

## Permesso di Soggiorno

Two days after my excited, anxious, and sweaty arrival in Firenze, I was presented with an unexpected opportunity. An error in my student visa documentation barred me from travelling outside of Italy during my study abroad here. Under the heading *Numero di Ingressi*, my visa displayed a unique “01”, which meant I was not permitted more than one entry into Italy. I would face serious repercussions if I left, even the threatening possibility of an immediate departure back to the United States. Friends and peers unremittingly offered me their words of commiseration, “That’s such bad luck! What about your trip to Oktoberfest with everyone for your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday? I’m sorry this happened to you!” Despite finding out I could not celebrate my birthday in Munich, follow my fall break wishes to Istanbul, and visit my friends in Barcelona, I kept a positive attitude. Like adjusting to the imperfectly perfect cobblestone streets, I wanted to turn this unexpected bump in the road into motivation for a deep immersion into Italian culture.

So I accepted what I saw as fate’s challenge of “imprisoning” me in this culturally voluptuous country. At first, I resembled a map of Venezia: I was a slab of fish stuck to a piece of paper, not sure where to begin in the deep labyrinth of my initial understanding of the Italian language and lifestyle. The phrases *mi piace* and *sì, capsico* (even when *non ho capito*) were becoming far too ubiquitous in my attempts at Italian discourse. Early on in the semester a waiter scolded me, “You must not speak English in my restaurant. Do not *think* of what you are saying. You must just open your mouth and *speak!*” But I could only respond with a meek smile and the persistent nod of a weekend tourist. I became disappointed in my slow progress and in myself. I decided to change this with just a simple self-pledge: to open up my *spinaci cotti* colored shutters to my enchanting Via de’ Macci every day. This idea would help me understand to act as if I were a piece of bread soaking in my host mother’s warm Ribollita; you must submerge yourself in order to absorb anything substantial. Patience is a significant factor in this process. I would never reach even a satisfactory level of immersion if I did not become saturated in the culture around me.

Many times I have sat in the intimate and ever-buzzing Piazza Sant' Ambrogio, and treated each sip of my smooth € glass of *Chianti Classico* like it was a small moment of ecstasy. I continue to adore the gorgeous embellishments of the Duomo and Santa Croce, which seem to bloom in the streets straight out of the terra cotta rooftops every time I find myself lost around a corner. I have caught myself staring down at the steps, aged with indentations from the various soles of previous visitors. I have tasted fresh *bianco tartufo* in San Miniato, shopped for Venetian glass by Piazza San Marco, and salivated during a forty-minute wait for pizza from L' Antica Pizzeria Da Michele in Napoli. I have learned to embrace the intangible, the impossible that only Italian culture can inspire. In Siena I had a moment overcome with romance and imaginativeness that I was Botticelli's Venus, and the Piazza del Campo was my shell, and the rushing horses of the traditional *il Palio* race were the crashing sea foam waves carrying me to this moment of cultural epiphany.

These feelings of inspiration and *benvenuto* in Italy can only be described physically like a warm internal smile, one that is relentless. I am indebted to my host parents, the Benvenuti's, both nearing age 70 without intention of knowing any English surpassing the word *ok*. Every time they say, "Ciao amore!" my heart becomes filled with love as thick as a bistecca alla Fiorentina from Il Latini. When they found out I would be alone on my birthday, they assertively (with love) invited me along with their family and friends to Follonica, a quaint Italian beach. I sat overjoyed in the back seat next to their best friend, 80-year-old vivacious little Tina. Their conversation flowed like a beautiful description of one of Calvino's invisible cities. It felt unbelievably magical that I could understand what they were saying, while I watched van Gogh cypress trees swiftly pass by my window. I would not have traded that weekend, let alone that two-hour car ride, for anything else in the world.

My visa situation was not a detriment to my abroad experience. I never thought it would be. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason. This thought has run incessantly through my subconscious as I have attempted to comprise the most inspiring and wonderful experiences of my life in these two pages. My passport may only have one stamp, but it encompasses an immeasurable journey.

This unexpected circumstance ended up being a blessing not so disguised that I am forever grateful for, thanks to my lucky "01".