

Walking On Bones

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I come to Italy with more sweaters than reservations, relying on the guidebook's advice that most of my three months will be spent in the chilled rain. It doesn't rain until late October, though, and so I spend everything except the last month sweating, cramped in tiny museum hallways and trying not to accidentally violate someone's person. For a while, it is so hot that I entertain the idea of chopping off all of my long hair—it clumps to my neck in damp, itchy knots—but the only thing worse than the heat is the persistence of the mosquito armies. My arms are battlefields covered in red mounds.

Italy doesn't speak to me for a long time, really. Sometimes I try talking to it, but the silence always makes me timid. Even when it's the right words, the right pronunciation, the right *intention*, nothing gets through except the hopelessness. It's a "point and smile" system, like a child, and then when it finally responds all I catch is a sense of laughter.

The taxi fee from the airport to the *pensione* is insane. My first impression about Florence is that it's small, like a labyrinth, and that the cab drivers refuse to be tipped.

I drag my large suitcase and laptop bag up the steps into the tiny, shoebox-size elevator two stories below the *pensione*. The woman who owns the *pensione* is motherly, stooped and old, and her husband sleeps in the lounge on the sofa in the afternoons and leaves the welcome desk empty.

The room has windows with shutters that I keep locked, mostly to keep the bugs out, and two small beds. The shower is a small glass cubicle in the corner. I shower in the dark, grateful after several hours of sleeping fitfully on airplanes, and then sleep more in the bed.

When I wake up, I go outside into the meandering streets with their high, built-up stories of stores. Everything is built tall in Florence; there's no more room for anything to grow wider. Outside the city walls there are hills rising sharply upwards, a sea of green trees and the occasional medieval tower crumbling into the earth. So the city itself just rises over the Arnos, colorful and patched buildings from each new age stacked on each other, tiny streets clogged with humidity. Everything is cobblestone, small space, and dirt. The air is stifled, cramped.

I find a small grocery shop and buy the first things that look familiar. The plums are juicy and large, organic, and the bag of chocolate chip cookies is desperately familiar and somehow grounding. I don't even like chocolate chip cookies.

The cashier chases me into the street, babbling Italian, and gives me my change.

I spend the next four hours lost, trying to find the *pensione*. By the time I get back, it's dark, I'm exhausted, and I know half of Florence like the back of my hand. The plums are sour, the best plums I've ever had, and even though I can hear the loud, bawdy singing outside my window every evening until early morning, I still sleep like the dead that the country packs beneath itself.

My roommate Julia comes the next day, toting a large duffel bag and a long skirt. She has very bright eyes. A man had stolen her other bag and now she's lost all her identification, cash, and a handful of other important items. Arrangements are immediately made with the professors, government, and home.

In Italy, they tell you to watch out for the gypsies. They sit on the streets in mid-traffic, staring hollowly, signs in Italian or English attached to their shirts. Some of them get on their knees and put their face to the ground, bowing, for hours at a time. I spend an afternoon once watching a girl like this—the 50 euro change piles in her tin can and she never smiles. Some of them are missing limbs; no feet, no hands, no right leg, no ear, or ridged scars dancing halfway across their face. In Rome, a woman opens her shawl over her head and cries bitterly, a pulpy mass of blood where her scalp should be. The people waiting in line to see the Vatican don't give her any money. Also in Rome, a little girl eating off of a paper plate smiles up at me with all her teeth missing. Her mother points to the gaping mouth and accuses me of being godless.

The tricks are easy to remember. Keep the bag away from the street, less the scooters sweep by and it's grabbed. Keep it in front of you. If someone stops you, saying there's something on your bag or jacket, do not let them wipe it off—they'll take it for compensation for their troubles in doing so.

I'm never robbed. It's because, someone tells me later, I look like an Italian sometimes when I run down the street. I'm never looking at my surroundings. To everyone else, I am hard as stone.

A meal in Italy is absolutely amazing. In my host family, a woman I call only *senora* cooks virtual feasts every night for dinner—bread fried with olive oil, a plate of pasta that could serve six, cooked tender meats with *finochi* or some other vegetable and potato, and to top it off, a beautifully tossed salad with vinegar oil and fresh tomatoes. The tomatoes are to die for in Italy. The salad is always last, in order to aid digestion and promote good health. To Italians, food is good if it aids in digestion.

Then, there is the necessary desert. Gelato, creamy and thick, or maybe apple or chocolate cake. Fruit from the bowl if we'd like it, and fruit is always ripe and juicy in Italy. Often I skip lunch completely in preparation for dinner. The fried bread with grapes and glaze, the fruit tarts, the tiramisu, the kebobs, the pig's stomach sandwiches, the gorgonzola pizza thick with ham and pineapple that is called, affectionately, the Leonardo Da Vinci! Italians eat well, they eat mightily, they eat splendidly. A glass of wine with each meal, red being the house favorite, cheaper than the soda which would cost three euro a glass without ice cubes. Not as cheap as the water, which comes bottled, *frizzante* or *naturale*.

The pastries, too, numerous and cheap by American standards. It is a guilty pleasure at the end of a particularly difficult day to veer off by Palazzo Vecchio and buy two *torte di frutti* or a crème bar, thick with chocolate and powdered sugar and vanilla crème between the delicate wafers. I can sit with my cup of hot chocolate and read Dante's *Paradiso* by the windows overlooking the statue of Neptune.

The first meal I have in Italy is cooked by the *senora* of the *pensione*. The wine is bitter even watered down, and by the first taste of Italy I somehow think everything is going to be alright.

We start off with several weeks of intensive Italian study, poring over the language a good five hours of the day. It's a good thing. Later, I learn that other cities in Italy are more accepting of tourists and students than Florence. Florence is closed in, stand-offish at points. The secret, I discover, is very simple. You just have to make an effort.

In time, I learn the right spots and the right places. The "point and smile" system becomes a scoffed tradition, bare bones rattling, something to be put away with my "American" ideals. The man who owns the gelato store two blocks from *senora's* apartment can never understand my Italian, no matter how clearly I attempt to speak it, but he's also from southern Italy where the dialect is different. He is delighted to see me, and when I finally try the *rosa* gelato, he is excited. It is a good choice, he tells me, that no one tries save the Italians.

It really does taste like rose petals. Disgusting, but after I swallow and wait a moment, I find the best aftertaste in my mouth than anything I've probably ever eaten. Much more effective than a mint and when I take a breath, it feels like I'm eating the sky itself.

Technology is an absent concept from most of Italy. The internet cafes are shady at best, though I manage to find one with wireless to my liking; the back room where I take my laptop lacks part of a roof and adjoins with an outside space. When winter comes, I wear three layers and shiver, avoiding the leaks. There is no internet at the school; there are barely any usable computers there, for that matter.

There are elevators, big ornate things that shudder and get stuck on a weekly basis. But mostly there are stairs, and more stairs, and more stairs after that. And the walking. I get a bus pass from the professors for unlimited use in Florence while I'm there, but the buses are not always reliable. They are late, they are early, they pass you without stopping, they are crowded, they are exhausting. Instead, I walk everywhere, carrying a shredded map with me in case I get lost. Which I do, often and everywhere.

When my family comes to visit me, they can't stand it. It's the first time I realize how far I've gotten here, always walking. For me, a half-hour walk through the city is normal. For them, it is agony. "Are we there yet?" my sister complains ten minutes after starting, just as we reach the bridge.

"We just started, you dork."

"We'll take a taxi back," my mother says.

To me, it's a waste of money. When I come home in December, I'm startled when I have to raise my cardio workout an extra hour and a half to make any impact on my body. The car pedals feel foreign under my feet, the food tastes thicker, and all this flat land is killing my ankles.

Italy is full of art and history. It's on the streets every time you turn around, it's in every building, Italy is *made* of these things. The Madonna and Child peer from every corner, tiny paintings in raised platforms overlooking the alleys, fragments of the medieval walls and towers still being used. A good portion of the city's shops are made inside the medieval shops on the bottom floors, the guilds' houses still bearing their crests. You can't walk down a street without being in 13th century Italy.

The family palaces are grand and elaborate. They have courtyards and coats of arms above their doors. The Santa Maria Novella, Santa Croce, Santa Trinita, San Marco, San Lorenzo, Santa Spirito, Orsanmichele, Santa Maria Carmine, the Baptistery—I tour so many churches, studying their architecture, the family chapels, the mosaics, the tombs. Santa Croce is my favorite, the strewn floor effigies worn down by thousands of feet, the Bardi and Peruzzi chapels with frescoes by Giotto. Everywhere you step, you are stepping on a tomb. The floor is marble and throughout it, the floor slabs depict names and dates, or simply devil's holes, a circle cut out of the floor with two places for hooks that would lift it, where a body is lowered down, wrapped tightly, below the church. Sometimes they shift when you walk over them.

It bothers some people. I've never hesitated to walk over a grave, though; when you get down to it, we're always treading on bones. Most of them have probably disintegrated into earth, but that doesn't mean they're gone. Italy is a graveyard. It is a garden.

I'm not remotely religious but in Italy a church can be so much more than a house of God. It becomes a house of a separate sacred for me, of a different eternity. I trace my knowledge by the paintbrush of Giotto, Cimabue, Monaco, Gaddi, and Masaccio; by the gold glitter of mosaic; by the graceful curve of the sculpture of Bernini, Michelozzo, and Donatello.

I come to Italy for the art history. Somehow, I feel like I leave with a lot more. I go to see the opera of San Giovanni in the central dome of the *Duomo*, the cathedral of Firenze. When they sing, the sound fills us all and there is no need for the blinding light of St. Peters. Instead, we open to the swelling music and for the first time, I am speaking to Italy and understanding what she says.

Venice is a floating city and the way the waves lap up over the streets make me think it's the future Atlantis of this generation. It smells like the sea here, clammy and old, if not as fresh, not so much the sea as a canal. The roads that part the Grand Canal are covered in maroon algae crusted to the pavement like stringy human hair.

It rains the entire time, big torrents that soak through my t-shirt and jeans. I live in Iowa—drought-ridden, all those dry corn husks that choke my lungs during harvest—and this is like the Deluge, this is the Atlantic turned upside down on its head, this is cold and glorious. The umbrella I buy off of the street vender for five euro breaks a spoke within the first hour. I try not to stab someone with the naked metal spike, but it leaves gouges in the brick alleyways.

Everything about Venice is mysterious, ancient, and in ruin. I take a walk and it's a writer's dream. All that possibility, all of it trapped inside the city because the water allows it nowhere else to go. The strange side streets, the antique book stores, the vegetable carts being lugged around on men's backs—there's no escaping from Venice. The roads are waterways framed by stone sidewalks, buildings right on the water, and I think of the Silver City of the *Neverending Story* that floats on acid with masked people gaily celebrating. I think now that that Silver City is Venice and vice versa; the magic creeps in with the longing.

I will never find another city like this.

I take a picture of the mosaics in San Marco. The light is so brilliant that it bleeds together, though, and I get nothing but a backwash of gold.

Cinque Terre is along the coast, five towns that are built over the Mediterranean Sea and connected by beaten path, train rail, and water. There is no place, I decide after the first time, closer to paradise than this life.

The towns are towering, teetering houses with flaking paints of bright colors, small towns. They are connected by paths built right on the cliffs and terraces of olive and grape trees, over the sea. It's a world of green and blue, the water so clear I can see to the bottom even from several yards up. Caverns dot the rocky line of the coast, beaches made of natural formations, and when I swim the waves pull me under into its grip like it wants to play but doesn't realize its own strength. The salt tastes sweet.

I eat fried seafood fresh, and a pizza with calamari and oysters, bread served with pesto, desert wine with biscotti. I take pictures of the faces the cliffsides make. I chase lizards into small, old churches made with columns of black marble cracked at the bases. The cats are sprawled over the towns, in flower pots and on the sandy harbors, between rocks by the ocean, on steps and on rooftops and restaurant benches. I play with them, tease them, scratch their chins and feed them fish.

At one point of day, the horizon is dark over the Mediterranean except for a single pinpoint of light from the clouds. It hits the cerulean of the water in a perfect circle, as if saying this is where buried treasure sinks, this is where you should swim, this is the most beautiful spot on earth and all things meet here, finding a sense of joy that until now has been bereft in their voices.

Side-step, spin, shove, excuse self, step, block, sigh. Daily life in an Italian street.

I watch the jewelry shops for the necklace that disappeared that I'd considered buying. I go into the bookstores. I frequent my favorite restaurants and chocolate shops, the art galleries, the steps of the cathedral with its towering green-and-white-and-pink façade, and I know where to buy the best gelato in the city. I'm working my way through every flavor. I can tell you anything about Santa Croce and Dante's optimistic view on original sin and free will. I can tell you what I've done today in Italian, laugh at an Italian joke. I can brush off the men who attempt to buy me cappuccinos or a beer; give them an inch, they take a mile. I know where the taxi stands are, where the bus stops are, and where the best fruit stands are located.

When my mother comes to visit, she says I'm going native.

Not even close, I tell her.

Christmas in Florence is something not quite magical but definitely with the possibility. Long, dangling white lights are sweeping down from above the streets, a tree brought in and decorated in the Piazza Republica. There are men with little metal carts that roast chestnuts in the street, three euro for a cup. I've never had roasted chestnuts. They're almost sweet; soft between my teeth. Better than peanuts.

The night before I leave Florence, there is no one left behind to share in my bittersweet recollections. Instead, I buy more gelato and roasted chestnuts. I also buy a felt reindeer antlers band. They're eight euros and I give the woman ten, absently trying to waste the last

of my money. I walk by the giant Christmas tree, down by the Palazzo Vecchio and the Uffizi. I watch the Arnos River from the oldest bridge, trying to find the muskrats we all know are down there. I sit very quietly, with nothing to do, on the steps of the cathedral for a while, and just watch how empty everything seems.

When I'm heading back to the hotel, I find the violin player. I've seen her around with an accordion player. She's a student; all clean skirt and turtleneck, brown mousy hair pulled back tight from her face. No one cares. She may not need the money as much as the gypsies, but when she plays, she's tugging on more than strings—she gets you in the gut. The sounds fill the square and the night, and I watch, rubbing my gloves together. I buy the two overpriced CDs because it's my last night and some things, like this, like the crowd of tourists and Italians alike clapping and murmuring to each other, feels a bit like home.

I take the last taxi ride to the airport afterwards, thank the man, and try to give him a tip. It's a no go. I should have known.

In Chicago, I buy cheap Chinese food and watch in silent amazement at the number of signs in English. It feels weird to hear it. Like a switch has been turned back on in my brain, but the gears are still slow to respond.

I call my parents, assure them I made it. I browse the novels. I worry over whether my luggage is coming or if it will go missing. I stutter for a second when someone asks me something, *si* and *va bene* and *scusi* still my defaults. They pretend like they don't hear them. I'm grateful for that.

I didn't get to see Pompeii. I didn't buy one of the scarves I wanted, nor that antique edition of Poe's poetry in Italian. I forgot to buy a souvenir for my grandmother. I wanted another photo of Santa Reparata's tombs. It all seems very far away now, some other lifetime with some other person. I wonder if I changed.

The flight to Des Moines is called and then I'm gone, thinking that there's snow on the ground here and I'll have to buy a new coat. In my head, the Italian me is already laughing, saying, *You don't need that. There's only two months left of winter, and soon things are going to change again.*

My first impression of Iowa is that it's wide, like a plate covered in grass, and it's not really speaking to me yet.