italy is just plain better. The ingredients *are* slightly different and, sure, confirmation bias may have played a small role, but there is no equivalent to a true Nutella sandwich in the States. The American version is to the Italian equivalent what Hydrox is to the Oreo.

During one of our early snack times, I flashed on a brilliant idea. What if we tried putting peanut butter on a sandwich with the Nutella? *It's brilliant*, I thought, and



so I suggested it to Ettore. The look on his face was a combination of true horror and anger, as if my mere suggestion of mixing the two was an insult to the good name of Nutella. He opened the refrigerator and started digging through it until his arm was completely engulfed. He emerged with a small jar of peanut butter, the sort of size you only find in exotic foreign food stores.

“No one eats it in Italy,” he said. “We bought it because Sam wanted it.” By the looks of it, no one had so much as touched it since the American had left either.

For the record, the Nutella and peanut butter combination is decent, although I do defer to my host brother’s opinion that it takes away from the brilliance that is Nutella in the same way that forcing a brilliant musician into a supporting role in a band limits his creative contribution.

After the afternoon snack I’d often study on my own or go out with classmates to explore the city or grab a cup of coffee. Then I’d return home at 7, around the time that Elli returned from work. I’d “help” her cook (in reality merely pester her about her cooking secrets) and we’d eat as Filippo arrived around 8. After dinner, Ettore and I would go out to meet up with some of his friends.

In my experience, American culture draws a fairly strict social line between high school and college-aged people. Those in high school tend to hang out with their high school peers while those in college stay among their own clique. Crossover happens, of course, but is hardly a common occurrence. My experience in Italy was different. As Ettore introduced me to his friends, I noticed almost immediately how diverse in age the group was. Not only were there some in their final years of high school (including Ettore) and others in college, but very few of them actually were in the same school,

much less same classes. Ettore's best friend, Riccardo "Sticky" Turrini, a shaggy, brown-haired kid of average height but a muscular build, was the only one of ten friends to whom Ettore introduced me in the first week that was actually in his class at school. What all of these friends had in common, though, was that they lived in the same parish and thus went to the same church. So in much the same way that youth sports teams had provided me with many of my earliest and best friends – most of whom happened to be in the same grade as me - the church three blocks from Ettore's apartment gave him a slightly more diverse age group of kids in close proximity to one another.

Ettore and his friends and I hit it off almost immediately. While my Italian was nothing to write home about, my rudimentary skills in the language at least gave me more depth than my predecessor, something which made conversing with my new Italian friends quite a fun game for both sides. I obviously tried my best to show off my second language abilities but inevitably got tripped up often, particularly in the early stages. No matter. Through a combination of Italians assisting in their own language or guessing in mine, we had enough of a bilingual bridge that communication was never a challenge.

One of Ettore's friends, Gianluca, was particularly interested in improving his English. He studied medicine at the University of Ferrara and spoke English very well for someone who had not gone to *Liceo linguistico*. He too had short black hair, was slightly shorter than me, and had a full beard, all quickly developing themes of my trip. He had a long face, flat nose, and his left ear pierced. When I met him he had a Carmelo Anthony NBA jersey and LA Dodgers baseball cap on. This caught me off

guard so I prodded him on his American sports knowledge and was surprised to find that he genuinely followed the NBA.

Conversations with Gianluca were refreshing because they were simultaneously informal and constructive. Whether in English or Italian, neither party was afraid to correct the other. Yet it never became something that sullied the fun. He would usually say something to me in English, I would correct him, then answer in Italian. He'd do the same for me.

Because Gianluca was as excited about improving his English as I was about learning Italian, many of our conversations were simply about language rules and grammar. His questions really illuminated for me just how silly English is. Since it is a language with both Germanic and Latin roots, English has two sets of rules that can't coexist without exceptions. For this reason it can be a nightmare to perfect, as Gianluca so frequently lamented. However, English is a simple language to gather a working knowledge of because we do so little to conjugate verbs. We start a sentence with a subject and follow it most often with a tense-specific form of the verb that is the same regardless of the pronoun that precedes it. Yes, there are exceptions with third person singular forms of verbs ("He runs" differs from "I run"), but the difference is small enough that it is not really a necessary element to include in order to be understood.

Italian seems to be the other way. It can be difficult even to build a solid foundation to work with but the finer nuances of the language are simpler and easier to pick up. Even the simplest of sentences require strict conjugations of the verb ("I eat" is *Mangio* while "they eat" is *Mangiano*). Additionally, subject and verb placement does not need to be as strictly enforced as it is in English. So the early approach to

language can create problems for speakers from other languages. Yet, the language itself is rather simple and, amazingly, logical. Italian is among the most phonetically rational languages in the world. I was shocked when I first found out that the letters of the alphabet *always follow the rules*. There are no silent letters or confusing diphthongs that only show up occasionally.

Perhaps the best trick I picked up from correcting Gianluca's English mistakes was recognizing why he made them. As was the case with my Italian, Gianluca's grammatical mistakes often reflected what would make most sense in his mother tongue. So, for example, he said to me early on in our relationship, "I like to make photographs." In Italian, to take photographs is *fare fotografia*. This is a common mistake for Italian speakers because the verb *fare* means both *to make* and *to do*; neither is differentiated from the other in Italian the way that they are in English.

There are similar mistakes that English speakers make in Italian. For example, English is heavily reliant on gerunds. "I'm studying at the university" could mean both in "I am physically at the university right now" and "I'm currently enrolled." But in Italian, the direct translation (*Sto studiando all'università*) can only mean that I am at the University studying *at this moment*. So perhaps the best way to supplement learning a language is to study native speakers' mistakes in our own.

## Chapter 8

The role that bicycles play in Ferrara is far greater than it could ever be in an American city. Even college campuses, with their surrounding neighborhoods overflowing with young people on bicycles, can't compare. Ferrara has poor public transportation; gas prices and small streets discourage excessive driving. Everyone has a bike and most use it as their exclusive mode of transportation. Going to the bank or grocery store? Bicycle. Venturing out to the weekly market in the square? Bicycle. Meeting a friend for an afternoon cup of coffee? Bicycle. Hardly anyone leaves home without taking their bicycle. And the streets are always crowded with people headed somewhere. That's why the bicycle that the Malagù's lent me quickly became as much a part of my relationship with the city of Ferrara as my host family and friends.

It had a racing frame with a flat bar across the top and handlebars that curved upward like a beach cruiser's. The paint was a sickly shade of green with rust speckled evenly throughout it. My American friends and I quickly called it *The Green Machine*. The front brake was inconsistent in its performance and the rear one never pretended to work. The seat was uncomfortable and the pedals too small. By the time my year had ended the front tire had been bent from getting T-boned by a car at a stop sign (I plead the fifth if asked who was at fault). In short, the bike was a piece of shit. I loved it.

Her underwhelming appearance was all part of the plan. What better place to steal bikes than the self-proclaimed "City of Bicycles"? And what better way to secure your own bikes safety in such a place than to have one ugly bike? Most Ferrarese people knew this and the locked bikes that lined the city streets showed it. Most of the bikes looked as terrible as mine. Every time you saw a shiny road bike, you just knew it

would be snatched, repainted, and shipped to Bologna or Ravenna by the weekend. So the result was a bunch of clunkers flying around the city and blending with one another. It gave the medieval town an additional rustic element.

So we'd ride everywhere on our bikes. I learned pretty quickly from Ettore's friends that there were two ways to you could go about riding a bicycle: the *basic* way and the *cool* way. I recognized right away that, as is usually the case with young people, the cool way was the only option. You could ride with one hand. You could ride with no hands. You could ride with both feet on the handlebars. With both feet on one pedal. Sitting on the middle frame with both legs on one pedal. With elbows on the handlebars. The variations were endless and the art of riding a bike was constantly being pushed forward by the youth in Ferrara.

The magnum opus of bike riding, though, was always *riding in two*. The origins really had nothing to do with style or flair, but rather arose from practicality. Oftentimes, one or two people in a group don't have a bicycle. Instead of everyone walking their bikes or the walkers trailing behind, the pedestrians just jump on a friend's bike. There were two primary techniques. The first was simply the extra person sitting on the handlebars facing the cyclist (facing forward creates both balance and conversational difficulties). The second requires a flat frame like the one on the Green Machine. The extra person sits on the frame with both legs on one side of the bike. The cyclist then reaches around the free rider's body to grab the handlebars. It was really pretty simple but damn did it look cool. Riding in two with an Italian girl quickly became my favorite thing to do. Once I had mastered it I made sure that my services were available to any girl in our group without a bike.

As for destinations, there were a few hot spots that we'd bounce between on a nightly basis. The first was an outdoor seating area attached to a small restaurant, chosen simply because they left the chairs out at night. We'd just sit under the streetlights playing cards, drinking beer and cracking jokes. Most of them smoked cigarettes. This is, by far, the largest difference between my Italian and American friends. A lot of my generation of Americans feels pressure from their peers *not* to smoke. We've had the health effects pounded into our brains at such a steady pace throughout our childhood that the appeal just isn't there for most of us. The Italian relationship with cigarettes is how I imagine the 1950s in America was. It *is* cool. It *is* fun. And almost *everyone* is doing it. In a group of ten, Ettore was the only one that didn't at least sporadically smoke, citing his mother's smoking habit as a major reason why he never enjoyed it.

They almost all roll their own cigarettes. Matteo, the older brother of Riccardo, ran his hand through his prematurely silvering but otherwise thick hair one night and said to me, "It's too expensive to buy cigarettes at the store. We save a lot by rolling our own." Matteo was a jovial fellow and loud. Boy was he loud. He was an actor in local theater and never showed stage fright around his friends. He was friendly and kind and had an occasionally immature sense of humor. I am near certain that he introduced Sam to his favorite word.

From this small alley, we often rode to the center square. *La Basilica Cattedrale di San Giorgio*, most often referred to by locals as *il Duomo*, is well lit at night. The large square and its nighttime gelaterias and bars (this time real "order three shots of absinthe at the bar" locations) make it a crowded center well into the night. The church

itself is beautiful and among the most famous attractions in Ferrara. The cathedral has had a continuously evolving appearance since its consecration in 1135. These many modifications, restorations, and extensions through the years reflect the changing architectural landscape of Ferrara. The original façade is Romanesque but so many renovations were made through the centuries that today it represents many of the architectural eras in Ferrara's history. The bell tower was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and, after a fire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the interior was redesigned in Baroque style. The exterior has been added to numerous times. This lack of uniformity in the church's appearance lends itself well to its popularity as a time capsule of Ferrarese history.

For my friends and me, though, it was usually just a pretty building to look at while eating gelato and plotting new bike tricks. One time I tried to explain to Ettore how much I admired the setting: "If I look this way there's a cathedral built 600 years before my country had even the slightest inkling of independence. And if I look that way there's a Medieval castle and a moat."

He just licked his ice cream, paused for a second, and said, "But you have skyscrapers!" That struck me as a fitting response. Merely thinking about how long people have come to see this building baffled me. But to the kid who learned how to ride a bike in its shadow, this is just another building.

Often our final spot was Piazza Ariostea. Two minutes from our house and five from the city center, the Piazza had a massive stone pillar in the center of a small racetrack. The statue atop the pillar was of Ludovico Ariosto, a 15<sup>th</sup> century poet whose namesake lives on through the piazza. The racetrack was sunk into the ground below the road, creating natural, arena-like seating. Both the berms and the infield were



covered in grass and offered another place for us to sit and talk without thinking of the rich history that surrounded us. The piazza hosts *il Palio di Ferrara* every year, a competition between the districts of the city that includes both foot and horse racing. While the Palio in Siena is more renowned, the one in Ferrara is actually the oldest in the world, dating back to 1279. Ettore and his friends appreciated the tradition of the Palio. They were proud of their city and its accomplishments. It's easy to become desensitized to such stuff, though, when it is constantly around you. Much like the duomo's role in a night out, we frequented Piazza Ariostea more for its soft grass and close proximity to our neighborhood than its history. After a few months in the city even I became accustomed to taking it for granted as I lay on the grass and listened to Matteo's crude jokes.

## Chapter 9

Italy is, of course, among the most Catholic countries in the world. With Vatican City enclosed inside of Rome and over 80% of the Italian population practicing the religion, the influence of the Catholic Church is omnipresent in Italian life. I committed to a homestay in slight trepidation about this, not sure how I would be received by a religious family as a nonmember of the church. The topic was broached over one of our first dinners together.

There have been, from time to time in my life, uncomfortable conversations where I've felt the need to explain myself. There was that time in elementary school I was sent to the principal's office for ruining another kid's puzzle. In middle school, my parents caught me sneaking out late at night. During the high school years, meeting a girlfriend's father was always nerve-racking. I know the feeling of an increased heart rate and clammy palms, but nothing compares to prepping myself to explain my non-affiliation to the Catholic Church to the Malagù family in a second language. I stammered out an almost apologetic statement, finishing with, "But my grandma was at least Catholic," as if to say not every Battista had been a sinner. Elli seemed amused. "Filippo doesn't really ever go to church," she said nonchalantly while cutting her zucchini, "And I don't think Sam was religious. Was he Ettore?" Ettore shook his head, his mouth too full to comment. I let out a quick sigh, realizing my nerves had been much ado about nothing.

Elli continued, "We just thought you might be, since America is so religious." I take a deep breath and reach for the bottle of water in the center of the table, still smiling to myself- *wait, what? America really religious? What was she talking about?*

She noticed my expression turn to bemusement and continued. “We’re all religious here but you Americans take it to another level. You have the *crazy* religious folk. We see it on TV.” Filippo comes in with a timely comment in English: He has a knack for showing off what few English words he knows at the opportune times, this time saying, “Bible Belt!”

Most Italians I interacted with showed similar apathy about my religious affiliation. Despite the Church courtyard being the nightly meeting point for us, Ettore’s friends and I never discussed it. This was very symbolic of my relationship with Catholicism during my time in Italy. Its presence was always clear, but its impact never really reached me. Perhaps this was reflective of its lesser influence on the younger generation, perhaps it was merely a common courtesy shown to a visitor. Maybe their treatment of me had something to do with my Italian heritage or American upbringing and would have been different had I been an exchange student from, say, the Middle East. All I can say is that the impact of Catholicism on my time in Italy was muted and far less than I ever anticipated.

## Chapter 10

One of the most convenient things about a study abroad program is its organized itinerary. During my time in Italy I took as many trips to various cities in Italy as I could. At first, I felt a sort of resentment towards the scheduled trips that were a part of the study abroad program. Part of what attracted me to travel so much was the appeal of venturing away from the tourist traps and into the realities of the country. I must concede, though, that after our day trip to Verona in the late fall there was a sort of comfort in knowing that this program's coordinators had the occasional tourist event planned to ensure we discovered some of the headliners of the country. Venturing off of the "beaten path" is when traveling can sometimes limit our experiences in a country. Sure, I never wanted to be another tourist taking photographs in St. Mark's Square, but to avoid it entirely in some misguided attempt to purify my travels creates other problems.

The structure of the CIEE program was apparent almost immediately upon our group's arrival in Verona. We picked up a guide and drove through the town to a hill just outside of the city. From there, we had our first glimpse of the town. Like Ferrara with the Po, Verona was historically built upon the Adige River. The river that cut through the city and its unique architecture stood out immediately to me. All of the buildings were adorned with red brick rooftops and walls that glinted in the late morning sun. Over the chirping of birds in the trees that shaded us, our guide shared that the city was awarded World Heritage Site status for its urban structure and architecture. After returning to the city center, and wandering through its alleys, we

found ourselves seated at a restaurant inside Piazza delle Erbe (Market's Square) an hour later.

Other than the meals at the Malagù house, the lunch we ate was the best meal I had at that point in my stay. The first plate was prosciutto and cheese and the main course consisted of two types of pasta: a noodle dish with duck meat and rabbit tortellini. All of that was quite delicious. But what made this meal epic was the dessert. We all received individual chocolate cakes served with powdered sugar and a vanilla sauce. In the center? More chocolate.

I had never gotten high from food before. If you haven't, I really hope you get that opportunity one day. We were midway through our cakes when it hit everyone, myself included. We all started smiling, some of us giggled, and it took someone telling me to stop moaning before I even realized I had been making sound. Carla, a small Italian American from New Jersey, may have wept in joy. Words cannot describe how unreal the cake was.

So unreal, in fact, that I must divide our day trip to Verona into two, Gregorian Calendar-esque divisions: BC (Before Cake) and AD (After Delight). The reasons why are hard to explain. Was this the best chocolate cake I had ever tasted in my entire life? Maybe. Was it so amazing that it should have been the first dessert to ever leave me in my seat giggling? Certainly not. No, what got me high was the *experience*. That is, the combination of ambience, companionship, as well as the four courses of food and drink as the sun slowly crawled its way across the shadowed afternoon sky is what did us in.

That's the thing about this country. Every meal I have is an experience in so much more than culinary critique. Yes, the food is always up to par. But sitting at my

host family's table for an hour and a half to eat dinner is what the meal is really about. Understanding this was one of my first lessons in this country. I shiver to think about what my host parents would say if I told them my own mother ate meals standing up in the kitchen when I was a child. Or how I ate dinners while writing this travelogue alone at my cramped desk. Or that walking while eating is par for the course in America. In fact, I had made such a cardinal sin during my first week in Ferrara. I had purchased a baguette and cheese to eat quickly between classes. I planned on taking my haul from the grocery store back to the entrance hall of our school building before diving in but I just couldn't make it. I dug into the bread and started to munch on it. Much to my chagrin, I drew the glares of every man, woman, and child in the street as I ducked around the corner toward our CIEE building.

This shines a fascinating light on a general difference in American and Italian lifestyles. American culture seems to be about living to work whereas Italian culture is about working to live. The American Dream pushes finding a career, working hard, climbing the professional ladder, and reaping the rewards of life that come with success. Eating lunch at a desk is just a necessary workplace sacrifice. Working late hours is to get ahead and crawl closer to a promotion.

The Italian lifestyle flips this on its head. Even in northern cities such as Milan and Torino, where the business sector drives the job market, there are certain things that take precedence over work. Lunch almost always means heading home and spending an hour with family. While not as pronounced as the Spanish Siesta, both of my host parents would lie down for a brief nap each day before returning to their store in the late afternoon. This was hardly a tradition unique to the Malagù household. Most of the

Ferrara's shops closed for the lunch hour before the pace slowly returned to normal in the late afternoon and evening. Almost all shops and businesses remained closed on Sundays. There were certainly times when this frustrated me, as I was used to a country in which I could head out at any time to purchase any item from any store but it is now one of the attributes of Italian life that I miss the most. It spurred me to rebalance the priorities in my life.

Anyway, after the orgasm that was that volcano cake, we had a couple of hours to cruise around Verona during the AD era. Those of us who hadn't been rendered immobile by lunch climbed to the top of the bell tower, the highest point in the city, and took more photos of the rustic city and its hills. The small group that I was with checked out the market again and meandered (meandered may overstate our pace) over to Juliet's house. Verona is the setting of *Romeo and Juliet*. Ironically enough, according to our guide, Shakespeare never actually visited the city. Still, "La casa di Giulietta" is the main tourist attraction the city has to offer. In the courtyard is a statue of Juliet that is said to bring good luck to those who touch her breasts. Needless to say, I copped a feel.

After the tourist mess that was Juliet's house we headed over to our final destination, the miniature Coliseum at the center of town. This one was built before that "other one in Rome," as our tour guide put it, and may have behaved as a model for the more famous one's construction. From there, we sat in a stupor on the steps of the Coliseum and absorbed the low afternoon light before the bus swept by to pick us up.

## Chapter 11

Two fellow American girls, Haley and Carla, invited me to take a day trip to Venice a week later. We bought tickets for an 8:43am train on Saturday morning and agreed to meet in the city center at 8:15. This gave us plenty of time to ride our bikes to the train station and get seats on the train. Well, I rolled in at 8:19 because I had fully embraced the Italian lifestyle of tardiness at this juncture in my trip. Haley had not and was waiting for me. Carla was nowhere to be seen. By American standards, I had a reputation as a late arriver and was almost always the last to arrive. I had carefully calculated that a four-minute delay would not risk us making the train. Any more, though, could, and so the fact that Carla had yet to arrive caught me off guard.

Carla has Italian heritage too but is far more Italian culturally than I could ever claim. She grew up in New Jersey with her Italian-born mother and spent her summers as a child with relatives in Bari, a southern Italian city on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. She grew up speaking Italian and really carried herself as a Southern Italian. Even Ettore remarked upon meeting her how her idiosyncrasies and accent were “pretty much from Bari.” As I learned quite quickly from my Northern friends, the South is in many ways an exaggerated version of the North. If the North is friendly and welcoming, the South is downright warm and hospitable. If Northerners use their hands to speak, Southern Italians can’t communicate without them. And when the Northerner is five minutes late, the Southerner hasn’t even left home. My own upbringing reflects some of these surviving traits from previous generations.



My Italian side of the family has always been late for things and I instinctively use my hands to talk without having any real plan for how to use them. Ettore told me often how I looked like someone directing traffic when I spoke.

Well, if I, as a 4th generation Italian-American showed up 4 minutes late, you can imagine what to expect from the real Southern Italian. I nodded to Haley as I arrived. She was a student at the University of Pittsburgh and a year older than everyone else in the study abroad group. This was fitting because almost immediately we adopted her as the motherly figure of the group. She was caring but blunt and honest. I could tell as I dismounted the Green Machine that she was a bit perturbed by my tardiness so I decided to keep mum until Carla arrived. We straddled our bikes in silence for the next few minutes.

8:23...8:25...8:28. "Should I call her?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah, call her." So I did. No answer. We were short on time to wait so I looked at Haley for a decision. She just shook her head, as if to say she'd rather strangle Carla when she arrived than rush to make the train on time. "I don't know where she is. I talked with her on the phone at 8 and she said she was about to leave," Haley said with a furrowed brow.

8:32...8:34...8:36. Still no Carla. I tried to call once more. This time there was an answer and the voice on the line sounded panicked and rushed.

"Yeah...I'm...coming...now." I chuckled and hung up. At this point, I began to plan how I was going to tell her that she needed to buy my next ticket. At 8:40 a blur of a bicycle flew into the city center and headed towards us. Instead of stopping, Carla just waved her arm around like a third base coach does to send a runner home. Haley and I

mounted our bikes and quickly tried to catch up to her. I had accepted defeat and began the transition into an amused state. I humored Carla's will by keeping pace with her but had no doubt that we would not make the train. I looked at my phone to see it was 8:43. Yup, departure time. Up ahead, Carla paid no mind to the time. Instead, she stood into a sprinting position cyclists do down the home stretch of the Tour de France and yelled something over her shoulder at us.

The problem, though, was that in her panic all Haley and I heard was an incoherent jumble. To this day I have no idea what she was trying to say. She kept it up, though, all the while swerving through pedestrians with each glance forward. Haley looked at me and began laughing.. We were both thinking the same thing. *Is this girl really doing this? How can she think we're going to make it?*

It was 8:44 when we screeched to a stop at the station and locked our bikes. Carla ran ahead into the station at 8:45. Haley and I jogged in after her to provide moral support. *Maybe we'll see the caboose down the tracks.*

We came out on Track 1. I looked up at the board that had updated train times. What luck! Our train's departure had been pushed back to 8:48 and was set to leave from Track 3. All we had to do was take the tunnel under tracks 1 and 2. Wow. *We actually did make it.* One Italian's tardiness saved another's. I grinned at Haley while Carla prepared to prove just how crazy she was. She turns and says her first words of the day that I can actually understand: "Let's go. We have to jump the tracks!"

"What? Are you crazy?! The train's been delayed." She didn't hear and clearly hadn't bothered to look at the board. "The train's still there!" She said impatiently, "We do it in Bari all the time. We have to go now though!" That was it. For both Haley and

me, that was our “Aha” moment where we realized that, yes, Southern Italians may, in fact, be caricatures of the “normal” Italian. Haley grabbed Carla, led her to the tunnel, and finally convinced her that the stairs were the proper course of action.

## Chapter 12

Italian cuisine is far more specialized from region to region than anyone would suspect whose connection with the country is their local Olive Garden. Each region produces different products and created signature dishes over the years. The Emilia-Romagna region is arguably near the top when it comes to its cuisine. Most regions in Italy have dishes or products that are unique to their region, but a cursory glance at what we Americans consider staples of Italian food has much in common with this region. Parmigiano-Reggiano, balsamic vinegar, and prosciutto all hail from Emilia Romagna. What American culture refers to as *Spaghetti Bolognese* is actually a bastardization of ragù, the meat sauce of the region. What makes ragù so special, Elli explained to me one night when I prodded her for details, is that everyone in the region has a different recipe. Some have more meat while others are saucier. Ingredients differ, as do the sizes of their portions. During my time with the family, Elli would make her ragù once a month and freeze the extra in smaller containers that she would defrost periodically.

Everyday for lunch, Elli would make some pasta dish, often with this homemade ragù. Every single day. And I never got sick of it. Her sauce was a red one with sizable chopped onions and tomatoes mixed with crumbled pork and seasoned with a mystery medley of spices. I asked her how much of everything she put in and she just winked at me and shrugged her shoulders.

That's how our relationship in the kitchen worked. I'd fawn over her with a pen and pad in hand while she cooked, asking her for each recipe. She'd always do her best to share it with me, showing me every step in great detail. We made a great deal of progress over the months. To this day I consider her tutoring a major part of my kitchen

repertoire. If I operate on an undergraduate level in the kitchen, Elli's completed her PhD. She'd eyeball how much water to boil, pinch unspecified amounts of spices, and rarely weigh or measure an ingredient before using a precise amount. At that point, I'd always stop her to ask how much of said ingredient she had used. Without fail she'd look at me as if I were asking for the meaning of life. "I don't know how to answer that, Beau. Just, as much as it want. You just...know."

It's this existential relationship between chef and cuisine that balances Italian cooking between science and art. There are the measurements and ingredients lists and directions – and Elli always gave me a lot of information regarding each - but there always seemed to be an intangible contribution. Where I lacked such magic, my host mother had it in spades.

There are two dishes unique to Ferrara that stand out from other cities in Emilia Romagna and the country as a whole. One is *cappellacci di zucca*, a ravioli-like pasta stuffed with pumpkin and served with one of two sauces: melted butter and sage or a red sausage sauce. To be completely honest, I didn't like it at first. The sweetness of the pumpkin just clashed with the savory sausage while the butter and sage combination had similarly conflicting flavors. But every occasion on which I ate it during my time in Ferrara was met with more positive results, until I finally pronounced it a fabulous dish for the very same reasons I initially disliked it.

Another Ferrarese staple that I was equally hesitant to warm up to was *La coppia ferrarese*, the local bread. First baked in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *La coppia* resembles an X in form with twisted legs spiraling out from a small, square center. The center has some soft bread to it while the rest is dry enough to crumble and cracks when pinched.

It was largely a disappointment for me the first time it was served to me at a CIEE dinner, as my expectation was that I would be showered with thick, soft bread at every Italian table. Since it was so opposite of what I had assumed I would get from European bread, my opinion of it was far from positive. In fact, I was so suspicious of conspiracy that I asked my host family one night at dinner whether they even liked the bread at all. They looked at me as if I had insulted a family member, so I quickly backtracked in an attempt to play it off as a joke.

What changed my opinion of *La coppia* was a simple change of expectations. Once I stopped expecting it to fill the traditional role of bread and instead valued it as a course on its own, I began to appreciate it for what it really was. It was filling and fresh-smelling and operated like a warm cracker. It went particularly well with Nutella, something that my host family of course introduced me to. Given enough time, both the Ferrarese bread and pumpkin pasta grew on me and offered a more unorthodox taste of the Emilia-Romagna cuisine of which I had grown so fond.

## Chapter 13

As is the case in our own country, Northern and Southern Italy are in many respects separate worlds. The difference in culture, language, and economy are often at the forefront of public discourse. Southern Italy has historically been more agricultural while the North has been more industrial. Over the years, this difference in economic structure has led to a major economic gap between the North and South, with the South generally having a lower standard of living. Incidentally, most American-Italians trace their lineage back to the southern provinces, as the prospects for a better life in America were greater for southern Italians during the great wave of migration at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, the philosophical debate over how much public funding should head south to boost a still struggling infrastructure is the main crux in Italian politics. Many negative stereotypes are attached to Southern Italy, including lethargic work ethic and corrupt morality. Yet even the most cynical of Northern Italians readily admit that Southerners are hospitable to a fault and take care of their own.

As an Italian American who traces his family back to Napoli and Bari, I was beyond excited when Carla invited a few of us to visit her grandmother in Cassano, a small town twenty minutes from Bari. So we packed our bags and flew to Bari for a weekend to experience the “Crazy South” of which we had heard so much. Chris, a Mexican-American from Arizona who played in a Mariachi band back home, and Challis, a girl whom I had met in Oregon in an early Italian class, were the other invitees. The trip was pitched as an opportunity to meet some of Carla’s family and see

a rural southern town. But the real headliner was the food. Carla had spent months telling us that Ferrarese food just couldn't hold a candle to Pugliese food.

Chris and I had bonded early after his arrival in the spring term over our shared passion for food. He had a similarly masochistic tendency to eat everything in sight and we were both proud to say we had finished every course served to us during our time in Italy. Our thinking was simple: the food is amazing and we would be remiss if we didn't take full advantage of the opportunity to gorge ourselves with superior cuisine. Carla claimed each time we finished a meal in Ferrara that the South would eventually conquer us, and that her grandmother viewed an empty plate as a request for seconds. So with that, the stage was set.

Carla's Uncle Pino picked us up at the airport at 9am and took us straight home. Carla's Nonna owned an apartment building with four floors. She lived on the first, the second was occupied by one of her sons, his wife Maria and their two kids, the third was empty and the fourth was where Uncle Pino lives. Pino exuded cool. He looked a little like George Clooney, with rugged features and salt and pepper hair and carried himself in a similarly charismatic way. He never spoke much during the weekend we visited, but just had an aura about him and always said something impressive when he did speak. Carla's uncle and one of her cousins on the second floor were out of town during our visit, but her aunt and other cousin were home. They stomped down the stairs to grandmother's house for every meal during our four day stay.

This is what I mean when I say the South takes everything Italian about the North and magnifies it. If the whole family lives on the same block in Ferrara, they live in the same building in Cassano. If a Northern family makes dinner with the extended



family a weekly occurrence, it happens twice a day in the South. And if a Northern grandmother is friendly and outgoing to visitors, a southern grandmother only stops short of officially filing adoption papers. Nonna, as she told us to call her the moment we met her, was something else. She was short and stocky, a figure that had been honed through years of a carefully crafted diet. She had short, curly gray hair and wore thick glasses. She was 70 years old but moved like 50, running out from the kitchen to hug her granddaughter the moment she heard the front door open.

My grandmother was 82 when I was born and lived to be 101 so I never knew her in middle age, but I'll be damned if I didn't spend that weekend in Cassano with her. Carla's nonna was caring, kind and witty in ways that reminded me of my own grandma; but she could flip a switch and command respect instantly. An amazing cook, Nonna forced food onto our plates, and even played cards in a sketchy way that made me suspicious that she was pulling one over on us (I'll never forget the time my grandma nonchalantly broke the most basic of rules in Checkers against me, then claimed the rules of the game must have changed over the years). Most of all though, the similarities in appearance between Carla's grandmother and my own were uncanny: similar glasses, hair, height, body shape, and face. Each possessed a surprising amount of agility for their age. The confidence of an old Italian woman as matriarch of a house is something to behold, and watching Carla's grandmother reminded me so much of my own. On more than one occasion I caught myself just watching her with a smile on my face.

## Chapter 14

The trip, as I've said before, was about the food and Nonna set the tone right away. After first hugs, she summoned us into the dining room before ducking into the kitchen. She returned moments later with a pizza-sized focaccia in each hand and set them on the table. At 10am. Italians in both the north and south rarely eat large breakfasts; a standard day calls for a cup of coffee and a cookie before noon. Carla smirked at Chris and I as we dig in. *Like this is going to stop us?*

We spent the late morning lounging about and walking outside. Nonna showed us her garden, where she grew an assortment of fruit trees and vegetables. We ate lunch in the early afternoon. Nonna somehow found time to make *Pasta al forno*. *Pasta al forno* is a casserole with a tomato sauce and horse meat in it. I'd never eaten horse before and had never really thought about doing it, but as they say, *When in Rome...* Challis was slightly more hesitant, having grown up riding horses, but she too finished a serving. The meat was tender and the pasta cooked to perfection. Nonna served with the pasta fresh mozzarella cheese and Pugliese bread. As famous as *La coppia* is as a regional bread, Pugliese bread is renowned in its own right. It is nothing short of perfect for a sauce based cuisine like the ones in Cassano with its crunchy outer shell and soft, spongy core. At one point during the meal, Chris nudged me with a pretty shocked look on his face and mumbled under his breath, "I think I just drooled on my plate. I can't control it, man. This is too good." While my salivary glands never left my control, I did have to make a conscious effort to not moan as I did in Verona.

For dinner we had *bruschetta*. Not your run-of-the-mill appetizer *bruschetta*, though. No, instead of crackers with melted cheese, we constructed our own from thick

Pugliese bread, fresh tomatoes and ground garlic from Nonna's garden, and homemade olive oil (Nonna owned several plots of olive trees in Cassano). This was supplemented with baked potatoes cooked in an open fire, more fresh mozzarella with salami and fruit. While every component of the meal deserves its own song in lore, the mozzarella was on another level. Many food critics cite mozzarella cheese from Southern Italy as the best in the world. I now count myself among that crowd. It's not that it brings any new flavors to the table that aren't present in other mozzarellas, but each flavor is magnified tenfold and the texture and consistency is somehow both creamy and solid.

Dinnertime in Ferrara was typically around 8pm. In Cassano, we sat to eat at 930 each night and never got up before 11. The pace of the meal was slow and a fire was burning throughout. Because of the late dinner, Chris and I figured we'd have until noon the following day to recover.

Instead, we were awoken by the smell of fresh croissants and coffee on Friday morning at 8:30. Obviously, we couldn't let a simple breakfast get in the way of our quest to eat our way to Nonna's heart. And so we ate.

Lunch was *pasta alla norma* - a Sicilian pasta with eggplant, served with more fresh cheeses. Chris and I cleaned our plates and leaned back in our chairs lethargically, satisfied with the work we had done. Nonna, however, was not. She saw us glance at the pasta and took that as her cue to serve more, snatching our plates and reloading them before we could protest. "You look hungry," she said with a grin as she returned them to us. For the first time since I had met him, I saw concern in Chris's eyes, a concern that I too shared. *What if we don't finish?*

We somehow managed to complete the meal for a second time and once more leaned back in our seats in ill fated attempts to relieve pressure on our stomachs. We were in a daze as we saw Nonna emerge from the kitchen with hot apple strudel. We each flashed bewildered looks at each other before regrouping and pleading with Nonna to give us small slices, knowing that any outright rejection would be ignored. She smiled, assured us not to worry, then cut what even American serving sizes considers a double portion for each of us. We somehow managed to finish.

## Chapter 15

In addition to hearing we'd eat more than ever before in our lives, Chris and I were specifically told to prepare for the *panzarotti* (mini calzones) night. Most eat between two and five. Apparently the last American to visit ate 13. We heard it from Carla on the train. We heard it from Carla's sister when we had met her earlier in the year. We heard it from Carla's nonna, uncle, and aunt at separate times during our first day and a half in Cassano. This man was a legend. No matter. Chris and I had dreams of his throne.

Friday night was *Panzarotti* Night. Chris and I shared a nervous excitement akin to boxers in the hours before a championship bout. In the evening we did a little walk through town with Carla and Challis to visit Carla's great aunts. At one point along our walk down the highway I sneezed. It was a loud sneeze but nothing egregious. "Salute!" came a loud voice over the sound of cars. This caught us off guard. It wasn't any of us. We looked into the road just in time to see an old man leaning out his window waving to us as he sped by. Another example of unsuspecting hospitality in Southern Italy.

We showed up at each house unexpected. Yet both houses somehow had food and coffee ready and waiting. These aunts and uncles showed no regard for our quest for *Panzarotti* glory, demanding we take either food or drink at each stop. We ate fresh muffins and *torrone* while sipping soda at house #1. "Zio Mini," as Carla liked to call him because his miniature size, made the *torrone*. *Torrone* is a sugary-sweet nougat dessert made with some form of nut, most typically almonds. Moments after we tried them Challis concluded that they were yet another family-perfected recipe that reached the pinnacle of its existence after years of careful refinement. Wrong. Zio Mini casually

mentioned how he hadn't baked in decades but was bored the week before so he made them as an experiment.

After leaving Zio Mini's, we visited Carla's other great aunt, Isa, and her husband, Michele, who forced mixed nuts and caramelized figs down our gullets. The worst thing about the eating was, as we were doing it we knew it was wrong and that it would cost us valuable stomach space for the looming heavyweight bout, but we couldn't stop because neither the quality of food nor expectations from our hosts would allow for it.

Finally, we headed home to help prepare the *panzarotti* and prepare for dinner. Chris and I had our strategy set: avoid the cheeses, meats, and other delicious distractions that line the table, don't drink too much of the homemade wine, and eat slowly. And above all else, avoid direct eye contact with Nonna anytime she is within reaching distance of our plate.

As we sat down Nonna, who was placed beside me, asked if I wanted cheese. I hesitated, knowing that "No" was not a realistic answer, settle on saying "a little," and watch in horror as she proceeds to cut pocket dictionary sized slab of fresh cheese and drop it on my plate. To be fair, it was the best cheese of the weekend. To be unfair, I noticed the all too familiar feeling of fullness creep over me and knew 13 mini calzones was already out of grasp. We settled in for an amazing meal (Chris and I ended up polishing off 13 *panzarotti combined*, much to our own chagrin), and finished the meal with more fruit and strudel.

For breakfast the next day, Nonna prepared for us *Uova battuta* (coffee with whipped egg yolk and sugar) with more fresh cheeses. Lunch was a pasta broth, served with salad, some meat, and fried ricotta with sugar.

Nonna wanted to send us home with an extravagant final dinner. On the menu: the rest of the *panzarotti* and *alti in bocca* (Literal translation is “jumps in mouth”): bite sized pieces of horsemeat speared with toothpicks and drowned in tomato sauce. We sat down for the first time with only five at the table: the four Americans and Nonna. Challis, having hoped that the earlier horse meal was to be her only foray into equestrian cuisine, grimaced a little at the meat on her plate, but gritted her teeth anyway. Suddenly, Nonna gasps. She starts talking frantically in a Pugliese dialect that only Carla understands and waving her arms around. Her eyes darted to the ground, then to the table, then to the kitchen. We understood enough of the dialect to piece together the crisis:

*Leave tomorrow...morning...no focaccia left... what will you eat on the train?  
...Oh god!*

Then she hopped up spryly, said, “You guys eat,” and ran out of the room. She ignored our pleas to return to the table as she buttoned up her jacket and hurried out the door to the market.

It wasn't that we didn't have food for the trip. We did. In fact, *we already had an entire suitcase filled with a king's ransom of homemade goodies* sitting at the edge of the table. Literally the only thing that wasn't in that suitcase was the focaccia. And Nonna couldn't bear to send us off without fresh focaccia.

So the four of us were left alone for the first time on the weekend. “Is this real?” Chris said. “Did she actually just leave?”

“Yeah,” Carla responded, “There was no use arguing with her. There’s no way she lets us leave without focaccia.”

To be polite we chose to not eat until her return...except for a few pieces might have “jumped in our mouths” during the wait. Nonna came back twenty minutes later, we ate the still warm meal and were at the end of what looks like our weekend marathon of food when Carla’s grandmother remembered the flank steaks of horsemeat that she hadn’t cooked. At that point in the weekend, we had spent enough time around Nonna to know that her question to us regarding whether we’d like to eat them really wasn’t a question at all. Instead of answering, I reached to loosen my belt. No one else responded either, but it never really mattered. Nonna was already in the kitchen before she had finished the question.

Ten minutes later the steaks were on our plates. Nonna announces, “Povero cavallino” (Poor baby horse). We all immediately shot looks at Challis for her reaction. There was a look of horror on her face as her eyes bulged. Chris and I tried unsuccessfully to stifle laughs. This sparks laughs from Nonna, Carla, and Challis. It took a good minute for everyone to compose themselves.

Challis, struggling desperately to justify her decision to eat her favorite animal to herself, leaned towards Nonna for clarification: “When you say “cavallino”, do you mean ‘baby’ or just ‘young?’” Nonna responded without pause, “Both,” which reignited the laughter, this time with even more hardiness. Everyone was laughing hysterically (Challis ins what may be only be described as a different form of hysteria). Nonna and I



were cracking up, throwing our heads back, and glancing at one another every few seconds. We each laughed so hard we'd throw our heads back in sync, chuckle there for a moment, then compose ourselves and glance at each other only to realize that the other had done exactly the same. This, in turn, only forced us to throw our heads back once more. This time, the laughter didn't die down for a more than a minute. A fine last memory with the woman who so strongly reminded me of my own grandmother.

The next morning was uneventful. We said our goodbyes and each threw a bag of food over our shoulders as we boarded the train back to Ferrara. It took the four of us working tirelessly over our final week in Ferrara to finish the supplies Nonna had sent with us.

## Chapter 16

The roles and differences of regional dialects are somewhat foreign to Americans. Yes, New Yorkers seem confused with where to put R's, Southerners have their own unique drawl, and West Coasters speak a little more slowly, but at the end of the day, those are minor differences in pronunciation and speech patterns. Other than the few instances where different words are actually used depending on the region ("Pass the Pop/Coke/Soda") we Americans all speak the same English. There are two primary reasons for this: 1) the presence of English on our continent only dates a few centuries, meaning that too little time has passed for regional dialects to truly take on forms of their own; and 2) the unification of our country from a very early date has prevented the sort of regional isolation that is necessary for dialects to develop.

Enter the Italian peninsula. It fits both of our prerequisites, as the Latin language was given centuries to evolve in isolated regions after the fall of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, extended periods of foreign domination introduced new linguistic groups into the regions, sparking even more variation. This splintering of the language meant that *Il Risorgimento* in 1861 essentially unified a peninsula that consisted of diverse cultures and even more distinct languages.

Everywhere had a different language. For example, Bologna and Ferrara, despite being less than 30 miles apart, have different dialects. So after unifying the country, the next step was to choose an official language. Essentially, they chose the Florentine dialect, which is now known as standard Italian. But the story of dialects doesn't die with the standardization of Italian. Dialects don't even really start to die out at all until

the 20th Century, when education became more widespread and “Standard Italian” was more rigidly used in the schools. Fast forward to modern Italy. The younger generation is more and more often only learning standard Italian and these dialects are slowly being forgotten.

While it’s similar everywhere, this process is moving a bit more slowly in the South. So the trip to Cassano was especially fun because we were able to listen to the occasional conversation between locals in their dialect, something that allowed me to notice a few of the elements that southern dialects seem to share. This is another nuance to the Italian dialect discussion. Each dialect is in a way a roadmap to a region’s history. Siciliano is heavily influenced by Spanish, in no small part because the Island was under Spanish rule for over three centuries. Ferrara’s dialect, on the other hand, is more reflective of the French control the region was under for some time.

The biggest thing that I noticed in the South was the tendency for the older generation to not finish words, even when speaking standard Italian. Instead of saying, “ho mangiato,” I’d hear, “Ho mangiat.” Conosci (COE-NOE-SHEE) was just conosh (COE-NOE-SH). And Capisci (CAH-PEE-SHEE) turned into Capeesh (CA-PEESH). Hmm, ‘Capeesh,’ the cliché line of every American Mafia movie maybe ever.

These revelations shed light onto my own childhood. According to my Dad, my grandmother and her sisters knew Italian and would speak it from time to time when they didn’t want their children to understand what they were talking about. And while I never saw her converse with her sisters, the way she’d say some Italian words while I was growing up just didn’t seem right for someone who was supposed to know the language. She’d say ‘spaghatt’ instead of ‘spaghetti’ and ‘mozzarell’ instead of

‘mozzarella.’ I just couldn’t understand how anyone could know a language and yet not finish the words. My trip to Cassano made sense of this as my grandmother’s relatives were from Southern Italy and had migrated to New York before the “Standard Italian” had become widespread and required.

## Chapter 17

We left for Cassano with the mindset that it would be just another chapter in an endless adventure. We returned to the reality that our time in the country was rapidly coming to a close. After I recovered from the food coma that Nonna had been so satisfied to put me in, I realized I had but a week left in Ferrara.

Often at the end of long journeys comes a unique feeling that is both warm nostalgia and desperate panic and my final week in Ferrara was no different. I embraced each moment by doing what had become so *normal* for me: I rode my bike from gelateria to gelateria with friends, basked in the sun at Piazza Ariostea, and continued to scrawl cooking tips from Elli into a small notebook. I marked each moment in my mind as the last of its kind and tried to wring every last ounce of joy from what had become second nature to me. Yet no matter how much I packed into each day, I couldn't help but feel time slipping through my fingers. I wondered how I hadn't somehow managed to do more.

Moving out of state for college had a temporary feel to it. I could always go home for summer breaks. My friends that had also left Nevada were in most cases a short flight away if we ever chose to visit one another. And there were enough cultural similarities between my childhood town and my college city that it never felt like I had left all that much behind.

But leaving Ferrara for the final time felt so much more permanent. *When would I be back again? When would I see these friends again? When would I speak this language with this sort of frequency again?* There would be no short flight back. There were hardly enough cultural similarities to feel that I could recapture the elements of

Italy I so thoroughly enjoyed upon my return to the States. And there was no telling where or how my relationships with these friends would evolve in the coming years.

So it was with a heavy heart that I sat down for my final meal with the Malagù family. Elli had asked me what I wanted for my last meal and I said the only thing that felt right: *le lasagne*. What better way to finish my amazing time with this family than to return to the first meal we shared together? Back before I even knew where to put my fork when I finished. Before I knew the milk content of a *latte bianco*. Before I understood just how lucky I was to have found Ferrara.

The meal was predictably fantastic. There would be no awkward request for seconds this time; I reached out eagerly myself. There would be no nervous conversation; we laughed over early moments of that awkward American who had stumbled into their house ten months earlier. And there would be no concern of the coming months. We were just a family sharing one last meal together.

After cleaning up, I decided to stay in to watch TV with Elli and Filippo. I had already said my goodbyes to friends and the city, and decided I'd rather eke out another moment with my host-parents. Elli and Filippo always watched a movie on TV after dinner and that night's cinema experience was *Ocean's Eleven*, starring George Clooney. George Clooney might somehow be even more famous in Italy than he is in America. In fact, Francesco Pannofino, an actor in his own right, is mainly known by Italians as the voice of George Clooney in translated films. "Aww. Gee-or-ge..." Elli said seductively when Clooney's character first showed up on screen, to which Filippo looked at me and rolled his eyes. I laughed, as I had done so often at the interactions between Elli and Filippo.

## Chapter 18

Elli woke me early the next morning, June 15<sup>th</sup>. I was to catch my last train from Ferrara to Venice at 4:30am. From there I would take a shuttle from the train station in Venice to the international airport just in time for my 9:30am flight.

I ate a quick cookie, as had become standard practice upon rising, brushed my teeth, and stumbled into the kitchen to find Ettore waiting to bid adieu. After spending such a long time with someone who had become at once a friend, roommate, and brother, I wasn't quite sure what to say. That and my general grogginess led to, "See you in America." He liked that, hugged me, and then sleepily stumbled out the room as he returned to bed. Filippo and Elli were waiting at the car with my suitcase.

The ride to the train station was brief and serene. We didn't say much as I looked out the window in the back seat as the golden streetlamps passed by my droopy eyes. Slipping out in the middle of a sleepy night without seeing the charm of a busy market or hearing the bell of a bike made it easier. Perhaps I would have felt the urge to miss the train intentionally had I seen a farmer's market or a young couple riding a bike in two.

Elli and Filippo helped me board the train and gave me final, drawn-out hugs before the conductor made the departure announcement. I stood by the train door and smiled at them as the train started to pull away. They smiled back and waved excitedly. As their figures became smaller and smaller in the window, I realized that for the first time in my life I was saying goodbye to family without any idea of when I would see them again.

I had planned my spending during the final week so that I would arrive in Venice with as few Euros as possible and surprised even myself with my efficiency. I hopped off the train in the City of Water without a penny in European currency. The only problem was that I hadn't included in my projected budget the cost of the shuttle to the airport.

I realized my blunder when I arrived to a waiting bus driver with one hand open and a hole-punch in the other. A quick conversation revealed just how dire my situation was: tickets cost €5, the nearest ATM was a five minute walk, the shuttle left in three, and the next departure wasn't for another half an hour. That's when panic set in. My eyes grew big, my hands clammy, and I was at a sudden loss for words. I literally needed to be on this bus if I was going to make my flight.

I explained my dilemma as succinctly as I could. The man frowned down at me with dark black eyes, then gazed down the side of the bus while he scratched the side of his bearded face. He looked in the other direction. He then paused for a second, took half a step to his left, and half nodded towards the bus, all without looking at me. I exhaled for the first time in a minute, said, "Grazie mille" multiple times, and lumbered up the stairs with my suitcase in hand and one last story of good fortune in mind.

If travel is an ongoing negotiation between similarity and difference, then life is no different. We organize our world around these lines and create polarizing differences in our societies. Differences in religion. Differences in sexuality. Differences in political party. Differences in geography. So much of the current strife in the world is because these differences are emphasized on a daily basis. Yet every so often similarity plays its part. In this instance, maybe it was the language I shared with this bus driver. Maybe he



had seen my Italian surname when I showed him my passport. Maybe he appreciated that I used the formal tense to show him respect. Or maybe he just felt compassion for a fellow human, a kid with long hair and a desperate look in his eyes. Whatever it was, I had nothing to offer this bus driver and he had everything to offer me. He chose to lend a helping hand when doing the complete opposite was what he had been trained to do.

Interactions like this during my time in Italy reignited the human spirit in me. I have become quite a hardened cynic in my short lifetime. What was once the outlook of an optimistic child has given way shockingly quickly to a pessimistic adult. And yet each smile I received from a stranger in the streets of Ferrara, each “Bless You” that was sent my way in Cassano, and each grin a barman gave me over a cup of milk reminded me that compassion and kindness are innate human traits.

That’s why I love travel. That’s why I cherish my time in Italy. Because it reminded me that even in the furthest corners of the globe, there will always be enough similarity in human spirit to transcend whatever perceived differences separate one of us from another.

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