

1

INNOCENCE ADRIFT

I was nineteen years old and on my way to a palace.

Bundled up in a wool scarf and heavy coat, I walked to school in my red leather boots with a broken heel, pondering my life in Italy.

On an impulse, I entered the church to attend the service, though I'd be late for Italian class, and joined other celebrants in a wooden pew. The chilly and vast interior of the 530-year-old Gothic cathedral under towering marble and stone arches was magnificent. Studying the massive altar inside a vaulted nave illuminated by a morning sun pouring through stained-glass windows, I thought maybe I felt so sad because I never asked God for help.

I muffled my gravelly coughs, got down on my knees, and began to pray. Within the cavernous stone expanse, no answers came in the dim amid the worshippers' echoing voices. *Why did my life turn out like this, all alone and living with a wound impossible to heal?*

Hunched in the church's frigid air, I decided to skip Mass and left for school.

Later that day, I wrote a letter home in my student pension room. I

longed for more compassion from my parents, but I could never reveal the ugly turn my life had taken over the past two months. Instead, I wrote about my misconception that Perugia was like my hometown of Mill Valley, California. “There are dangers,” I wrote. “I want to be able to recognize the dangers.”

I also noted, “I don’t feel good, but I don’t feel like giving up and coming back. There’s too much to learn . . . about me or how I’d act in certain situations. I don’t know whether this is clear or not. I hope you can see my meaning or what I’ve been through.”

No one wrote back asking for clarification.

But my younger sister, Grace, picked up on something between the lines. In her letter, she wrote, “From your last letter to Mom, your tone seemed depressed about something. What is really going on with you? I really would like to know. Maybe I can help. Please tell me.”

I never answered her question. I could never write down the words anyway.



Two months earlier, I had left home for the first time to attend the Università per Stranieri, the University for Foreigners, in Perugia. The plan was to study Italian, art, and culture for a year.

Free at last, I was learning to fly. But I didn’t have wings.

Excited and nervous after landing in this Umbrian hill town, I was knocked by frustration. I couldn’t speak enough Italian to navigate daily life. Snotty salesgirls rolled their eyes as I stammered and searched for the right words. In restaurants, waiters presented me with a horrific slab of liver or horsemeat, and my mouth twisted in disgust before gagging. *I didn’t order that, did I?*

Grabbing my dictionary, I began memorizing as many words as possible.

Every day, things scrambled out of order. After opening a detergent

bottle, the smell told me I had wasted money on bleach. The laundry I hung outside my window to dry in the morning became soaked by afternoon rains. I fought with ancient, poorly hung Italian doors and confusing locks, feeling lost and incompetent in a beautiful place.

Italy the infuriating. Though unacclimated to living on my own, I could easily forgive my ancestral country as the afternoon sun burnished ornate buildings into gold, as I ate luscious food, rambled along cobblestone streets, or joined the townsfolk on traffic-free Corso Vannucci.

On my first day of class, I squeezed past Fiats parked with great anarchy along Via Ulisse Rocchi. Rubbing my eyes, I had awakened too early that September morning and couldn't dress fast enough, my hands shaking with excitement.

Amid buzzing mopeds and the Italian language filling my ears, my new leather backpack banging against my back, I swung down the narrow passage. An espresso machine hissed in a nearby café, and my nose caught the intoxicating scent of a bakery.

I wanted to soak up every fabulous thing about my new Italian life. I marveled at the simplest details—a Fiat sign, a woman heaving her market basket, the bantering school kids. And I ached to share this beauty with everyone back home.

Suddenly, an Alfa Romeo squad car driven by a policeman zoomed too close, threatening to rub me against a rough stone wall. As I spun out of his way, my head just missed two dead rabbits hanging on hooks outside a butcher shop—an advertisement for today's fresh meat. I smiled and shrugged without a care.

Untouristed and authentic, Perugia hummed with the vibrant energy of two universities. Though the University of Perugia dates back to 1308 while my university was founded in 1921, medieval history permeated the whole city. At the University of Perugia, ten thousand students studied everything from engineering to art or attended vet school, law school, or medical school.

At the bottom of Via Ulisse Rocchi, I entered Piazza Fortebraccio through the Etruscan Gate, a thick stone arch that had stood for over two millennia. I walked faster toward an eighteenth-century Baroque palace, the Palazzo Gallenga, which housed my university.

Once inside, I ascended wide marble steps worn concave by centuries of feet to find my Italian language class in ornate Classroom Three. Underneath an embellished and frescoed ceiling, I joined French, Japanese, Spanish, Persian, Swedish, and Nigerian students at long eighteenth-century-style desks and benches in stepped-up rows like in a small theater.

Giddy with anticipation, I chose a seat underneath a Venetian glass chandelier. Listening to a babel of languages, I pulled out my pen and notebook and looked around to take in the red walls, gilded moldings, tall windows, and old paintings hung in heavy gold frames.

This is too much. What a place to learn Italian.

Before embarking on my adventure and leaving everything I knew behind, I imagined Italy as that captivating destination in travel magazines and movies—where Audrey Hepburn explored lively, sunlit streets in *Roman Holiday*. Unbeknownst to me or my parents, I had landed in a shadowy Italy during the seventies, an era the Italians call the *anni oscuri*, the dark years.

A year earlier, the Getty heir kidnapping and torture had created international headlines. Worse, months before I arrived, Palestinian terrorists had stormed Rome's airport, spraying the terminal with submachine fire and firebombing a Pan Am jet. They slaughtered thirty-four people. Afterward, travelers landing in Rome found Italian soldiers, Uzis in hand, on guard throughout the terminal.

2

FARFALLA

Before my classes began, my mother and I arrived to search for my student accommodation after checking into the eighteenth-century Hotel della Posta on Corso Vannucci. Stepping into our room, I entered a wondrous world of ceiling frescos and scrolled gilt work. I bounced on my bed, in awe of the lavish décor and antique armoires. Then, I hopped up and opened a window over Corso Vannucci, listening to the Italian conversations below and observing the locals on their afternoon strolls toward the Piazza IV Novembre. Every street and alley led to this main piazza; many descended from footpaths formed before Christ was born.

I felt like the whole world had opened up to me. *This is where I live now.*

I studied women parading in the latest Italian fashions, sumptuous furs, and fine footwear. They pushed strollers holding gorgeous babies or children cosseted in multi-colored knits and matching hats. Dressed as a typical Mill Valley girl, I felt sloppy in my jeans and silver hippie jewelry. Mom looked elegant in her skirt and heels, so I figured I must dress up more to fit in.

“This is not the room I paid for,” Mom said. She grabbed the phone and informed the front desk, “We’re supposed to have a larger room with a bathroom. And not over a noisy street.”

What’s wrong with this room? It’s gorgeous. “Mom,” I whispered. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not, Lenore.”

I felt embarrassed as Mom disregarded me. We traded this vibrant room with a city view for a quiet room with a bathroom.



The following day, we left the hotel lobby to check out the student housing. A bit older than me, an elegant woman sat perched at the hotel bar, sipping coffee. I tilted my head, curious about her. Sylph-like and graceful, she had long strawberry-blond hair that tumbled down her back.

I remembered she’d been there when we checked in the night before. Why was she there again?

When we returned in the afternoon, she sat alone, sipping wine patiently, waiting. But for what?

And when we returned from dinner, there she was, wearing an exquisite, long, green silk gown.

Did she live in the hotel? What was she waiting for?

After two days of this chic tableau, I approached the desk clerk and said, “Excuse me, Sir, but why is that woman always in your bar?”

“Why, she is the house girl,” replied the hotelman, all business. “Her name is Farfalla.”

Butterfly. Farfalla’s pure beauty shocked me. She looked nothing like the trashy-looking prostitutes I’d seen in movies.

In my guidebook, I read how Italian hotels offered their house girls like fine wine. Clerks asked lone men if they needed an extra blanket. If so, a girl would be right up. I also learned and appreciated the Italians’ poetic



At sixteen, I enjoyed a rare silent moment with my family at our Tahoe cabin.

Image courtesy of the author's collection.

nickname for prostitutes: lucciole—fireflies. Fireflies burn bright at night. Italian law allowed fireflies to work privately, permitting loitering yet outlawing streetwalking. How the police made the distinction puzzled me.

I sure wasn't in Mill Valley anymore.



We toured several student pensions, simple rooms with shared baths in an apartment or house. We found my new place near school. It was a bare room with a single bed, an armoire, a desk, and a chair. Hot water was available twice weekly for bathing and laundry, but heating oil cost extra.

I twirled around in my new abode. "This sure is different from living in a big house with a noisy family," I told Mom.

I didn't tell her it was also very quiet, perhaps too quiet.

After I settled in, Mom got busy shopping for gifts back home, covering

every local boutique, shop, and department in the Standa retail store. Impatient, I jiggled while waiting for her.

We passed cafés full of students, kids my age having fun without parents. I turned around to look at them, burning with jealousy. Glaring with irritation at Mom, I wondered when she'd leave so I could start my new life. *Longest three days ever. Jesus.*

In the Covered Market, I lost her amid vegetable sellers, kitchenware, and Italian fashions. I sat in a little café with an espresso, put my chin into my palm, and thought about how this all had started as Mom's idea.



One evening last winter, Mom walked into the bedroom I shared with my little sister, Grace, as we did homework. She handed me an article about the University for Foreigners and asked, "Do you think you'd be interested in this?"

"Maybe." I took the article with shaky hands, my eyes growing wide. Grace looked stunned.

I read that tuition cost only fifteen dollars a quarter and student room and board under a hundred dollars a month—unheard of even in the seventies. But the deal was that I'd have to work and save money to pay for extra expenses such as traveling.

As her shocking idea sank in, I thought, *Wow, a year in Italy could help me become a good writer.* I loved reading works by Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and other members of the Lost Generation. I imagined myself as a brilliant expat, writing about life abroad.

But what about Jackson?

My boyfriend Jackson lived across the bay, studying at UC Berkeley. With my excellent grades at the College of Marin, I'd qualified for entrance there the following September.

Thinking about the same thing, Grace asked about Jackson as soon as Mom left our room.

“Hmm, well,” I said as I brushed lint off the leg of my jeans, “it’s only for a year—no big deal. We’ll be together at Berkeley when I get back. We’re never going to break up.”

“Remember,” said Grace, “when the Bianchis sent Simonetta to that convent school in Florence during her sophomore year? You know, ‘to straighten her out,’ as they said?”

“Yeah, I do. Wow, is that why they want to ship me off for a year abroad? Do I need straightening out?” Perhaps the Asiano authorities, as Jackson called my parents, hated the idea of me living near him across the Bay, beyond their control.

Mom and Dad had watched us grow close over the past year and a half, afraid we were having sex. And so what if we were?



Very accustomed to Mom’s disappearances when shopping, I sipped my espresso more slowly, listening for her tinkling gold bracelets.

I spotted her in a shoe seller’s booth.

“I found these, Lenore,” she said, holding a pair of creamy red Italian leather boots. “Try them on.”

I pulled them on; they looked so cool. “Wow, I love them! Thank you!”

As Mom paid the vendor, I bent to study my boots. They matched my upbeat mood and added a silver lining to my dream Italian life. They would help me and my Mill Valley jeans fit in better.

Finally, my new life began two days later when Mom left to meet Dad in Madrid. The three of us made a plan to meet in Rome a couple weeks later for our last weekend together, sightseeing, dining, and shopping.



Waiting with Dad for Mom outside a shop, we watched the stunning

Roman women and their fascinating sidewalk fashion show. Moving gracefully and tossing their long hair, they wore oversized sunglasses, gold chains, and well-cut coats.

Later, Dad couldn't help remarking to our hotel clerk, "Italian women are so beautiful."

"But Signore," he replied, placing his hand over his heart, "all women are beautiful."

Dad and I rode a bus early Sunday morning to the Vatican Museum; Mom preferred sleeping in. Through the bus window, I saw lone women standing on deserted street corners and looking expectantly at passing cars and pedestrians.

Oh my God, are they still working from the night before?

Unfortunately, I had to ask my father a question that I never would've dreamed of asking. "Are they prostitutes, Dad?"

"Well, yeah," said the former Naval officer who had circumnavigated the globe. "They need money for the collection basket at Mass, too, Lenore."



That evening, after dinner, we fended off another species of firefly. Walking back to our hotel in the dark, a group of tall, beautifully made-up high-fashion models materialized on the sidewalk, their sparkly evening gowns gleaming in the night.

When they swaggered with aggression toward Dad, I recognized this gaggle as male sex workers. Supremely gorgeous male sex workers. They drew near, enticing my father for an invitation to his hotel room. Ever the seasoned international traveler, Dad ignored them.

I yelled at them. "Vai via—go away!" But secretly, my curiosity about legal Italian prostitution grew. I obsessed over Farfalla and *fireflies*, the human kind.



The next day, while shopping with Mom, I browsed around an English bookstore on Via Nazionale and made a serendipitous discovery: an English book on the history of Italian prostitution. What a find! I devoured it on the train back to Perugia.

The ancient Romans neither stigmatized nor outlawed prostitution and only required registration. For an easy income, even upper-class women practiced the trade. If a lower-class woman couldn't afford to register, she was branded as a prostibula. *So that's where we got the word "prostitute." Very cool.*

Prostitutes of both sexes lurked in the shadows underneath the fornices, or arches, of Roman buildings. That's where we got the word "fornication." A firefly might offer many specialties, including serving her clients as a fellatrix. Yes, both "fellatrix" and "fellatio" come from the Latin verb "fellare," which means "to suck."

Even more astonishing, I read that the Romans venerated a prostitute goddess, the mythical, wealthy, and notorious Acca Larentia. Every December 23rd, Romans celebrated her during an annual Larentalia festival, which some historians date back to sixth century BCE. Later, the Holy Roman Catholic Church replaced this pagan festivity with Christian holy days.

I closed my book. *Is a prostitute the reason we celebrate Christmas in December?*

I stared out the train window. So the Catholic Church sanitized that tradition and reshaped it into Christmas, just like the temples of Venus were reshaped into Christian basilicas over the centuries.

At nineteen, I hungered for the stories that had been rewritten or buried. I wanted to understand how things truly were and learn what had been softened and made more palatable.

The past had always fascinated me—not only historically but also personally. What else did the world rewrite? And what did it mean to desire something? To own one's body, one's pleasure? I was at an age where



I came to Italy for a year to become a writer. Instead, that year became about survival.

Image courtesy of the author's collection.

these weren't just abstract questions. I was in Italy, a country where sensuality seemed as natural as breathing, where beauty was celebrated without shame. I was watching the way the culture moved—how legal prostitution still existed, how the Italians accepted that desire, in all its forms, as a simple part of life.

I wasn't sure what I was searching for. Maybe I wanted to understand something about myself before I even knew the question I was asking. What did I want? What was I allowed to want?

I didn't know then how soon these questions would no longer feel like a choice, when my own body would transform into a battlefield.

And I didn't know that soon, silence would feel like my only choice. The world's demand for the "clean" story would weigh on me so heavily that I'd try to rewrite my own—into something acceptable, something survivable.

But at nineteen, before all of that, I was just curious about how history twists itself into new shapes, how societies justify what they once

embraced, all behind the thin veil between the sacred and the profane. And maybe, in some quiet way, I was also trying to understand the kind of story I was about to step into myself.