

Adventures in the Eternal City

Excerpt. Not for Reprint.

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As I peruse the menu at *Il Bolognese* with its entrails freezing prices, I see the man who had been in the group I had followed inside and who had opened the door for me approach my table.

“*Scusi*, I noticed that you’re alone. I saw you at the film awards ceremony. I hope I’m not being too forward but my friends and I would be delighted if you’d come join us.”

He introduces himself and gives me his card. He says he’s a journalist and that he’s here with some friends and colleagues. I look over at the group of men and women at his table and say that I really don’t want to impose while they’re having dinner (customary little Italian ritual dance of politeness). Of course, he insists, saying that they’ve just ordered too many appetizers and that he would appreciate it if I saved him from a lot of boring business talk.

After seeing the prices of those appetizers, I see no reason to refuse. I smile at him and say “*Grazie...molto gentile.*”

I try to inform the waiters but they need no explanations. They seem to know the journalist very well. One of the waiters immediately brings a chair to accommodate me at the large table, another puts a napkin on my lap, another brings me a place setting while yet another fills my wine glass. An avalanche of appetizers make their appearance in rapid succession with waiters coming around to serve each guest individually from huge platters filled with small creamy buffalo mozzarella balls, paper thin slices of fragrant prosciutto, sweet melon, assorted crostini, marinated vegetables and bite-size pizzas.

The men and women at the table politely ask me where I’m from in the United States, what I’m doing in Rome, how come an *Americana* can speak Italian so perfectly. I explain I was born in Genoa and moved to the United States as a young girl. Luckily, they soon resume their shop talk and I’m glad with just listening, not being asked any more questions and enjoying my one meal of the day.

When I decide it’s time to leave I have to patiently wait for a lull in the conversation since I’ll need to say goodbye to everybody. The men stand up to shake hands and I go to each woman individually for a kiss on both cheeks. How I hate these long goodbyes. How easy it would be to just get up, wave a cheery goodbye to the general assembly and take off. The journalist accompanies me to the door, gives me his card and makes me promise to call him while I’m in Rome.

"I'm here to do some work and I'm sure you're also very busy." I say coyly. "I really don't want to take up your time." I'm assuming he's married and have no interest in wasting my time on meaningless little dates.

"No, at all." He responds. "I have selfish reasons. It will be fun talking to somebody new. You'll be saving me from spending my time around a lot of boring colleagues."

Geez with such romance...how can I resist?

"Better still," he continues, "just in case you lose my card, let me have your number so I can enter it in my phone."

"*Si certo,*" I answer as I dig in dig through my bag and finally find my cheap, 'Usa e getta' (disposable) cell phone that I bought upon my arrival in Italy. He enters my name on his phone then asks: "*Allora, il numero?*"

With slight embarrassment I turn the phone over so I can read the piece of paper with the incredibly long number on it which I had asked the store employee to tape on the back. "Sorry I say, but I don't think I could ever memorize so many numbers." He smiles, takes the phone from me and enters my numbers in his latest model cell phone.

"In the United States every phone number has only seven digits," I continue, to distract him from scrutinizing my cheap phone.

"Yes, cell phone numbers are pretty long" he says. "but even for landlines there is no standard rule as in the United States. Some land lines have 6, some 7 and in some places even 5 digits. Area codes can be two, three or four digits."

"That can be confusing," I say, throwing the offending phone back in my bag.

"Not at all," he laughs. "Italians like things to be different." Then, after kissing me on both cheeks, he looks into my eyes and says "Life should always be a surprise, not too predictable."

I would later find out from Maurizio, the good looking barman at my hotel, that he is a parliamentary journalist for the *Camera dei Deputati* (Chamber of Deputies) and a legend in the world of journalism.