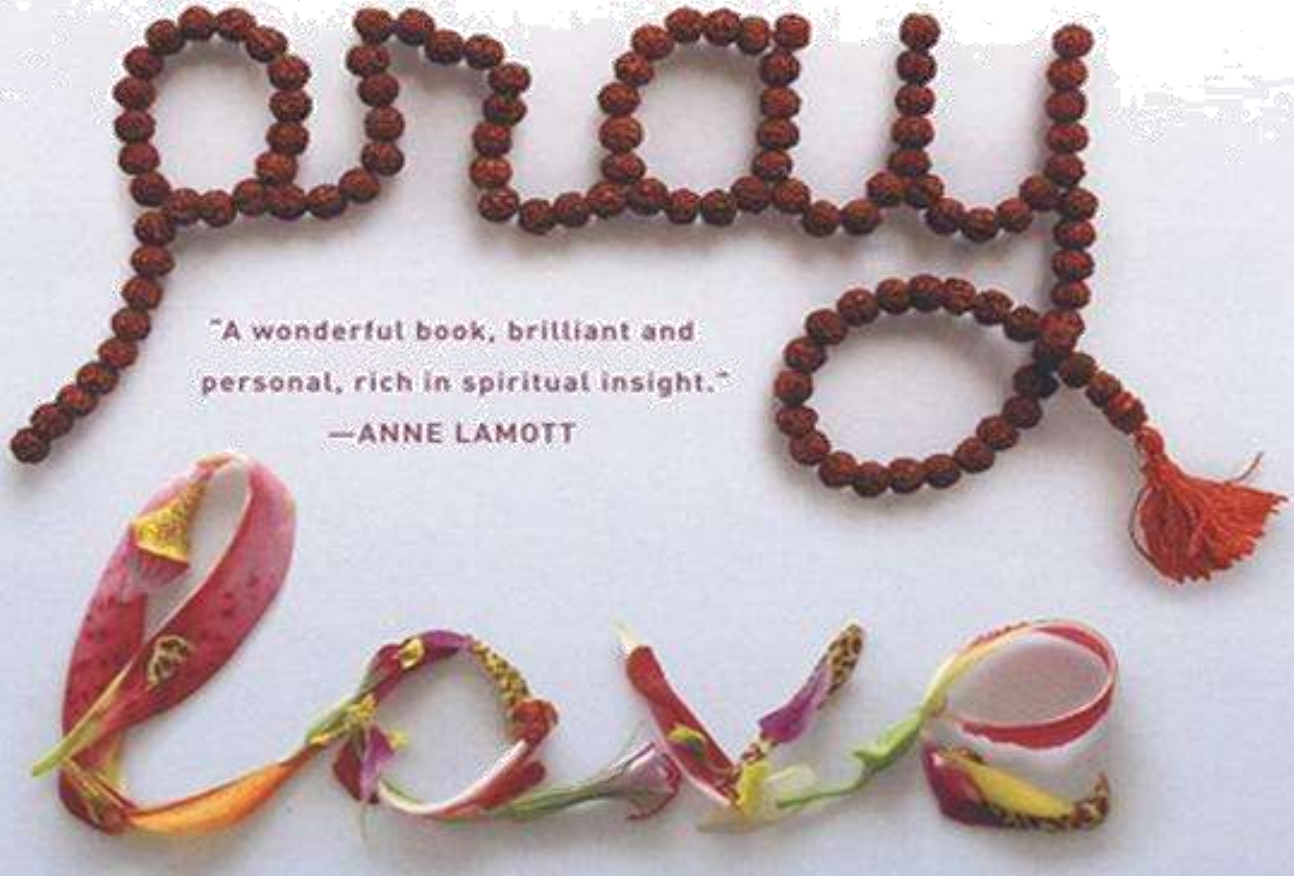
A *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

ELIZABETH GILBERT



"A wonderful book, brilliant and personal, rich in spiritual insight."
—ANNE LAMOTT

One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia

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Now, I'm the kind of person who, when a ninth-generation Indonesian medicine man tells you that you're destined to move to Bali and live with him for four months, thinks you should make every effort to do that. And this, finally, was how my whole idea about this year of traveling began to gel. I absolutely needed to get myself back to Indonesia somehow, on my own dime this time. This was evident. Though I couldn't yet imagine how to do it, given my chaotic and disturbed life. (Not only did I still have a pricey divorce to settle, and David-troubles, I still had a magazine job that prevented me from going anywhere for three or four months at a time.) But I had to get back there. Didn't I? Hadn't he foretold it? Problem was, I also wanted to go to India, to visit my Guru's Ashram, and going to India is an expensive and time-consuming affair, also. To make matters even more confusing, I'd also been dying lately to get over to Italy, so I could practice speaking Italian in context, but also because I was drawn to the idea of living for a while in a culture where pleasure and beauty are revered.

All these desires seemed to be at odds with one another. Especially the Italy/India conflict. What was more important? The part of me that wanted to eat veal in Venice? Or the part of me that wanted to be waking up long before dawn in the austerity of an Ashram to begin a long day of meditation and prayer? The great Sufi poet and philosopher Rumi once advised his students to write down the three things they most wanted in life. If any item on the list clashes with any other item, Rumi warned, you are destined for unhappiness. Better to live a life of single-pointed focus, he taught. But what about the benefits of living harmoniously amid extremes? What if you could somehow create an expansive enough life that you could synchronize seemingly incongruous opposites into a worldview that excludes nothing? My truth was exactly what I'd said to the medicine man in Bali—I wanted to experience both. I wanted worldly enjoyment and divine transcendence—the dual glories of a human life. I wanted what the Greeks called kalos kai agathos, the singular balance of the good and the beautiful. I'd been missing both during these last hard years, because both pleasure and devotion require a stress-free space in which to flourish and I'd been living in a giant trash compactor of nonstop anxiety. As for how to balance the urge for pleasure against the longing for devotion . . . well, surely there was a way to learn that trick. And it seemed to me, just from my short stay in

Bali, that I maybe could learn this from the Balinese. Maybe even from the medicine man himself.

Four feet on the ground, a head full of foliage, looking at the world through the heart . . .

So I stopped trying to choose—Italy? India? or Indonesia?—and eventually just admitted that I wanted to travel to all of them. Four months in each place. A year in total. Of course this was a slightly more ambitious dream than "I want to buy myself a new pencil box." But this is what I wanted. And I knew that I wanted to write about it. It wasn't so much that I wanted to thoroughly explore the countries themselves; this has been done. It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country, in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well. I wanted to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two. It was only later, after admitting this dream, that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries begin with the letter I. A fairly auspicious sign, it seemed, on a voyage of self-discovery.

Imagine now, if you will, all the opportunities for mockery this idea unleashed in my wise-ass friends. I wanted to go to the Three I's, did I? Then why not spend the year in Iran, Ivory Coast and Iceland? Or even better—why not go on pilgrimage to the Great Tri-State "I" Triumvirate of Islip, I-95 and Ikea? My friend Susan suggested that perhaps I should establish a not-for-profit relief organization called "Divorcées Without Borders." But all this joking was moot because "I" wasn't free to go anywhere yet. That divorce—long after I'd walked out of my marriage—was still not happening. I'd started having to put legal pressure on my hus-band, doing dreadful things out of my worst divorce nightmares, like serving papers and writ-ing damning legal accusations (required by New York State law) of his alleged mental cruelty—documents that left no room for subtlety, no way in which to say to the judge: "Hey, listen, it was a really complicated relationship, and I made huge mistakes, too, and I'm very sorry about that, but all I want is to be allowed to leave."

(Here, I pause to offer a prayer for my gentle reader: May you never, ever, have to get a divorce in New York.)

The spring of 2003 brought things to a boiling point. A year and a half after I'd left, my husband was finally ready to discuss terms of a settlement. Yes, he wanted cash and the house and the lease on the Manhattan apartment—everything I'd been offering the whole while. But he was also asking for things I'd never even considered (a stake in the royalties of books I'd written during the marriage, a cut of possible future movie rights to my work, a share of my retirement accounts, etc.) and here I had to voice my protest at last. Months of negotiations ensued between our lawyers, a compromise of sorts inched its way toward the table and it was

starting to look like my husband might actually accept a modified deal. It would cost me dearly, but a fight in the courts would be infinitely more expensive and time-consuming, not to mention soul-corroding. If he signed the agreement, all I had to do was pay and walk away. Which would be fine with me at this point. Our relationship now thoroughly ruined, with even civility destroyed between us, all I wanted anymore was the door.

The question was—would he sign? More weeks passed as he contested more details. If he didn't agree to this settlement, we'd have to go to trial. A trial would almost certainly mean that every remaining dime would be lost in legal fees. Worst of all, a trial would mean another year—at least—of all this mess. So whatever my husband decided (and he still was my husband, after all), it was going to determine yet another year of my life. Would I be traveling all alone through Italy, India and Indonesia? Or would I be getting cross-examined somewhere in a courtroom basement during a deposition hearing?

Every day I called my lawyer fourteen times—any news?—and every day she assured me that she was doing her best, that she would telephone immediately if the deal was signed. The nervousness I felt during this time was something between waiting to be called into the principal's office and anticipating the results of a biopsy. I'd love to report that I stayed calm and Zen, but I didn't. Several nights, in waves of anger, I beat the life out of my couch with a softball bat. Most of the time I was just achingly depressed.

Meanwhile, David and I had broken up again. This time, it seemed, for good. Or maybe not—we couldn't totally let go of it. Often I was still overcome with a desire to sacrifice everything for the love of him. Other times, I had the quite opposite instinct—to put as many continents and oceans as possible between me and this guy, in the hope of finding peace and happiness.

I had lines in my face now, permanent incisions dug between my eyebrows, from crying and from worry.

And in the middle of all that, a book that I'd written a few years earlier was being published in paperback and I had to go on a small publicity tour. I took my friend Iva with me for company. Iva is my age but grew up in Beirut, Lebanon. Which means that, while I was playing sports and auditioning for musicals in a Connecticut middle school, she was cowering in a bomb shelter five nights out of seven, trying not to die. I'm not sure how all this early exposure to violence created somebody who's so steady now, but Iva is one of the calmest souls I know. Moreover, she's got what I call "The Bat Phone to the Universe," some kind of Iva-only, open-round-the-clock special channel to the divine.

So we were driving across Kansas, and I was in my normal state of sweaty disarray over this divorce deal—will he sign, will he not sign?—and I said to Iva, "I don't think I can endure another year in court. I wish I could get some divine intervention here. I wish I could write a

petition to God, asking for this thing to end."

"So why don't you?"

I explained to Iva my personal opinions about prayer. Namely, that I don't feel comfortable petitioning for specific things from God, because that feels to me like a kind of weakness of faith. I don't like asking, "Will you change this or that thing in my life that's difficult for me?" Because—who knows?—God might want me to be facing that particular challenge for a reason. Instead, I feel more comfortable praying for the courage to face whatever occurs in my life with equanimity, no matter how things turn out.

Iva listened politely, then asked, "Where'd you get that stupid idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where did you get the idea you aren't allowed to petition the universe with prayer? You are part of this universe, Liz. You're a constituent—you have every entitlement to participate in the actions of the universe, and to let your feelings be known. So put your opinion out there. Make your case. Believe me—it will at least be taken into consideration."

"Really?" All this was news to me.

"Really! Listen—if you were to write a petition to God right now, what would it say?"

I thought for a while, then pulled out a notebook and wrote this petition:

Dear God.

Please intervene and help end this divorce. My husband and I have failed at our marriage and now we are failing at our divorce. This poisonous process is bringing suffering to us and to everyone who cares about us.

I recognize that you are busy with wars and tragedies and much larger conflicts than the ongoing dispute of one dysfunctional couple. But it is my understanding that the health of the planet is affected by the health of every individual on it. As long as even two souls are locked in conflict, the whole of the world is contaminated by it. Similarly, if even one or two souls can be free from discord, this will increase the general health of the whole world, the way a few healthy cells in a body can increase the general health of that body.

It is my most humble request, then, that you help us end this conflict, so that two more people can have the chance to become free and healthy, and so there will be just a little bit

less animosity and bitterness in a world that is already far too troubled by suffering.

I thank you for your kind attention.

Respectfully,

Elizabeth M. Gilbert

I read it to Iva, and she nodded her approval.

"I would sign that," she said.

I handed the petition over to her with a pen, but she was too busy driving, so she said, "No, let's say that I did just sign it. I signed it in my heart."

"Thank you, Iva. I appreciate your support."

"Now, who else would sign it?" she asked.

"My family. My mother and father. My sister."

"OK," she said. "They just did. Consider their names added. I actually felt them sign it. They're on the list now. OK—who else would sign it? Start naming names."

So I started naming names of all the people who I thought would sign this petition. I named all my close friends, then some family members and some people I worked with. After each name, Iva would say with assurance, "Yep. He just signed it," or "She just signed it." Sometimes she would pop in with her own signatories, like: "My parents just signed it. They raised their children during a war. They hate useless conflict. They'd be happy to see your di-vorce end."

I closed my eyes and waited for more names to come to me.

"I think Bill and Hillary Clinton just signed it," I said.

"I don't doubt it," she said. "Listen, Liz—anybody can sign this petition. Do you understand that? Call on anyone, living or dead, and start collecting signatures."

"Saint Francis of Assisi just signed it!"

"Of course he did!" Iva smacked her hand against the steering wheel with certainty.

Now I was cooking:

"Abraham Lincoln just signed it! And Gandhi, and Mandela and all the peacemakers. Eleanor Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, Bono, Jimmy Carter, Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson and the Dalai Lama . . . and my grandmother who died in 1984 and my grandmother who's

still alive . . . and my Italian teacher, and my therapist, and my agent . . . and Martin Luther King Jr. and Katharine Hepburn . . . and Martin Scorsese (which you wouldn't necessarily ex-pect, but it's still nice of him) . . . and my Guru, of course . . . and Joanne Woodward, and Joan of Arc, and Ms. Carpenter, my fourth-grade teacher, and Jim Henson—"

The names spilled from me. They didn't stop spilling for almost an hour, as we drove across Kansas and my petition for peace stretched into page after invisible page of support-ers. Iva kept confirming—yes, he signed it, yes, she signed it—and I became filled with a grand sense of protection, surrounded by the collective goodwill of so many mighty souls.

The list finally wound down, and my anxiety wound down with it. I was sleepy. Iva said, "Take a nap. I'll drive." I closed my eyes. One last name appeared. "Michael J. Fox just signed it," I murmured, then drifted into sleep. I don't know how long I slept, maybe only for ten minutes, but it was deep. When I woke up, Iva was still driving. She was humming a little song to herself. I yawned.

My cell phone rang.

I looked at that crazy little telefonino vibrating with excitement in the ashtray of the rental car. I felt disoriented, kind of stoned from my nap, suddenly unable to remember how a tele-phone works.

"Go ahead," Iva said, already knowing. "Answer the thing." I

picked up the phone, whispered hello.

"Great news!" my lawyer announced from distant New York City. "He just signed it!"

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A few weeks later, I am living in Italy.

I have quit my job, paid off my divorce settlement and legal bills, given up my house, given up my apartment, put what belongings I had left into storage in my sister's place and packed up two suitcases. My year of traveling has commenced. And I can actually afford to do this because of a staggering personal miracle: in advance, my publisher has purchased the book I shall write about my travels. It all turned out, in other words, just as the Indonesian medicine man had predicted. I would lose all my money and it would be replaced immediately—or at least enough of it to buy me a year of life.

So now I am a resident of Rome. The apartment I've found is a quiet studio in a historic building, located just a few narrow blocks from the Spanish Steps, draped beneath the graceful shadows of the elegant Borghese Gardens, right up the street from the Piazza del Popolo, where the ancient Romans used to race their chariots. Of course, this district doesn't quite have the sprawling grandeur of my old New York City neighborhood, which overlooked the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, but still . . .

It will do.

Eat, Pray, Love

11

The first meal I ate in Rome was nothing much. Just some homemade pasta (spaghetti carbonara) with a side order of sautéed spinach and garlic. (The great romantic poet Shelley once wrote a horrified letter to a friend in England about cuisine in Italy: “Young women of rank actually eat—you will never guess what—GARLIC!”) Also, I had one artichoke, just to try it; the Romans are awfully proud of their artichokes. Then there was a pop-surprise bonus side order brought over by the waitress for free—a serving of fried zucchini blossoms with a soft dab of cheese in the middle (prepared so delicately that the blossoms probably didn’t even notice they weren’t on the vine anymore). After the spaghetti, I tried the veal. Oh, and also I drank a bottle of house red, just for me. And ate some warm bread, with olive oil and salt. Tiramisu for dessert.

Walking home after that meal, around 11:00 PM, I could hear noise coming from one of the buildings on my street, something that sounded like a convention of seven-year-olds—a birthday party, maybe? Laughter and screaming and running around. I climbed the stairs to my apartment, lay down in my new bed and turned off the light. I waited to start crying or wor-rying, since that’s what usually happened to me with the lights off, but I actually felt OK. I felt fine. I felt the early symptoms of contentment.

My weary body asked my weary mind: “Was this all you needed, then?”

There was no response. I was already fast asleep.

Eat, Pray, Love

12

In every major city in the Western World, some things are always the same. The same African men are always selling knockoffs of the same designer handbags and sunglasses, and the same Guatemalan musicians are always playing “I’d rather be a sparrow than a snail” on their bamboo windpipes. But some things are only in Rome. Like the sandwich counter-man so comfortably calling me “beautiful” every time we speak. You want this panino grilled or cold, bella? Or the couples making out all over the place, like there is some contest for it, twisting into each other on benches, stroking each other’s hair and crotches, nuzzling and grinding ceaselessly . . .

And then there are the fountains. Pliny the Elder wrote once: “If anyone will consider the abundance of Rome’s public supply of water, for baths, cisterns, ditches, houses, gardens, villas; and take into account the distance over which it travels, the arches reared, the mountains pierced, the valleys spanned—he will admit that there never was anything more marvelous in the whole world.”

A few centuries later, I already have a few contenders for my favorite fountain in Rome. One is in the Villa Borghese. In the center of this fountain is a frolicking bronze family. Dad is a faun and Mom is a regular human woman. They have a baby who enjoys eating grapes. Mom and Dad are in a strange position—facing each other, grabbing each other’s wrists, both of them leaning back. It’s hard to tell whether they are yanking against each other in strife or swinging around merrily, but there’s lots of energy there. Either way, Junior sits perched atop their wrists, right between them, unaffected by their merriment or strife, munching on his bunch of grapes. His little cloven hoofs dangle below him as he eats. (He takes after his father.)

It is early September, 2003. The weather is warm and lazy. By this, my fourth day in Rome, my shadow has still not darkened the doorway of a church or a museum, nor have I even looked at a guidebook. But I have been walking endlessly and aimlessly, and I did finally find a tiny little place that a friendly bus driver informed me sells The Best Gelato in Rome. It’s called “Il Gelato di San Crispino.” I’m not sure, but I think this might translate as “the ice cream of the crispy saint.” I tried a combination of the honey and the hazelnut. I came back

later that same day for the grapefruit and the melon. Then, after dinner that same night, I walked all the way back over there one last time, just to sample a cup of the cinnamon-ginger.

I've been trying to read through one newspaper article every day, no matter how long it takes. I look up approximately every third word in my dictionary. Today's news was fascinating. Hard to imagine a more dramatic headline than "Obesità! I Bambini Italiani Sono i Più Grassi d'Europa!" Good God! Obesity! The article, I think, is declaring that Italian babies are the fattest babies in Europe! Reading on, I learn that Italian babies are significantly fatter than German babies and very significantly fatter than French babies.(Mercifully, there was no mention of how they measure up against American babies.) Older Italian children are dangerously obese these days, too, says the article. (The pasta industry defended itself.) These alarming statistics on Italian child fatness were unveiled yesterday by—no need to translate here—"una task force internazionale." It took me almost an hour to decipher this whole article. The entire time, I was eating a pizza and listening to one of Italy's children play the accordion across the street. The kid didn't look very fat to me, but that may have been because he was a gypsy. I'm not sure if I misread the last line of the article, but it seemed there was some talk from the government that the only way to deal with the obesity crisis in Italy was to implement a tax on the overweight . . .? Could this be true? After a few months of eating like this, will they come after me?

It's also important to read the newspaper every day to see how the pope is doing. Here in Rome, the pope's health is recorded daily in the newspaper, very much like weather, or the TV schedule. Today the pope is tired. Yesterday, the pope was less tired than he is today. Tomorrow, we expect that the pope will not be quite so tired as he was today.

It's kind of a fairyland of language for me here. For someone who has always wanted to speak Italian, what could be better than Rome? It's like somebody invented a city just to suit my specifications, where everyone (even the children, even the taxi drivers, even the actors on the commercials!) speaks this magical language. It's like the whole society is conspiring to teach me Italian. They'll even print their newspapers in Italian while I'm here; they don't mind! They have bookstores here that only sell books written in Italian! I found such a bookstore yesterday morning and felt I'd entered an enchanted palace. Everything was in Italian—even Dr. Seuss. I wandered through, touching all the books, hoping that anyone watching me might think I was a native speaker. Oh, how I want Italian to open itself up to me! This feeling reminded me of when I was four years old and couldn't read yet, but was dying to learn. I remember sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office with my mother, holding a Good Housekeeping magazine in front of my face, turning the pages slowly, staring at the text, and hoping the grown-ups in the waiting room would think I was actually reading. I haven't felt so starved for comprehension since then. I found some works by American poets in that bookstore, with

the original English version printed on one side of the page and the Italian translation on the other. I bought a volume by Robert Lowell, another by Louise Glück.

There are spontaneous conversation classes everywhere. Today, I was sitting on a park bench when a tiny old woman in a black dress came over, roosted down beside me and star-ted bossing me around about something. I shook my head, muted and confused. I apolo-gized, saying in very nice Italian, “I’m sorry, but I don’t speak Italian,” and she looked like she would’ve smacked me with a wooden spoon, if she’d had one. She insisted: “You do under-stand!” (Interestingly, she was correct. That sentence, I did understand.) Now she wanted to know where I was from. I told her I was from New York, and asked where she was from. Duh—she was from Rome. Hearing this, I clapped my hands like a baby. Ah, Rome! Beautiful Rome! I love Rome! Pretty Rome! She listened to my primitive rhapsodies with skepticism. Then she got down to it and asked me if I was married. I told her I was divorced. This was the first time I’d said it to anyone, and here I was, saying it in Italian. Of course she demanded, “Perché?” Well . . . “why” is a hard question to answer in any language. I stammered, then fi-nally came up with “L’abbiamo rotto” (We broke it).

She nodded, stood up, walked up the street to her bus stop, got on her bus and did not even turn around to look at me again. Was she mad at me? Strangely, I waited for her on that park bench for twenty minutes, thinking against reason that she might come back and contin-ue our conversation, but she never returned. Her name was Celeste, pronounced with a sharp ch, as in cello.

Later in the day, I found a library. Dear me, how I love a library. Because we are in Rome, this library is a beautiful old thing, and within it there is a courtyard garden which you’d never have guessed existed if you’d only looked at the place from the street. The garden is a perfect square, dotted with orange trees and, in the center, a fountain. This fountain was going to be a contender for my favorite in Rome, I could tell immediately, though it was unlike any I’d seen so far. It was not carved of imperial marble, for starters. This was a small green, mossy, organic fountain. It was like a shaggy, leaking bush of ferns. (It looked, actually, exactly like the wild foliage growing out of the head of that praying figure which the old medicine man in Indonesia had drawn for me.) The water shot up out of the center of this flowering shrub, then rained back down on the leaves, making a melancholy, lovely sound throughout the whole courtyard.

I found a seat under an orange tree and opened one of the poetry books I’d purchased yesterday. Louise Glück. I read the first poem in Italian, then in English, and stopped short at this line:

Dal centro della mia vita venne una grande fontana . . .

“From the center of my life, there came a great fountain . . .” I set the book down in my lap, shaking with relief.
Eat, Pray, Love

13

Truthfully, I'm not the best traveler in the world.

I know this because I've traveled a lot and I've met people who are great at it. Real naturals. I've met travelers who are so physically sturdy they could drink a shoebox of water from a Calcutta gutter and never get sick. People who can pick up new languages where others of us might only pick up infectious diseases. People who know how to stand down a threatening border guard or cajole an uncooperative bureaucrat at the visa office. People who are the right height and complexion that they kind of look halfway normal wherever they go—in Tur-key they just might be Turks, in Mexico they are suddenly Mexican, in Spain they could be mistaken for a Basque, in Northern Africa they can sometimes pass for Arab . . .

I don't have these qualities. First off, I don't blend. Tall and blond and pink-complexioned, I am less a chameleon than a flamingo. Everywhere I go but Dusseldorf, I stand out garishly. When I was in China, women used to come up to me on the street and point me out to their children as though I were some escaped zoo animal. And their children—who had never seen anything quite like this pink-faced yellow-headed phantom person—would often burst into tears at the sight of me. I really hated that about China.

I'm bad (or, rather, lazy) at researching a place before I travel, tending just to show up and see what happens. When you travel this way, what typically "happens" is that you end up spending a lot of time standing in the middle of the train station feeling confused, or dropping way too much money on hotels because you don't know better. My shaky sense of direction and geography means I have explored six continents in my life with only the vaguest idea of where I am at any given time. Aside from my cockeyed internal compass, I also have a shortage of personal coolness, which can be a liability in travel. I have never learned how to arrange my face into that blank expression of competent invisibility that is so useful when traveling in dangerous, foreign places. You know—that super-relaxed, totally-in-charge expression which makes you look like you belong there, anywhere, everywhere, even in the middle of a riot in Jakarta. Oh, no. When I don't know what I'm doing, I look like I don't know what I'm doing. When I'm excited or nervous, I look excited or nervous. And when I am lost, which is frequently, I look lost. My face is a transparent transmitter of my every thought. As David once

put it, “You have the opposite of poker face. You have, like . . . miniature golf face.”

And, oh, the woes that traveling has inflicted on my digestive tract! I don’t really want to open that (forgive the expression) can of worms, but suffice it to say I’ve experienced every extreme of digestive emergency. In Lebanon I became so explosively ill one night that I could only imagine I’d somehow contracted a Middle Eastern version of the Ebola virus. In Hungary, I suffered from an entirely different kind of bowel affliction, which changed forever the way I feel about the term “Soviet Bloc.” But I have other bodily weaknesses, too. My back gave out on my first day traveling in Africa, I was the only member of my party to emerge from the jungles of Venezuela with infected spider bites, and I ask you—I beg of you!—who gets sun-burned in Stockholm?

Still, despite all this, traveling is the great true love of my life. I have always felt, ever since I was sixteen years old and first went to Russia with my saved-up babysitting money, that to travel is worth any cost or sacrifice. I am loyal and constant in my love for travel, as I have not always been loyal and constant in my other loves. I feel about travel the way a happy new mother feels about her impossible, colicky, restless newborn baby—I just don’t care what it puts me through. Because I adore it. Because it’s mine. Because it looks exactly like me. It can barf all over me if it wants to—I just don’t care.

Anyway, for a flamingo, I’m not completely helpless out there in the world. I have my own set of survival techniques. I am patient. I know how to pack light. I’m a fearless eater. But my one mighty travel talent is that I can make friends with anybody. I can make friends with the dead. I once made friends with a war criminal in Serbia, and he invited me to go on a mountain holiday with his family. Not that I’m proud to list Serbian mass murderers amongst my nearest and dearest (I had to befriend him for a story, and also so he wouldn’t punch me), but I’m just saying—I can do it. If there isn’t anyone else around to talk to, I could probably make friends with a four-foot-tall pile of Sheetrock. This is why I’m not afraid to travel to the most remote places in the world, not if there are human beings there to meet. People asked me before I left for Italy, “Do you have friends in Rome?” and I would just shake my head no, think-ing to myself, But I will.

Mostly, you meet your friends when traveling by accident, like by sitting next to them on a train, or in a restaurant, or in a holding cell. But these are chance encounters, and you should never rely entirely on chance. For a more systematic approach, there is still the grand old system of the “letter of introduction” (today more likely to be an e-mail), presenting you formally to the acquaintance of an acquaintance. This is a terrific way to meet people, if you’re shame-less enough to make the cold call and invite yourself over for dinner. So before I left for Italy, I asked everyone I knew in America if they had any friends in Rome, and I’m happy to report that I have been sent abroad with a substantial list of Italian contacts.

Among all the nominees on my Potential New Italian Friends List, I am most intrigued to meet a fellow named . . . brace yourself . . . Luca Spaghetti. Luca Spaghetti is a good friend of my buddy Patrick McDevitt, whom I know from my college days. And that is honestly his name, I swear to God, I'm not making it up. It's too crazy. I mean—just think of it. Imagine going through life with a name like Patrick McDevitt?

Anyhow, I plan to get in touch with Luca Spaghetti just as soon as possible.

Eat, Pray, Love

14

First, though, I must get settled into school. My classes begin today at the Leonardo da Vinci Academy of Language Studies, where I will be studying Italian five days a week, four hours a day. I'm so excited about school. I'm such a shameless student. I laid my clothes out last night, just like I did before my first day of first grade, with my patent leather shoes and my new lunch box. I hope the teacher will like me.

We all have to take a test on the first day at Leonardo da Vinci, in order to be placed in the proper level of Italian class for our abilities. When I hear this, I immediately start hoping I don't place into a Level One class, because that would be humiliating, given that I already took a whole entire semester of Italian at my Night School for Divorced Ladies in New York, and that I spent the summer memorizing flash cards, and that I've already been in Rome a week, and have been practicing the language in person, even conversing with old grandmothers about divorce. The thing is, I don't even know how many levels this school has, but as soon as I heard the word level, I decided that I must test into Level Two—at least.

So it's hammering down rain today, and I show up to school early (like I always have—geek!) and I take the test. It's such a hard test! I can't get through even a tenth of it! I know so much Italian, I know dozens of words in Italian, but they don't ask me anything that I know. Then there's an oral exam, which is even worse. There's this skinny Italian teacher in-terviewing me and speaking way too fast, in my opinion, and I should be doing so much better than this but I'm nervous and making mistakes with stuff I already know (like, why did I say Vado a scuola instead of Sono andata a scuola? I know that!).

In the end, it's OK, though. The skinny Italian teacher looks over my exam and selects my class level: Level TWO!

Classes begin in the afternoon. So I go eat lunch (roasted endive) then saunter back to the school and smugly walk past all those Level One students (who must be molto stupido, really) and enter my first class. With my peers. Except that it becomes swiftly evident that these are not my peers and that I have no business being here because Level Two is really impossibly hard. I feel like I'm swimming, but barely. Like I'm taking in water with every breath. The teacher, a skinny guy (why are the teachers so skinny here? I don't trust skinny

Italians), is going way too fast, skipping over whole chapters of the textbook, saying, “You already know this, you already know that . . .” and keeping up a rapid-fire conversation with my apparently fluent classmates. My stomach is gripped in horror and I’m gasping for air and praying he won’t call on me. Just as soon as the break comes, I run out of that classroom on wobbling legs and I scurry all the way over to the administrative office almost in tears, where I beg in very clear English if they could please move me down to a Level One class. And so they do. And now I am here.

This teacher is plump and speaks slowly. This is much better.

Eat, Pray, Love

15

The interesting thing about my Italian class is that nobody really needs to be there. There are twelve of us studying together, of all ages, from all over the world, and everybody has come to Rome for the same reason—to study Italian just because they feel like it. Not one of us can identify a single practical reason for being here. Nobody's boss has said to anyone, "It is vital that you learn to speak Italian in order for us to conduct our business overseas." Every-body, even the uptight German engineer, shares what I thought was my own personal motive: we all want to speak Italian because we love the way it makes us feel. A sad-faced Russian woman tells us she's treating herself to Italian lessons because "I think I deserve something beautiful." The German engineer says, "I want Italian because I love the dolce vita"—the sweet life. (Only, in his stiff Germanic accent, it ends up sounding like he said he loved "the deutsche vita"—the German life—which I'm afraid he's already had plenty of.)

As I will find out over the next few months, there are actually some good reasons that Italian is the most seductively beautiful language in the world, and why I'm not the only person who thinks so. To understand why, you have to first understand that Europe was once a pandemonium of numberless Latin-derived dialects that gradually, over the centuries, morphed into a few separate languages—French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian. What happened in France, Portugal and Spain was an organic evolution: the dialect of the most prominent city gradually became the accepted language of the whole region. Therefore, what we today call French is really a version of medieval Parisian. Portuguese is really Lisboan. Spanish is es-sentially Madrileño. These were capitalist victories; the strongest city ultimately determined the language of the whole country.

Italy was different. One critical difference was that, for the longest time, Italy wasn't even a country. It didn't get itself unified until quite late in life (1861) and until then was a peninsula of warring city-states dominated by proud local princes or other European powers. Parts of Italy belonged to France, parts to Spain, parts to the Church, parts to whoever could grab the local fortress or palace. The Italian people were alternatively humiliated and cavalier about all this domination. Most didn't much like being colonized by their fellow Europeans, but there was always that apathetic crowd that said, "Franza o Spagna, purchè se magna," which means, in

dialect, “France or Spain, as long as I can eat.”

All this internal division meant that Italy never properly coalesced, and Italian didn’t either. So it’s not surprising that, for centuries, Italians wrote and spoke in local dialects that were mutually unfathomable. A scientist in Florence could barely communicate with a poet in Sicily or a merchant in Venice (except in Latin, of course, which was hardly considered the national language). In the sixteenth century, some Italian intellectuals got together and decided that this was absurd. This Italian peninsula needed an Italian language, at least in the written form, which everyone could agree upon. So this gathering of intellectuals proceeded to do something unprecedented in the history of Europe; they handpicked the most beautiful of all the local dialects and crowned it Italian.

In order to find the most beautiful dialect ever spoken in Italy, they had to reach back in time two hundred years to fourteenth-century Florence. What this congress decided would henceforth be considered proper Italian was the personal language of the great Florentine poet Dante Alighieri. When Dante published his Divine Comedy back in 1321, detailing a vis-ionary progression through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, he’d shocked the literate world by not writing in Latin. He felt that Latin was a corrupted, elitist language, and that the use of it in ser-ious prose had “turned literature into a harlot” by making universal narrative into something that could only be bought with money, through the privilege of an aristocratic education. In-stead, Dante turned back to the streets, picking up the real Florentine language spoken by the residents of his city (who included such luminous contemporaries as Boccaccio and Petrarch) and using that language to tell his tale.

He wrote his masterpiece in what he called dolce stil nuovo, the “sweet new style” of the vernacular, and he shaped that vernacular even as he was writing it, affecting it as personally as Shakespeare would someday affect Elizabethan English. For a group of nationalist intel-lectuals much later in history to have sat down and decided that Dante’s Italian would now be the official language of Italy would be very much as if a group of Oxford dons had sat down one day in the early nineteenth century and decided that—from this point forward—everybody in England was going to speak pure Shakespeare. And it actually worked.

The Italian we speak today, therefore, is not Roman or Venetian (though these were the powerful military and merchant cities) nor even really entirely Florentine. Essentially, it is Dantean. No other European language has such an artistic pedigree. And perhaps no lan-guage was ever more perfectly ordained to express human emotions than this four-teenth-century Florentine Italian, as embellished by one of Western civilization’s greatest po-ets. Dante wrote his Divine Comedy in terza rima, triple rhyme, a chain of rhymes with each rhyme repeating three times every five lines, giving his pretty Florentine vernacular what scholars call “a cascading rhythm”—a rhythm which still lives in the tumbling, poetic cadences

spoken by Italian cabdrivers and butchers and government administrators even today. The last line of the Divine Comedy, in which Dante is faced with the vision of God Himself, is a sentiment that is still easily understandable by anyone familiar with so-called modern Italian. Dante writes that God is not merely a blinding vision of glorious light, but that He is, most of all, l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle . . .

"The love that moves the sun and the other stars."

So it's really no wonder that I want so desperately to learn this language.

Eat, Pray, Love

16

Depression and Loneliness track me down after about ten days in Italy. I am walking through the Villa Borghese one evening after a happy day spent in school, and the sun is set-ting gold over St. Peter's Basilica. I am feeling contented in this romantic scene, even if I am all by myself, while everyone else in the park is either fondling a lover or playing with a laugh-ing child. But I stop to lean against a balustrade and watch the sunset, and I get to thinking a little too much, and then my thinking turns to brooding, and that's when they catch up with me.

They come upon me all silent and menacing like Pinkerton Detectives, and they flank me—Depression on my left, Loneliness on my right. They don't need to show me their badges. I know these guys very well. We've been playing a cat-and-mouse game for years now. Though I admit that I am surprised to meet them in this elegant Italian garden at dusk. This is no place they belong.

I say to them, "How did you find me here? Who told you I had come to Rome?"

Depression, always the wise guy, says, "What—you're not happy to see us?"

"Go away," I tell him.

Loneliness, the more sensitive cop, says, "I'm sorry, ma'am. But I might have to tail you the whole time you're traveling. It's my assignment."

"I'd really rather you didn't," I tell him, and he shrugs almost apologetically, but only moves closer.

Then they frisk me. They empty my pockets of any joy I had been carrying there. Depres-sion even confiscates my identity; but he always does that. Then Loneliness starts interrogat-ing me, which I dread because it always goes on for hours. He's polite but relentless, and he always trips me up eventually. He asks if I have any reason to be happy that I know of. He asks why I am all by myself tonight, yet again. He asks (though we've been through this line of questioning hundreds of times already) why I can't keep a relationship going, why I ruined my marriage, why I messed things up with David, why I messed things up with every man I've ever been with. He asks me where I was the night I turned thirty, and why things have gone so sour since then. He asks why I can't get my act together, and why I'm not at home living in a nice house and raising nice children like any respectable woman my age should be. He

asks why, exactly, I think I deserve a vacation in Rome when I've made such a rubble of my life. He asks me why I think that running away to Italy like a college kid will make me happy. He asks where I think I'll end up in my old age, if I keep living this way.

I walk back home, hoping to shake them, but they keep following me, these two goons. Depression has a firm hand on my shoulder and Loneliness harangues me with his interrogation. I don't even bother eating dinner; I don't want them watching me. I don't want to let them up the stairs to my apartment, either, but I know Depression, and he's got a billy club, so there's no stopping him from coming in if he decides that he wants to.

"It's not fair for you to come here," I tell Depression. "I paid you off already. I served my time back in New York."

But he just gives me that dark smile, settles into my favorite chair, puts his feet on my ta-ble and lights a cigar, filling the place with his awful smoke. Loneliness watches and sighs, then climbs into my bed and pulls the covers over himself, fully dressed, shoes and all. He's going to make me sleep with him again tonight, I just know it.

Eat, Pray, Love