

*Italian Lesson #1 – Dove?*

First week of orientation. Armed with three weeks of independent Italian study and an only occasionally reliable sense of direction, I take to the streets of Firenze. Mistake. En route from the orientation hotel to school, it becomes plain the Villa Rossa does not sit along the Arno, on either bank. Ex-Boy Scout that I am, the map provided only succeeds in further confusing my already muddled sense of location. Less than forty-eight hours after arriving in Italy, lost and alone in a strange city, I am ready to declare myself the program's first victim.

A park looks familiar – a thought forms that there should be a cemetery nearby. Looking up and down the length of Via Vittorio Alfieri, I cannot decide which direction should take me there. I feel stymied and mystified, but my raw surge of survival adrenaline pushes me to do the desperate: attempt to speak with the natives. (Three months later, has the adrenaline ever left?) Fortunately, one is at hand. “Scusi,” I ask la donna; “Dove son io?” As we hunch over the enormous tourist-sized map together, my sense of elation at having communicated is so great that when the woman succeeds in locating us, I joyfully thank her... and head in the opposite direction to school.

I have conquered the use of “dove”.

*Italian Lesson #2 – Irregular Conjugations*

Several weeks into the program, all my confusion and disorientation from being in Italy congeal into my first ever ear infection. Hours prior to meeting friends for the evening, at six o'clock exactly my right ear closes, blocking all sound. That night, I hover on the edge of sleep, rolling my head as if playing the game to stop the ball from entering the hole. After hours of tossing, I dream I am trapped in a maze covered in fog. I realize with horror that in order to escape I must conjugate irregular Italian verbs, none of which I have learned yet. The dream has become a nightmare.

*Italian Lesson #3 – Volere*

Want is a tricky matter. I initially wanted to come to Italy to learn the language and to meet the people, and that is what I have tried to do. However, after the initial thrill of language study, there has come a sense of disappointment. Each conversation, it is never long before I realize my limits of communication. I can ask how someone is feeling, but unless the answer is “Well”, I find myself at a loss; I cannot offer even the smallest words of friendship or comfort that any native of a language knows. Linguistically, the only safe ground is unfortunately a language of consumption. I can want a pizza, but wanting to speak with Italians is another matter completely.

*Italian Lesson #4 – Da vs. Per*

“Sono a Firenze *da* tre mese.” Somehow this phrase (and its implications) has come to haunt the countdown to the end of the program. Having finally reached the level to express how long I’ve been in Florence, I find myself about to leave. I am loath to summarize the semester as if it were finished, drawing some conclusion or tidy morale from it; faced with having to leave Italy, the only conclusion I can make is that I *have* to come back. Instead of conceiving of my time here as closed, in the way one would use the Italian “per” – “Sono stato a Firenze *per* tre mese” – I have to recognize how what I have learned cannot be compartmentalized into the past. Tourists leave Italy by finishing their travel logs; as a student, I must leave by making sure I have plenty of space for later. Even without immediate plans to return, even if one *never* returns, this impulse feels like the only genuine lesson to communicate.