



disappearing entirely into the ether.

Since then, I've only been out of the country to visit Canada, and since I grew up in Buffalo where Canada was closer than any of the neighboring states, that wasn't a very big deal. When I met Leah, she always talked about wanting to go to Europe; a trip to Spain in college had lit the fire within her, and she wanted more. I, on the other hand, had trouble with the idea of spending money on something that I couldn't keep, rather than on a material item that I could use over and over. It hadn't occurred to me that there are ways we keep non-material things in our lives as well, that even after a trip has faded into memory, it can continue to shape our lives in profound and meaningful ways. Looking back at recent travels, even before the one about which I now write, I realize how they centered me, brought me joy, and gave me something far more than just a week away from work, playing in the sunshine. It has taken many journeys to come to that realization, however. In some ways, I think that it was the weeks I spent floating around on random boats in random places on various sea tests that I began to truly appreciate the effect that travel has on me. Though these tests often involved long hours in somewhat inhospitable conditions, I reveled in the fresh air and sunshine. I also began to approach these trips as a blessing, and began to spend any free time I might have as a vacation, rather than sitting in the hotel room. It began last January, when I was sent on a rather unpleasant two-week trip to West Palm Beach. Trapped inside from before dawn until after sunset, I didn't get to experience much of the benefit of visiting Florida in January. My SAD kicked in earlier than usual, and I was profoundly unhappy. Despite that, I used my weekend to experience the great outdoors, Florida-style. I spent one day at the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and the next at the wonderful MacArthur State Park. In June I was back in North Idaho, where, despite a cold, I managed to go kayaking on Lake Coeur d'Alene, and to climb to the highest point in Farragut State Park. I snorkeled in Panama City, hiked long beaches and saw all variety of wildlife, including alligators and bottle-nosed dolphins. All this I did alone and while on business travel. Each experience enriched me and helped me to realize just how much there is to see. Nevertheless, it was still a major endeavor to convince me to spend any significant amount of my own money on travel.

It was Leah who forced the issue. I'd known from the time we met that she wanted to travel. When her sister, Katy, joined the Navy and was eventually stationed in Napoli (Naples), Leah insisted that we find a way to go visit her. I promised that we would go – eventually. We picked out possible dates, Leah's always a year or two earlier than my own, as she thought about visiting her sister and seeing Italy, while I thought about our bank accounts. Then one day last October, Leah was window shopping for tickets online and stumbled across a very good fare from Syracuse to Napoli. A day or two later, Leah's mother had decided to join us, since she wanted to visit as well, but not on her own. Before we knew it, we'd booked flights around the Syracuse University spring break in March. And so began our adventure. We didn't make much more in the way of plans until the trip neared, but we eventually booked some hotels, purchased rail passes and even bought opera tickets. The Internet is a wonderful thing.

On Wednesday, March 3, Sue's partner Dennis took us all to the airport. He needed to be at an

#### SHADES OF ITALY

##### ZIA LYDIA

THE BLACK CAT FLEW ACROSS THE ROOM  
IT WAS A VERY DARK ROOM  
I DIDN'T LIKE THAT CAT.

##### NONNI

WE WENT TO THE CANDY STORE ON NONNO'S BICYCLE  
NONNO BOUGHT ME A STICK OF GUM  
ELENA GOT TWO HARD CANDIES  
WE ATE IT IN THE MUSHROOM FOREST  
AND RODE BACK ON THE BICYCLE  
ELENA RODE IN THE BABY SEAT  
I RODE IN THE WIRE BASKET  
IT HURT A LITTLE.

WE WENT EVERYDAY FOR A WEEK  
IT WAS NICE  
I GOT THE SAME KIND OF GUM EVERYDAY  
UNTIL THE LAST DAY  
I HAD FINISHED THE PACK OF GUM THE DAY BEFORE  
NONNO BOUGHT A DIFFERENT KIND  
I CRIED  
I WANTED THE FIRST KIND  
ELENA GOT TWO HARD CANDIES  
WE ATE IT IN THE MUSHROOM FOREST  
AND RODE BACK ON THE BICYCLE.

##### SICILY

I RODE ON A TRAIN  
MY BIG ITALIAN COUSINS RODE TOO  
THEY GOT TO RIDE IN THE ENGINE  
I HAD TO RIDE IN A PASSENGER CAR  
THE TRAIN WENT AROUND AND AROUND.

appointment in Syracuse that morning, so he dropped us off beforehand, leaving us plenty of time to kill. We wandered around what little there is to wander around in the Syracuse airport, playing in the educational section. Leah and I enjoyed sitting in the cockpit of a Boeing 707 and playing with the instrument panels, even though none of them did anything in a cockpit long since disemboweled from its airplane. We played with the displays that explained lift, thrust and drag, and other things that allow airplanes to fly. We watched videos displaying how the Syracuse airport dealt with snow. And then we waited for our plane to arrive. We flew first to Newark, where we had several hours to wait, and I was unable to find an electrical outlet anywhere at which to plug in my laptop. From Newark, we boarded our flight to Milano (Milan.) We'd secured seats in the limited section that had laptop power ports, so I completed a homework assignment before attempting to get a bit of sleep. The red-eye flight was fairly empty, so we moved around and stretched out. It was never exactly comfortable, but we could have done much worse. Shutting out the outside world with earplugs and an eye mask, I managed to sleep a tiny bit, but before we knew it, breakfast was being served. I watched the GPS track of our progress on the monitors, and though I love all things GPS, it was the anticipation of finally arriving in Europe at last which truly stirred my blood. We were almost in Italy.

As we flew into Milano Thursday morning, the alpine peaks rose mightily above the clouds as the sun broke over the horizon. Leah and I watched, transfixed, as we flew through France into Italy. Italia ... the land of wine and art and romance, the land of my ancestors. Our journey was far from over, but the sight of the snow-covered Alps set a powerful mood for the dawning day.

Two hours in the Milano airport seemed interminable, and in our exhaustion, the controlled chaos of the Italian boarding process seemed more chaos than control. When the flight was called, approximately 100 people swarmed the gate. It took two packed buses to take us all to the plane, at which point everyone swarmed onto the plane from both front and rear. We were some of the last ones on board. Leah had to find a spot for my laptop in an overhead bin. My backpack wouldn't fit under the seat in front of me, and I had to wedge it between my legs and the seat, but the flight was so crowded that no one could tell. I was glad of the shorter flight, though the sights were still magnificent. The Alps and Apennines rose above the clouds and farms covered the countryside. As we descended into Napoli, the mass of Vesuvio (Mt. Vesuvius) loomed large, its snow-capped peak shining brightly in the midday sky. Below, life went on throughout the ancient land. We passed over an amphitheatre, and saw cars barreling into tunnels blasted through the sides of the mountains.

A few hours later, I was sitting in the rehearsal room of the CINCSOUTH Band on the NATO base in Napoli. The band rehearsing, while comprised mostly of U.S. Navy members, also contained representatives from the Royal British Marines, the Greek Air Force, the Italian Army and the Carabinieri. Drumsticks flew as the red-headed percussionist jammed, trumpets danced, and a trombone slid in and out of the music, while Katy's soprano soared high above the din. This was certainly not a part of any typical tourist jaunt through Italy, and a singularly unique experience. All the same, at that moment, we were all so exhausted that getting to bed that night was the most appealing thing any of us could think to do at that moment. Dinner came first, however, so we squeezed into Katy's miniature Fiat with its missing dome light, ceiling panel and other assorted parts. At dinner, I had gnocchi, a particular favorite of mine all too often left off the menu in Italian-American restaurants, and they were the fluffiest I have ever had. They were also the fluffiest that Katy had ever had, and she's lived there for a year. The sauce was rather too salty for my tastes, particularly after I had eaten for a while, but the first few bites alone made up for that. Katy had been recommending many of the appetizers, so we tried those, and then the first course, followed by a salad. Even without the second course or desert, it was far too much food, and we were all getting far too full for our own good.

By Friday, we'd been in Italy for two days, and though it seemed as though we hadn't seen much, we'd had some interesting adventures. Being totally exhausted, by the time we got back from dinner on Thursday, we went right to bed. It was 10:30 by then anyway. Unfortunately, Katy realized that she had forgotten her medications back in her barracks, so she had to drive all the way back to get them. Sue volunteered to go with her. Leah and I fell asleep almost immediately after they left, so we didn't notice how long it took for them to return. It was close to two when they finally arrived back in the hotel room. Katy's car had broken down on their way to the base, leaving them stranded at the side of the highway in the middle

of the night. She had to call a friend, who, with his wife, picked them up and brought them to her base, and then driven them up to the base at which we were staying. After they'd finally gone to bed and I had fallen back asleep, we were suddenly awakened by loud voices in the room. I was the first to realize that the television was on, and stumbled around the room to find the remote control and turn the bloody thing off. It was four in the morning, and we had a possessed television. (I assumed that a previous occupant of the room had decided to use the TV as an alarm clock, and didn't bother to turn off the alarm before leaving. It was incredibly disconcerting to be woken up in the middle of the night by a television. We made certain to clear the programming before going to bed the next night.)

Katy had to be up the next morning for work, so we all woke up quite early, but the rest of us went back to sleep and ended up sleeping until noon. Having barely slept on the plane the prior night, we badly needed the sleep. For breakfast, I wandered down to the little coffee shop (which they call a "bar" in Italy,) to find something to eat. I ended up with what was listed on the menu - for the benefit of the Americans populating the base - as "Panning Neopolitan." That bizarre English description turned out to be a traditional Neapolitan sandwich; someone had apparently translated "Panino Neopolitano" very strangely indeed. Once everyone was up and dressed, we went for a walk around the base, stopping at the caffè bar for gelato. We'd gotten warm walking in the sunny afternoon, so the gelato was perfect. I had tiramisù flavor, which was wonderful.

When Katy came home from work that afternoon, she had a rental car. We all piled into the Opel, which was a darned sight more comfortable than Katy's Fiat, and headed off to our fourth military base in two days. We'd started off at Capodichino, which is right next to the airport, and also where Katy lives. We then visited AFSOUTH, the NATO base where she works. The Navy Lodge is at Gricignano, and we went to Agnano to visit the USO office and see which tours we could sign up for. After making reservations for a trip to Roma (Rome,) we took the train into downtown Napoli to see the sights. On the train, which had been mostly empty when we boarded, a quartet of accordionists boarded and serenaded all on. Playing non-stop between two stations, they transformed the atmosphere on the uninspiring car for a few surprising minutes. At the next stop, they were gone. It was a brief and delightfully Italian moment.



Our next adventure, while not at all delightful, was also quite Italian. We had gone to Napoli Centrale, the main train station, to reserve tickets for our train on Saturday. We started at the Eurostar booth, where the man behind the glass decided that his English was better than Katy's Italian, and told us in English where we had to go to get our tickets. We did as instructed, and found the line for the Eurostar reservations. When called, Katy tried to explain to the clerk what we wanted. When it came time to pay the €44 fee, Leah took out a bill and paid for it. We were waiting for our change, wondering what was going on, when the clerk showed us the €10 bill in the tray, and motioned to us that there was not enough money. We apologized and dug up the rest of the money, thinking that Leah had somehow mistaken a €10 for a €50. It was only a few minutes later that we put the pieces together and realized that we had been swindled. Leah hadn't used any of her Euros since she'd taken the money from the ATM, so she didn't even have a ten in her wallet at the time we paid the guy. He'd pulled a fast one on us, exchanging the similarly colored €50 and €10 bills, and made off with €40 of our money. By the time we realized it, there was nothing that we could do. Because the guy was in uniform, acting in an official capacity, we'd let down our guard, and we got taken. Benvenuti a l' Italia.

When we finally got our upgrades/reservations, having paid almost twice as much for them as we should have, we went outside of the station to find a snack and walk around a bit. Downtown Napoli is, like any other large city on a Friday night, teeming with people, most of whom are trying to sell you something designed to look like something more expensive. We headed into the nearest caffè bar for a snack.

We bought several snacks at a bar on a corner directly across from the station, and the staff seemed greatly amused by us. When we went and sat on a bench directly outside, passing the sandwiches around in a circle, each taking a bite until they were gone, they found us even more amusing (which, I suppose, we rather

were.) After eating, we wandered around the square, but it was incredibly crowded and crazy, it being a Friday night in the heart of downtown Napoli. We decided that it was a bit too much for us, so we got back on the subway, and Katy took us to Mergellina, an upscale area on the waterfront. It was significantly quieter, but, as we crossed a street and the light changed while we were halfway across, Sue was nearly hit by a moped. The drivers had their eyes so fixed on the light that they didn't notice us walking directly in front of them. We walked briefly along the waterfront, drooling over the exquisitely crafted torte and other heavenly delicacies. Stray dogs routinely wandered out around us; Katy explained that it is illegal to put animals to sleep, so instead they are abandoned and left to starve.

Katy then took us to dinner at a place called Romario's. She and her friends go there regularly, and as a result, she now knows the owner. Fabio was very friendly, and the food was excellent. Their bruschetta is made non-traditionally, pizza-style rather than on toast, but it was fantastic. I had fettuccine con frutte del mare, and had a grand old time showing all the fun little calamari - in all of their tentacled glory - to my less than enthusiastic dining companions. They all declined to sample my meal that evening. Even the salads were excellent. Fresh lettuce, tomatoes and good olive oil and vinegar elevate a simple salad to a whole new level. They put American salads and their useless iceberg lettuce, which I have always found lacking anyway, to shame.