

Rebecca Levitan

Il piccolo verde Dizionario and what it taught me about life in Italy

Do you know that moment in the movie “Castaway” where Tom Hanks’ character loses “Wilson”, the volleyball that has served as his only form of company for years on a deserted island? Tom Hanks is lying on a raft sobbing as the volleyball slowly drifts out into the never-ending expanse of ocean around him. It is a hard scene to watch - kind of sickening and devastating at the same time. Well, I recently had a similar experience in which I understood why Tom Hanks was so upset to lose his inanimate friend. I wasn’t on a raft in the middle of the ocean drifting off into the unknown, I certainly wasn’t starving and delusional like Hank’s Castaway character, and I didn’t lose a volleyball. Instead, I was torn from “il piccolo verde dizionario.”

Il piccolo verde dizionario had been my constant friend and companion in Italy since the day of my arrival. A gift from my host mom, the dictionary had been left at our apartment by a previous student. I arrived in Italy with a semester’s worth of Italian experience which didn’t seem to help much with my host mom, who speaks virtually zero English. My roommate, a student in the Option Two track, felt no need for the piccolo verde dizionario, and conversed comfortably with my host mom from Day One. The dizionario and I quickly became inseparable “migliore amici.”

Like some kind of little green shadow, it travelled with me in hand to the beach for “Immersion Weekend”, sat next to me at the dinner table, and even rode the bus with me to the Villa Rossa. Whenever I was uncertain of how to say something, the piccolo verde dizionario was there. If my host mom and I were having trouble communicating, it brought us together, and flipping through its pages, we were on equal footing. Between its little green covers was a safe bilingual world.

Then last week, something awful happened. An American friend of my host mom, Frank, had come to Italy for a week and the piccolo verde dizionario was passed to him temporarily. The only problem was when Frank left, the dizionario also mysteriously went missing. The moment I heard the news, I felt a whole lot like the bearded and starving Tom Hanks, floating in the middle of the Pacific yelling “Wilson!” Then after a few minutes the panic subsided. I realized that the dizionario and I had been spending much less time together anyways. It no longer accompanied me to dinner; I had learned enough conversational Italian that I could speak with my host mom without its help. It hadn’t ridden the bus with me in weeks. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I used the piccolo verde dizionario. Was it possible that its departure wasn’t such a big deal after all? Maybe it had been time for us to part.

The truth is things like dictionaries can only get you so far. After two months of immersion in Italian culture and language, I learned to communicate without the help of books or memorization or anything you can learn in a classroom. The dictionary was a jumping off point, but it couldn’t teach me how to switch bus lines, cook gnocchi, or haggle for a leather bag like a real Italian. Through my experience in the Syracuse program and my homestay I stopped *studying* Italian and started actually *living* like one. Somewhere in the process, I learned that cultural values and the intrinsic similarities between all people, whether they are American or Italian, will get you a lot further in life than memorizing verb tenses or synonyms. At a certain point we need to leave our Wilsons (or dictionaries) and jump into the terrifying ocean that is the culture of another country – it’s the only way to really understand.

I’m not sure where the piccolo verde dizionario is now or who it may be helping. I only wish I could have broken up with it more resolutely. So dizionario - wherever you are: Its not you, its me. I’ve moved on. You are really great, and you will make someone really happy one day, but I’m just at a different stage in my life. I’ll always look back on our time together fondly, but I’m ready to move on. Arrivederci!