

*Sarah Walmsley*  
*S.U. in Florence*  
*Coluccio Salutati Essay*

### **Feeling at Home in Florence**

When I first arrived in Florence, I had a hard time adjusting. I felt like a constant, unwanted guest. I was embarrassed that I spoke English, made lines longer in cafés, and took up space on the sidewalk. Part of my embarrassment came from being *Americana* but mostly I was embarrassed because I was obviously *un-Florentine*. My mentality was that of any young traveler: curious and selfish. I was continuously absorbing the culture, taking it all in, but feeling as though I was unable to give anything back. After about a month, I became comfortable with the people, culture and streets of Florence, and I was able to relax. Unfortunately, I also relaxed while playing *calcetto* and I lost my balance, rolled on my hand and broke it.

From my first x-ray at Santa Maria Nuova Hospital I saw a different side of Italy. In the waiting room, a friendly Italian man initiated a conversation in English and asked me about my injury. While I told him that I thought Italian emergency rooms were quick and well organized compared to American ones, he was surprised. He said he had thought that the American ones would be much better, like on *ER*. It was the first time I had felt an Italian stranger express any interest in me. From that moment on, all of the nurses and doctors were curious about my injury and most were surprised when I told them that I had been playing *calcetto*. In the hospitals I became known as the *Ragazza Americana* who played *calcetto*. It was as if, by getting injured, I had surpassed the role of the average tourist and I was seen as an American, a student and a real person. Throughout the next month, with the help of my large cast, I met many more curious

Italians who would smile, laugh, sneer or raise their eyebrows and say, “*Da vero?*” when I told them the story. It was in this simple and casual way that I began to feel welcome in Florence.

Throughout my experience so far, there are specific moments in which I have found myself feeling truly at home. It happens when American culture and Italian culture mix and create a state of simultaneous, unspoken understanding. I was playing *calcetto* when I felt this comforting fusion for the first time. It is the sport that I know and love, and I was lucky enough to be playing it in a country that was just as passionate about it as I was. During the game, Italians surrounded the field, watching each move, each pass, and each shot that my American teammates and I made. For those few moments, we were all part of the same culture and we all spoke the same language.

One night I was sitting at the kitchen table talking with a best friend from home who had come to visit. My host mom was sitting beside me, playing cards with her best friend, Donatella. They spoke in Italian while we spoke in English. At one point, Donatella stopped what she was doing and listened. Then she said in Italian, “I love listening to you girls talk”. My friend and I smiled and said the same thing back to them, and then we all continued on. In these brief moments of synthesis and understanding I feel at peace, like I truly belong.

I no longer feel like an unwanted guest in Florence. In the past three months, I have been able to create my own relationship with the city and its people. I have absorbed the culture as much as possible and now it is a part of me. But amidst all that Florence has done for me, I like to think that I have left something for a handful of Florentines: even if this something is only a smile, a thought or a brief feeling of connection.