

Perry Del Favero

I've learned to choose my battles wisely since I've been fighting them all in Italian. Especially since my opponent has been an elderly woman with a rolling pin. The word for rolling pin in Italian is *matterello*, which I wouldn't have known except that Piera, my host mother, said it while wielding a rolling pin like one would wield an object used for bludgeoning.

I've also learned that without my vocabulary, I am nothing. I can't even lie in another language, when nothing you say ever sounds like you're giving a straight answer. Piera always seems to be able to tell the difference between when I genuinely don't understand what she's saying and when I just don't want to, which is most of the time.

Alternatively, Piera tells the truth *all* the time. Asking her every night before I went out if she liked my outfit seemed like an exercise in masochism. I knew that eventually she would tell me something I didn't want to hear. When she finally did, she said it simply, plainly, and without decorum: *brutta*. I changed.

The other day, Piera took me shopping (for warmer clothes) only after I had put on not one, but two, coats. Needless to say, this was one of those Italian battles I chose wisely not to fight. I struggled to move my arms like the countless children in the snow I had seen in movies. When they were dressed like that, you knew someone who loved them—perhaps too much—had dressed them that way. I closed my eyes and tried to think if I had ever felt this way as a child.

I can definitely see qualities in Piera that also exist within my own family. I first learned that the Italian word for anorexic is nearly the same as the English when I once told Piera that I had eaten a kebab for lunch. Whether she's faking it or not, Piera has not

heard of anything that isn't Italian. When Piera accused me of having a problem, I remembered my own grandmother leaning across the table from me one Thanksgiving dinner after I refused a third roll and saying in a high, detached tone, "Honey, are you anorexic?" When Piera warned me that the bad men in Florence were not *italiano* but in fact *albanese*, I was reminded of my grandmother eyeing the wait staff at her country club while lifting a hair out of her food and saying, "At least it's blonde!" This being said, I've realized that some things come with age and have nothing to do with one's country of origin.

In the same way, I've grown to view Florence as I would view a very old and very dear friend. In her, I only see the good and the highs I've had I really feel are the highest highs I will ever have. But when I do experience the bad, it's certainly never her fault. I could've been attacked on the street in any city in the world but where else am I going to find ice cream so good they can't even call it ice cream? Surely, only Florence.

I realized all of this on the walk to the clothing store, which was amazing considering the cold and the coats were so constricting I could barely even breathe, much less think. As I waddled down the road, Piera commented that I looked like something I didn't understand. I didn't need to; I knew I looked like a penguin too.