

The Eurostar train to Firenze was crowded, and thus not nearly as pleasurable as our first had been. Alas, the biggest annoyance was an American child - wearing a jester's hat with bells that jingled every time he moved his hyperactive self, high on caffeine and chocolate - who talked, sang and otherwise would not shut his mouth for the entire journey. Exhausted though I was, sleep was pretty much out of the question, so I read the guidebook for Firenze and watched the miles roll by. We arrived to a slight drizzle, but blazing sunlight. Stazione Santa Maria Novella is known for its pickpockets and other petty thieves, and while we were in line at the Trenitalia window for our upgrades back to Napoli, we were approached by an obnoxious young guy asking for money, who was doing his best not to leave us alone. In broken English, he said something about wanting to go to the US someday, and only sneered at me when I told him to bug off - "Va via!" Katy had taught us something much stronger, but we'd forgotten it at that moment, so we were left to evade him as he went on in search of other victims.



Milano is known for crowds and noise, but our visit had been relatively free of both. Venezia was quite touristed even in March, and none of us could imagine the hell of being there in the tourist season. But Firenze was a land unto itself. The minute we stepped out of the station we were engulfed in the swarms of traffic, both pedestrian and vehicular. To get to our hotel, we had to walk down one of the main drags, a shop-filled street with narrow sidewalks teeming with people. Many of those shops were filled with shoes,



however, regularly distracting Leah from our intended route to the hotel. I finally promised her that we could return after first checking into the hotel and depositing our bags. Rounding the corner onto Via Aprile XXVII (April 27th Rd, a name which I found rather amusing,) we walked down a street full of hotels. We passed many, and Leah was certain that I was leading us astray, when we suddenly arrived at our location, an unassuming lobby with a plaque announcing the presence of the Tourist House Liberty (<http://www.touristhouseliberty.it/> .) Upstairs was the Hotel Souvenir. We quickly realized that Firenze was full of English signs, not to mention English speaking people - particularly Americans. In Firenze, there is far less of the "Italian experience" and more of the crowds of American sorority girls on a semester abroad.

The most notable thing about our room at the Tourist House Liberty was, of all things, the toilet. Its pressure assisted flush had some issues, creating the most god-awful racket one could ever imagine emanating from a toilet. We quickly made a rule that no one was to flush it in the middle of the night unless it was a true emergency. And fear not, you too can share in the experience of this toilet, for I recorded it using the handy voice recorder on my PDA. (It doesn't quite capture the true wonder of the racket, but it gives you a small sense of it. Double click on the toilet to hear.)



Flush.wav

Of all of the cities on our whirlwind itinerary, Napoli excepted, we had the most time to spend in Firenze. We arrived relatively early on Wednesday, and weren't leaving until late Friday morning, giving us a bit more time to explore the city and its many wonders. The first stop was lunch, at a caffè bar right on the corner from our hotel, followed by the inevitable shopping trip as Leah wandered in and out of shoe and clothing stores, not to mention the seemingly endless streets lined with vendors near the Mercato Centrale, on the way to il Duomo and the Ponte Vecchio. It was clear from the rows and rows of aprons, underwear and other sundry items strategically displaying only *David's* manhood, leaving the rest of the statue for the purists that Americans clearly do not have a monopoly on the market for tacky souvenirs. Between tacky souvenirs, leather goods, and old Levis, they managed to fill many streets with seemingly identical merchandise. Leah's primary goal in Firenze was to see the Arno and the Ponte Vecchio, which is featured prominently in Puccini's famous aria (from the opera *Gianni Schicchi*,) *O Mio Babbino, Caro*.



*O mio babbino, caro,
mi piace, è bello bello,
vo'andare in Porta Rossa,
a comperar l'anello!*

*Sì, sì, ci vogli andare!
E se l'amassi indarno,
andrei sul Ponte Vecchio
ma per buttarmi in Arno!*

*Mi struggo e mi tormento,
oh! Dio vorrei morir!*

*Oh, my beloved Daddy
He's handsom as a King
I'm going to Porta Rossa
To buy our wedding-ring!*

*Yes, father, I do mean it!
And if you still say no
I swear from Ponte Vecchio
I'll throw myself down into the Arno*

*What shivers! What a chill!
Poor me, I want to Die!*

On the way to the bridge, we passed by the incredible Duomo, whose massive structure erupts from a packed city block. Indeed, there is no good way to view the building once at the square, for the piazza is so tiny that you cannot begin to stand back far enough to take in the entire view. (Hence the strange perspective distortion in the photos.) We only passed by the building and its crowds (particularly since I had, for some strange reason, chosen not to bring my camera with me that evening.) From the Duomo,



we took the obvious route to Piazza Signoria, where we briefly debated whether or not the *David* (which was surrounded by scaffolding, of course,) was the real thing, though I felt quite certain that the real thing was at the Accademia, where they could charge an exorbitant entrance fee to see it. And then, the Ponte Vecchio. Well, not quite – first we stopped for gelato at a gelateria aptly named “Very Good.” It was very good indeed; I went for a heavenly coconut, while Leah’s amaretto was equally divine. And then, at last, Leah finally got to see the Ponte Vecchio. It was, of course, not at all what she’d expected, but once past the rows of jeweler’s shops and mobs of people, the view was quite wondrous, and quintessentially Florentine.



which we encountered numerous times during the trip, was the salad (or pizza, for that matter,) containing “rocket.” We believed it was a strange and perversely literal translation of “rucola,” which we assumed to be arugula, a fact confirmed by the ever-helpful food dictionary at [epicurious.com \(http://eat.epicurious.com/dictionary/food/\)](http://eat.epicurious.com/dictionary/food/) Somewhere, sometime, this was translated into English as “rocket,” so we ate many an insalata with rockets in it. (Interestingly, Epicurious lists “rocket” as another name for arugula. You learn something new every day, I guess. We’re assuming it’s a British term.)

Dinner that night was at Trattoria Zà-Zà, a well-known establishment recommended to us both by the owner of our hotel, and by my guidebook. We arrived soon after they opened, so we didn’t have to wait for a table in this quintessential trattoria. This being the heart of a tourist district, they had an English only menu, which we were given. Italian menus translated into English were a source of great amusement on our trip. These amusements ranged from simple errors like “rice” spelled “rise,” to frustrating simplifications for clueless Americans such as calling tortellini, “ravioli.” Our favorite,

arugula
[ah-ROO-guh-lah]

Also called rocket, roquette, rugula and rucola, arugula is a bitterish, aromatic salad green with a peppery mustard flavor. Though it has long been extremely popular with Italians, American palates often find its flavor too assertive. Arugula (which resembles radish leaves) can be found in specialty produce markets and in some supermarkets. It's sold in small bunches with roots attached. The leaves should be bright green and fresh looking. Arugula is very perishable and should be tightly wrapped in a plastic bag and refrigerated for no more than 2 days. Its leaves hold a tremendous amount of grit and must be thoroughly washed just before using. Arugula makes a lively addition to salads, soups and sautéed vegetable dishes. It's a rich source of iron as well as vitamins A and C.

Rocket salad, along with many other amusing but ultimately bewildering mis-translations, left the English translations best left for their comedic value alone. For the purpose of ordering a meal, an Italian menu, supplemented by a phrasebook for the few words we couldn't decipher, was far more useful. Until we dined at Trattoria Zà-Zà, however, we had never been faced with the dilemma of an English only menu. We quickly requested the Italian menus, and proceeded to order some of the best food we'd ever tasted. The restaurant was warm and cozy, and the food sumptuous. My tagliatelli con funghi porcini was my favorite meal of the entire trip, and we had some amazing meals on this trip. The heart of Firenze is one probably of the few places in Italy where a meal does not last two or three hours, and our food arrived surprisingly quickly. After dinner, we returned to the hotel and fell into bed.

I was itching to go the next morning, eager to see the sights more than I had been able to do in Venezia and Milano. This hotel did not include breakfast, and I had been drooling over all of the pasticcerie, so we found a caffè bar which beamed with delightful pastries. In ordering, however, we somehow ended up with three croissants. They were delicious, as was the cappuccino, apparently, but I was ever so slightly disappointed. We didn't have a bad meal in Firenze, however, so it was a minor frustration. We continued on our way, for I had been given license to lead the way, and with my camera firmly in hand, I was ready to see the city. As were the Japanese tourists, who were waiting in line at the Duomo before it even opened. We decided to wait until it was actually open and that queue had funneled through before we visited, so we retraced part of our path from the previous night. I had my camera this time, but it was also raining fairly heavily, so



while I took plenty of photos, they will likely be a bit gray. Not on our route the previous night was Santa Croce, so I led the charge, and Leah and Sue dragged along, wondering where I was taking them. I'd seen *A Room with a View* enough times to know that Santa Croce was important, but when we got there, Leah was feeling mostly very wet. We decided to go inside to get out of the rain. The entrance fee proved to be money well spent, for there was much to see. Santa Croce is filled with the tombs of "over 270 of Firenze's most illustrious citizens," including Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Without the benefit of flash, my camera proved useless inside, and Leah didn't want me to fill up her memory card (we'd left the laptops in Katy's room, so we couldn't download the images until we got back to Napoli.) Sue, who wanted to have photos more than she wanted to



take them, let me use her camera (conveniently the same model Canon A70 that Leah and I bought prior to this trip,) and I went around the church snapping photos. As it turned out, Leah's first attempt at a photograph inside the church resulted in an inadvertent flash, and though there were flashes going off everywhere, she was immediately reprimanded by a guard and scared out of taking any further photos. I ran out of time to see the attached convent, since I was so much slower than my traveling companions, but it was apparently "really neat." Inside Santa Croce, I recognized the little chapels and other sights from the movie, which I later watched, saying, "We went there! And there!"

Exiting the church, we found a t-shirt shop selling remarkably inexpensive umbrellas amongst the *David* t-shirts and football jerseys. Feeling drier, Leah was up for more of my wanderings, after another delightful meal of panini and my much-desired pastries (which tasted as wonderful as they looked.) And then, we returned at last to the Duomo. We went inside first, marveling at the frescos and the marvel of

Brunelleschi's perfect dome. Sue's camera in hand, I took a few photos inside, but our highlight was, well, much higher. We found during our trip that one of the best applications of entrance fees was to go up. In Milano, it was the view from the terraces of il Duomo which seized our collective sense of wonder. So too was it in Firenze, where we paid 6€ each for the privilege of climbing the 463 narrow, winding stairs, through spiral staircases hundreds of years old, up to the cupola. Legs straining, and lungs gasping for breath (I had a reasonable excuse, having both asthma and a cold at the time,) we mounted the steps one at a time, hoping the view would be worth the effort. As Sue exclaimed while we climbed, "We



paid to do this?" As the stairs wound higher and higher, they soon opened to a walkway ringing the base of the dome. From there, we had a closer view of Brunelleschi's marvel and the frescos which covered it. Looking down, we saw all the people wandering through the cathedral, giving us a striking perspective of how high up we were. Looking above us, we simultaneously realized how much higher we had to go, and we began the ascent through narrower and narrower passageways, sandwiched between the inner and outer shells of the dome, to the top. The staircase are now dimly illuminated by electric light for the safety of those who negotiate them, but I wondered at those who had long ago climbed those same steps, guided only by a candle or the thin stripes of light shining through the scattered apertures to the outside. And then, when it seemed we couldn't possibly go much higher, we emerged onto the terrace of the cupola.



Six euro and 463 steps was well worth it. Even in the rain, the view from the top of the Duomo was nothing short of incredible. Looking down, we could see the Arno and the Ponte Vecchio, and the sea of red-tiled roofs that is Firenze from the sky. Beyond the tightly packed confines of the city center, the world opened out into the rolling Tuscan countryside. From our perch on high, we looked down upon all of the city, even the heights of the Campanile, Giotto's belltower. I spent many minutes and many rolls of film at the cupola, capturing the full 360° of the Florentine skyline. The view from the Duomo is truly a wonder that words cannot truly express. (This is why I take pictures, of course.)



By the time Leah dragged me off the roof and we'd descended the 463 steps into the cathedral, it was afternoon and the Japanese tour groups had been supplanted by hordes of Italian school children and the ubiquitous American co-eds. Unlike the Japanese tourists, stereotypically docile and unnaturally friendly, the Italian schoolchildren were, like teenagers anywhere, pushy, loud and generally obnoxious. They were also everywhere, crowding in packs around all of the major sights and photo spots taking group shots and blocking the view. Our agenda took us next to the Galleria dell'Accademia, current home of the original *David* (and not much else.) I didn't think it a necessity to go just to see the *David*, particularly since we had not been to the Uffizi, but Leah and Sue really wanted to go, saying that they thought they would regret it if they didn't see it. So off we went to see *David*. An exorbitant entry fee was charged, of course, given how little else was housed in the museum other than Michelangelo's original *David* and his *Slaves*, the riveting unfinished works which show his process for extracting such exactly realistic human forms from huge slabs of cold marble.

We joined the huge queue entering the museum, all to see one work. Upon entering, one first encounters the vast gift shop, selling all variety of *David* souvenirs, albeit significantly less tacky than those sold by the vendors on the street. The crowd walked blindly past Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabines*, an impressive work in its own right, and filed directly towards *David*. We walked past the *Slaves*, and I stopped to view them, letting the crowd pass and dissipate before moving towards the centerpiece of the exhibit. There, in all its monumental glory, gleaming brightly, was *David*. Surrounded by scaffolding.

I suppose it was inevitable, since nearly everything else we had visited was obstructed by the work

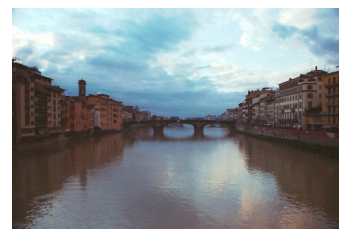
of the restoration efforts. It is necessary work to preserve these great masterpieces, and we could see far more of the statue than we were able to see of the impressive façade of Milano's Duomo, so I found it more fitting than annoying. This is in contrast to the obnoxious American woman (sigh, there certainly are a lot of them – no wonder we have such a bad reputation abroad, even not considering foreign policy – but I digress,) next to me, who was overheard to say in complaint, "I wish it didn't have all that stuff around it." I actually found the restoration process quite fascinating, and watching the restorer Cinzia Parnigoni at work was not something one will see often. Leah and I watched her work, applying and removing patches around the chest of the statue. (For more details about the restoration project, see <http://www.friendsofFirenze.org/English/Projects/David/intro.htm>)

On top of the fact that the contents of the museum hardly seemed worth the entrance fee and the statue was in the shop, so to speak, the Galleria dell'Accademia was also the only place we visited that did not allow photography of any sort, even without flash. Whether or not this is due to the restoration, or simply a way to stop the multitudes of idiots who take flash photographs of delicate works of art is unclear. In the past, non-flash photography was allowed, and I'm not sure when that changed. Whatever the rationale, there were still cameras popping up all over the place, and even numerous flashes going off. Guards ran around shouting, "No photo!" at the offenders, but there were far more cameras than guards. Directly in front of us stood a well-arranged trio. Standing at a corner, a young man hid behind his companion, who was innocuously sketching the famed statue. Next to the man drawing stood a woman, both blocking the view of the photographer and keeping an eye out for the roving guards ready to reprimand anyone who dared lift a camera. Leah and I watched this process with keen interest, as the renegade photographer captured image after image on his digital camera. We discussed this, and finally decided to take a chance ourselves. Positioning ourselves behind a pillar, I tried to block and keep lookout from one side, with Sue on the other and Leah with the camera. Our strategy was far less successful than the group in front of us, however, for Leah had only managed to lift the camera and snap one quick shot before the guard was upon us, shouting, "No photo!" Convinced that she was cursed when it came to photography and overly observant guards, Leah decided that she was not willing to try again. I took the camera and wandered around to the back of the statue, where no guards lurked, and snuck a brief image from the side. With two photos and knowing that we could buy postcards to supplement them, we put away the camera for the rest of our visit. In a little visited section of the building was a museum of musical instruments, which was the hidden treasure of the Galleria dell'Accademia, particularly for a music lover like Leah. Even I found the old instruments fascinating, and we all found it enjoyable, other than an encounter with a snobbish guy who thought he knew far more about instruments than did Leah. "That's a viola, not a violin," he sneered, after overhearing her comment on the unusual size of one of the violas. He apparently couldn't be bothered to hear her call it a viola, which she had.



Walking back from the museum, we passed by more of Firenze's seemingly omnipresent shoe stores, each distracting Leah's attention and pulling us inside. After trying on several pairs, however, she finally found a pair that she liked. I suppose no trip to Italy could be complete without Leah buying shoes. I had thought that would end the shoe shopping, but I clearly was not thinking very hard. I should know Leah better than that by now!

The rain had dissipated as the day went on, and the sun started to break through the clouds as the day grew short. Though our view from the Duomo had been necessarily overcast, the late afternoon break in the clouds afforded us the perfect opportunity to return to the Ponte Vecchio at sunset. By that point we'd been walking all day, and while I was on a mission to see and do as much as possible, Leah and Sue were beginning to tire and grow weary of all of the walking. On our walk the previous day, we'd seen the rows of watercolor artists hawking their wares along the Arno, and both Leah and I saw some that we liked. With as many photographs as I take in my travels, photographs, ticket stubs, GPS tracks and memories are sufficient souvenirs for me, but Leah like souvenirs of a more tactile variety. She'd already purchased a few such items, including the lovely glass earring and necklace



set she'd purchased on Murano, but she was pushing for me to purchase a souvenir for myself as well. I'd been tempted to purchase one of the rainbow PACE flags which hang from every other balcony in every city we visited, but didn't want to purchase something that I would take from my suitcase when I got home and say, "Now what do I do with this?" I was eyeing the watercolors, however, and when I realized that Leah wanted one as well, we decided to purchase one as my official souvenir of Italy. We stopped for a long time looking at the work of one particular vendor, even asking for the price of one piece, but decided to wait and see if we found anything we liked better before purchasing. Right on the bridge, we browsed through the bins of considerably cheaper prints of watercolors, but in the end, decided to go back to our original choice. Leah suggested that we go back immediately, for it was getting later, and many of the vendors were starting to close up shop for the night.

Having already asked the price of the piece, I was in a bad position to feign aloofness, but when in Rome ... He'd quoted us €15, so I offered him ten, though my Italian must not have been very clear, for we had to repeat it in English. He responded by painting "13" on his palette. At this point, my brain stopped functioning and all common sense and knowledge of bargaining techniques eluded me. I presented my next offer, "undici." Obviously, the proper choice would have been €12; since he had moved two, I should have done the same. He acted appropriately insulted, and responded by ignoring me completely and returning to his work. We gave him €13, and he wrapped our watercolor for us.



Returning yet again to the Ponte Vecchio, (Leah certainly satisfied her desire to see it, I am sure,) we stopped on the bridge and repeated the photos of the previous night, with a glorious sunset backdrop for the ideal romantic touch. Waiting for the crowds to clear enough to get the shots we wanted afforded us numerous opportunities for people-watching, and I was not disappointed. Sitting on the stone balustrade, a shaggy-looking man with a beer was re-carving his graffiti (originally dated 1997) into the wall next to him. He was completely engrossed in his labors, and took no notice of the random tourist snapping a photograph of him defacing the wall. Even more amusing was the fact that he took no notice of the two white-helmeted municipal policewomen who wandered over to stop him. None of them took any notice of me as I snapped another photo of Italian street life. They asked him what the hell he was doing (or something to that effect, no doubt,) and he protested, gesturing that the wall was already covered with graffiti, so what could a bit more matter? Unconvinced, they told him to stop, but left him otherwise alone.



Satisfied that we had seen quite enough of the Ponte Vecchio, I then dragged us down the other side and on towards Palazzo Pitti, but once we'd seen the mammoth structure from afar, Leah and Sue decided that they had had quite enough, and it was time for dinner. Dinner that night was at il Garibaldi, another delightfully cozy trattoria just down the block from Zà-Zà. It wasn't even seven when we arrived (they opened early for the tourist crowd, it seemed,) so we were some of the first people in the place. A party of three young Japanese men sat at the table behind us, served by the Japanese-speaking waiter. The English-speaking waiter came to take our orders, which we placed in Italian nonetheless. I decided to take a break from the Tour of Gnocchi and Tiramisu and be a bit adventurous than evening, ordering a seafood risotto,



verdura grigliate (grilled vegetables,) and eventually for dessert, a velvety panecotta that was the highlight of my meal (the caffè-soaked tiramisu that Leah selected was far less appealing to me.) Though I was glad to have tried something different, I realized that risotto is not something I love. My one culinary regret of the entire trip was that I did not order the famed "bistecca alla fiorentina," due to my (apparently unfounded) worries of BSE. When the diners all around us received their thick, perfectly grilled steaks, my mouth began to water at the sight. While we had ordered our meal from a young man who spoke to us in English, we noticed that for the rest of the meal, we were served by a young woman who spoke little English. We took a delighted pride in the fact that our Italian had developed sufficiently to allow them to free up the English-speaking waiter for other tables. One such table was the American couple sitting near us, the female half of whom complained about the white house wine because, "It has bubbles." At the large table in the corner sat a sizeable group of female American college students. They provided the excitement for the evening when one of them started choking on her meal and the rest of them ran around shouting in English,

“We need help!” The unfortunate dinner was saved with a Heimlich-like maneuver from one of her friends (though she was still breathing,) and proceeded to throw up all over the floor. Our poor server had to come out with the bucket and mop and clean up the mess.

We maneuvered our way back to the hotel, weaving amongst the lines of mopeds, and going specifically out of our way to avoid the sketchy gangs of guys hanging out on some of the darker streets. In keeping with that theme, Leah and Sue walked right by a dead rat, its head apparently bashed in. (“Ew, gross! Why did she have to write about that?” the audience complains.) Given the number of cities we visited, and the number of people we saw, the fact that a dead rat was one of the ugliest sights of the trip is indeed a testament to the remarkable beauty of Italy. Or at least a testament to the fact that we avoided most of the sketchy places.

Completely spent from a solid day of trekking all over the city, we all fell into bed early that night, sleeping heavily. We woke, feeling rested, to a bright and sunny morning in Firenze. Leah was so enamored of our breakfast location the previous day that she insisted we go there again; she didn’t want to leave without another taste of their cappuccino. This time, I made certain to order the decadent pastries, and enjoyed them quite thoroughly. After eating, we moved on to the Mercato Centrale, the huge open market in the heart of the city. We’d walked by the huge red and green warehouse-like structure the two previous days,



but each time it was later in the day, and its tall gates were shuttered. Friday morning, we went inside, greeted first by the fishmongers and their bountiful displays of whole calamari, octopus, and all other variety of fresh seafood. We walked through the cavernous building, alive with every kind of food imaginable, all looking wonderfully fresh and enticing. We walked past bins of freshly baked bread, stacked rounds of pungent cheeses in glass cases, delectable meats hanging from the rafters of the stalls, and piles of picture-perfect produce. I went around with Sue’s camera, taking photos of everything, from the obviously photogenic to the delightfully unusual, like the whole roosters with heads still attached and the pig’s head with a sandwich stuffed in its mouth. The Mercato Centrale was a



feast for the eyes as well as the stomach. Leah bought several bottles of wine, and she and Sue assembled a selection from an incredibly vast variety of gorgeously multi-colored dried fruits. For lunch on the train back to Napoli, we purchased crusty bread and hearty cheese. With my cold and a bit of confusion, I had some trouble pronouncing “quarto,” so instead of ordering the quarter kilo of cheese I was trying to obtain, the highly amused grocer thought I had said four kilos. Once we’d straightened that out, cheese purchased, we headed back to the hotel to check out.

We still had time to kill before our train, so I lead the way to Santa Maria Novella, the church for which the nearby train station is named. On the way, we stopped for stamps for the postcards we’d purchased along the way. We could have mailed them from the base at the U.S. domestic rate, but Leah wanted them to have an Italian postmark. That postmark ended up costing us nearly a dollar per card, but they at least got to the U.S. reasonably quickly (unlike my film.) The guidebook had mentioned Santa Maria Novella as being a worthwhile visit, second in importance only to Santa Croce, and we were prepared to go in, but discovered that it did not open until one on Fridays. As our train was scheduled to leave at 12:53, we had to forego that particular visit. Instead, I led us down a particularly busy street towards the immense Fortezza Basso. We did manage to reach the outer wall of the fortress, but there wasn’t much to see, so we turned around and headed back to the hotel to retrieve our luggage.



When vacationing, one of the pleasures of the being away from home is being away from the constant buzz of the media. In our week out of Napoli, we had only Italian television to watch anyway, so we stayed blissfully unaware. Eventually, however, the world will intrude, which it did quite shockingly when we boarded the train. The previous occupants of our seats had left behind their newspapers, and there, splashed across the headline of *La Repubblica*, was “Il Massacro in Madrid.” No translation was required for

that headline, but after the initial “Oh, my god,” I set about trying to glean a few more details from the paper. I got a few more facts, but I suppose it was just as well that we did not realize it had been a train until we were back in Napoli, off of our last train for the trip. It was a sobering reminder of the realities of the world in which we find ourselves today. On a brilliant spring day, the trip was a sumptuous visual tour of the Italian countryside, from the rolling hills of Toscana, to the bustle (Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now approaching Roma Termini,) and ancient ruins of Roma, through mountain villages and sweeping farmland, into the south with its cacti, citrus trees and buffalo, the source of the fresh mozzarella abundant in Napoli. This Eurostar train also had a train god to watch over our journey, though we never imagined the train god would be required. When the beverage cart was brought by, I even managed to be convincingly Italian enough to get the “Saltino” snack, which for some reason was only ever offered to the Italians; English speakers got “biscuits,” which were really cookies anyway. The Italians always had a choice between the two. As the saltino was a delightful rosemary-olive oil something or other (with rosemary olive oil snacks, it rarely matters what they are, they are invariably divine,) I was quite pleased with myself.



We were half-asleep, watching the miles roll by, when an announcement came over the intercom. Every other announcement had been in Italian and then repeated in English (hence the train god,) but this one was in Italian only. I was rather taken aback when I heard the request that if there were any Carabinieri on board that they go to the club car. We saw no Carabinieri go by, but several attendants rushed back and forth, with first aid kits and other supplies. And then, we saw her – the train god. She looked not the least bit god-like; she was in reality a dowdy older woman dressed in a smock, looking very much like a cleaning lady. Her smock, however, read, “Polizia A Bordo.” Train god, indeed. When we disembarked in Napoli, the train was met by the Carabinieri, as well as an ambulance with its crew of EMTs, all clad in fluorescent orange. A young man was taken from the train on a stretcher, holding a cloth up to his bleeding nose, and another man was being detained by the Carabinieri. By all impressions, there seemed to have been a fight in the club car.