

# Niente Senza Gioia

An Italian Adventure

My vision of the perfect life came true one night — and it happened in Florence, half a world away.

It was the beginning of my second week in Italy. I'd come to get away from anxiety at home and ironically, had found myself caught up in a trip bursting with the unexpected. I'd lost my luggage and brought the wrong shoes. I'd explored the peace of ancient cathedrals and been caught in the revelry of Carnevale in Milan. But none of my adventures thus far had prepared me for the joy to come on that night. I had been a tourist, an outsider. But I was about to become part of a family.

I was traveling with my friend, Frank. We'd asked Laura, the Italian desk clerk at our hotel, to suggest a good place for dinner. We wanted to get away from the tourist traps we'd already sampled with shrill English voices at every table and disinterested waiters hawking uniform plates of spaghetti. She suggested a place across town and beside the Arno River called "Alla Vecchia Bettola." It advertised itself as "Cucina tipica fiorentina" — typical Florentine cuisine. For us, it was anything but.

It was a long walk. Our journey took us past the Ponte Vecchio, across a different bridge famous for nothing, and into the dark, empty neighborhoods far away from the tourist attractions of central Florence. We hiked past ancient wooden doors, deserted storefronts, and numerous fountains spouting water from the mouths of copper lions.

"Where is this place, Frank?" I was getting cranky.

It wasn't the first time I'd asked.

“Stop worrying, Becky! I marked the directions on the map. We’ll get there. Give it a rest, willya?”

I finally saw lights in the distance. As we drew closer to the only source of illumination for blocks, it was obvious we’d found the Alla Vecchia Bettola. We edged closer to the entrance. From across the street, the trattoria was bathed in warmth. The windows were fogged with heat from food, candles and mirth. Every table was full of wildly gesticulating Italians, wine bottles and overflowing plates - all surrounded by the blur of busy waiters swooping in to set down, replace and refill.

We yanked open the heavy wooden door and walked in. The verbal roar seemed to skip a beat when we entered. We were the only non-Italians and the only tourists in the whole place! I felt stared at, conspicuous for the first time since arriving in tourist-dense Florence.

The dining room was small for such popularity on a Wednesday night in March. To our left was a long wooden bar festooned with Art Deco swirls. The view across the top was blocked by the immense bouquet of pussy willows and sweet peas springing forth from an earthenware jug. Beyond it were yards of wine on shelves, like actors jammed together for a clumsy curtain call. There were bottles standing neatly in rows and bottles scattered on their sides. Neatly wrapped packages of liquid joy. The display case at the other end of the bar held rounds of fresh, ripe cheese. Resting precariously above it was an immense jar of antipasti ingredients – pepperonicinis, salami rounds, olives and porcini mushrooms – all sloshed together in a bath of balsamic vinegar.

The rest of the room was jammed full with mismatched wooden tables of varying sizes. Couples engaged in intimate conversation sat elbow to elbow with families juggling squirming children. Stuck in between sat chains of friends gathered together for what appeared to be regularly scheduled debates and raucous joke-telling.

My self-consciousness abated only slightly after being shown to one of the long, wooden tables opposite the windows. We were seated at one end of the empty table and handed menus written entirely in Italian. Digging out our dictionaries, we proceeded to decipher the handwritten offerings.

“Frank, I can’t read this. What does it say?”

“I think it says ‘braciola di maiale.’ Pork chops. What about this one? ‘Zuppa di cipolla.’ “

“That’s onion soup.”

We were deep into the decoding process and I was becoming anxious about what to order. The waiter kept coming over to see if we needed help. We asked him repeatedly to translate the menu listings. I was tense and self-conscious.

While we were struggling with our order, another group of diners sat down at our table. I looked up to see four swarthy Italians in dark shirts and black jeans settling in at the other end. It didn’t even occur to me to speak to them, the wide gulf of language and culture seemingly insurmountable. I thought it strange to share the table but I ignored them and went back to the menu.

Suddenly my self-absorption was interrupted. A hand stuck in my face demanded to be shaken. It belonged to a tall smiling man newly arrived from the cold. He spoke Italian but didn’t look it. Instead of the typical swarthinness, he was lithe and angular with sandy hair and blue eyes behind wire glasses. He wore a sports coat – an odd counterpoint to the coarseness of his companions. He made his way around the table and shook hands vigorously with each of us in turn.

“Ciao! Ciao! Come sta?”

“Uh, hi...bene...ciao.” I stumbled for the appropriate Italian response as I retrieved my hand from its hold on my Italian-English dictionary.

“Ah! Americana!” He had noticed the halting Italian and realized his mistake.

“Si, I mean yes.”

The stranger went through the same routine with Frank. Then, finished with his tour of greetings, he settled in among the group of men at the other end of our table.

“What the hell was that all about, Frank?” I muttered.

“I don’t know. I think he’s confused us with that group he came to meet. He must think we’re part of them.”

Or did he?

We finally placed our order and settled into our carafe of house red. We weren’t talking much; instead we watched as the jocularity at the other end of the table escalated. But we weren’t going to be let off so easily in our voyeur roles. No, this was participation dining! The smiling man, like a master of ceremonies, turned toward us and began addressing us in accented, but easily understandable English.

“Where are you guyz from? Amerika, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” I stuttered, unaccustomed to being lassoed into someone else’s dining experience.

“I’m Arturo. But call me ‘Artie.’ ”

He introduced his friends and told us he was a traveling salesman for a mens' sportswear company. That explained his natty attire. He was from Mantova, he offered. Originally from Germany. That explained the lack of facial hair and "Degerfeld" surname.

Frank and I resumed our private conversation but snuck surreptitious glances towards his end of the table to see what would happen next. We watched as Arturo ordered the meals and wine for his group, brandishing his menu like a cape. It seemed his friends had been waiting for him to show up before the lights dimmed and the action could begin.

The next thing we knew, a waiter had snuck up behind us with water glasses full of the expensive wine Arturo had ordered. We were shocked and touched by his generosity. It wasn't in the North American rulebook of what you do when you share a table with strangers.

Slowly but surely Arturo gathered us into his ring, the wine drawing us in. At the beginning of the evening, the table seemed split into two continents; Frank and I at one end and the Italians at the other. But now both sides inched closer and closer in response to Arturo's encouragement, questions, bribes and toasts. Soon I was sitting directly across from one of the amici, the shy one with the soulful brown eyes, deep in a conversation conducted via hand waves and eyebrow waggles over the onion soup I was eating. I looked up the correct words – and anything else I was trying to discuss with him, in the mini yellow English-Italian dictionary I carried. He was desperate to make a connection and stymied by the language barrier.

Arturo to the rescue. His role as master of ceremonies extended to individual conversation translations as well.

"Heez asking if you like formaggio – cheese. He's a master cheese maker in Parma."

"Really?" I was duly impressed.

“You guyz want to try some?”

On cue, the attentive waiters delivered rounds of the cheese to our table.

We were now firmly fixed in Arturo’s spotlight as the main courses arrived. Italian meals are served family style with platters passed around the table for sharing. This meal was no exception. Arturo expected, no demanded, that we help ourselves to their food, extracting only the small price of good-natured inquisition into our lives.

“You guyz are married, no?”

“No, we’re not even dating.”

“Oh, I don’t believe you!”

My mouth dripped with juices from the most tender pork chop I’d ever set teeth into. The Brunello wine in my glass exploded with the flavor of sun-warmed berries. Time slowed. Conversations faded into the background. An overwhelming sense of peace and belonging seeped into my body, relaxing muscles that had been tense for months. I didn’t want to be anywhere else in the world. I didn’t want to be with any other people in the world. I felt I could have anything I wanted that night. Food, wine, love, companionship, freedom, peace, and joy.

We weren’t tourists or strangers anymore; we’d been fully initiated into a community of intimates.

Though the rest of the patrons were long gone, the drinking, bantering and laughing continued at our table. Two of their female friends showed up to help finish off the tirmisu, liqueur and cigars with which we ended the meal. When only crumbs and ashes remained, Frank organized us all into a “family portrait.”

I have that photograph now – the table looks like a cross between the remains of a bacchanalian feast and a modern, ecumenical “Last Supper.” It captures perfectly the liveliness and warmth of the evening. At one end, a waiter is leaning on the edge of the table and smiling at the camera. A couple in the middle is caught in a private whisper; another amico’s mouth hangs open in mid-syllable. Frank and Arturo and I are positioned in a self-contained pyramid, like one of Raphael’s holy family “tondo” portraits. Two others, the other woman, and the cheesemaker, are squeezed in beside us, beaming at the camera.

I recognized that scene. I’d literally dreamt it before. Friends gathered around a table, laughing and eating in a bright and warm kitchen. Words I’d read long before in a favorite book came to mind to express this vision – a touchstone for the kind of life I want to lead.

*Niente Senza Gioia* - “Nothing Without Joy.”

I’ve lived it now. Awake. The memory of peace and laughter and berries will always be there with the taste of wine and the sound of laughter. I can remember that.