

# The Language Barrier

by C. P. Boyko

SHE STAGGERED THROUGH the narrow streets with her head thrown back and her eyes peeled open, drinking in the strange sights and sounds like a clean page absorbing ink. She paused occasionally to siphon some of these impressions into her notebook, her lips fluttering slightly as she translated her raw perceptions into prose. Each afternoon, back at the *albergo*, she refined and expanded these jottings into long letters home to her husband, which she posted in the mailbox across the street with the gravity of a woman making a deposit at the bank. When she returned home to North Carolina, she intended to mine these letters for material for her next novel. It was to be called *Italy*.

Katherine had been in Italy only two and a half days and already she had collected an incredible assortment of material. She had seen an old woman spitting off a balcony into the hair of an unwitting vendor below. She had seen a boy riding a bicycle that was much too large for him, so that his feet reached the pedals only at their apex. She had seen garbage; never before had she seen so much garbage: in alleyways, in the gutters, in cracks and corners like drifted snow. She had seen little boys pissing in the street—*into* the street, with their backs to a wall. She had seen Coca-Cola served in plastic bags. She had seen very small cats—not kittens, but fully grown cats in miniature. She had seen a dead dog lying undisturbed in the street, strangely black and mummified, as if it had been sun-dried before it could decompose. She had seen a fat man, shirtless but wearing black pants, socks, and shoes, seated on a rocking chair in the middle of a bustling market and apparently asleep. She had seen a man watering a dirt road with a garden hose. She had seen a man in some kind of military uniform holding a rifle under one arm and a baby in the other.

And she had captured all these astonishing things in her notebook, pre-

serving them in noun phrases, as if they were found objects: “That Italians at bus stops crane their necks out into the street to see if the bus is coming.” “That in an otherwise empty restaurant, the Italian waitress insists on seating you next to the only other patrons.” “That Italian dogs will lick *any* face.” Truly, Italy was unlike any other country in the world.

And the Italians were unlike any other people in the world. Never had she encountered, never had she imagined such friendliness. Everywhere she went, the locals stared, smiled, waved, or shouted “*buongiorno!*” Hostesses stationed outside restaurants asked when she had last eaten; grocers stuffed her pockets with oranges, for which they charged her a “very special price”; passing taxi drivers hailed *her*, and expressed concern for her feet. One morning a shopkeeper had come running out of his shop to ask her where she was going. Katherine, by making slithering gestures with her arms to suggest peregrination, and carefully mangling one or two sentences that she had memorized from her phrasebook (“Where can I buy a ticket,” and “I asked for a room with a bath”), managed to convey to the shopkeeper her happy destinationlessness. The man was scandalized. Taking Katherine’s pen and drawing a map on her forearm, he sketched an itinerary which featured the Colosseum, the Vatican, the Pantheon, many famous churches, famous ruins, and famous museums, and which culminated in a visit to the most amazing, most essential, most famous suit factory. How much would Katherine expect to pay for such a tour? Five hundred lire? One thousand lire? Katherine shrugged and nodded in cynical agreement. The shopkeeper slapped this idea out of the air and stamped on it. He took a step closer and said in a confidential tone, “For *you*, my friend—one lira.” Katherine was moved almost to tears by gratitude—gratitude which she could express only by purchasing three suits at the factory and tipping her driver 999 lire.

Perhaps fortunately, Katherine had no head for math. The exchange rate between lire and dollars was an awkward enough number (it had a seven in it) to deter her from attempting the calculation. As a consequence, Italian currency, with its funny dour faces printed on childishly colorful bills, seemed to her a sort of play money, which she was amused and titillated to exchange for real products and services. The atmosphere of make-believe

was reinforced by the fact that nothing in Italy had a price tag; apparently the vendors just made up the prices as they went along, like children playing General Store. Katherine was careful not to burst their bubble, and paid whatever they asked, with a serious face.

A vendor beckoned and Katherine crossed the street. The old man was selling some kind of green gourd with its top lopped off and a spoon stuck inside. Katherine supposed that she *was* rather hungry. In any case, she had not tried one of these things before; it would make good material.

Holding up one finger, she said, in mellifluous Italian, “One very.”

The vendor, who assumed that this yellow-haired tourist was speaking English, heard her say in that language what sounded to his incredulous ears like, “Who knows old train motors?” He decided, after a few seconds of grinding cogitation, that the young foreigner could not possibly be asking for the whereabouts of an antique train engineer, but must be searching for the train station—and someone there who could tell her when the old trains “motored.” Perhaps, he thought charitably, English was not the young woman’s first language. Speaking slowly, out of consideration but also necessity, the old man gave Katherine, in a simplified version of English, a simplified version of directions to the central train station.

Katherine, who assumed that the old man was speaking Italian, listened with squinting intentness for any of the phrases or words that she had memorized, and eventually pulled from the river of verbiage what sounded to her like the Italian word for “beef.” She thanked the vendor sincerely for this recommendation, then pointed at one of the gourds and said, “*Quanto?*”

A light, as bright as that of first love, came into the old vendor’s eyes. “You,” he cried in English, “speak—Italian!”

Katherine blushed and shrugged and agreed that it was so. “And you,” she said, “speak English so well!”

The old man, who assumed now that Katherine was speaking Italian, could not make heads or tails of this statement, and kindly asked her, in Italian, to try again. Katherine, who now assumed that the old man was speaking English, apologized profusely and asked him, in English, to please repeat what he had just said. Then they both shook their heads and turned up their

hands and laughed in companionable befuddlement. To seal their new friendship, the vendor gave Katherine a gourd, for which Katherine paid him twenty times its value, and they clasped hands and parted smiling, each pleased to have surmounted however briefly the language barrier.

Katherine walked back in the direction of the *albergo* in a daze of joy. She rapped on lampposts with her knuckles, ruffled children's hair, and stared into passing doorways and alleys like a camera, taking pleasure even in simple parallax—the way her moving perspective caused the various planes of the scene to shift and stretch smoothly and in perfect unison, like a symphony of converging lines. She stopped to preserve this simile in her notebook, and while she did so, her joy slipped furtively away.

When she looked up, she discovered that she was standing in the middle of the street, and that some of the omnipresent honking of horns was directed at her. She waved her arms apologetically, then froze in amazement when she realized that the little black car directly in front of her had not stopped at all, but was steadily creeping towards her. She stared incredulously at the approaching fender, then through the windshield at the shouting and gesticulating driver, then back at the fender. She was flabbergasted. Did the man intend to run her over? Some of her happiness returned on a wave of astonishment. This could never happen in North Carolina!

When the fender was a mere inch from her right knee, Katherine, against her own will, took a step back. The car continued to stalk forward, and soon had swallowed the spot where she had been standing. She became convinced that he really would have run her over—and she resolved this time not to budge, in order to prove it. But again, at the critical moment, she retreated reflexively. It was like trying to hold one's eye open to an approaching finger. She withdrew dejectedly to the sidewalk and the little black car roared through the intersection, blazing its horn in what sounded to Katherine like triumph. Surely he *would have* run her over? She pulled out her notebook—but did not know what to write.

ONE EVENING A week later, after she had posted her afternoon's letter,

Katherine was sitting alone in a deserted *trattoria*, waiting for whatever dish she had ordered to arrive, watching the chimney pots across the street change color as the sun set somewhere behind the apartment blocks, and fitfully describing this vision in her notebook, when the English family appeared—being led, with only their partial and conditional submission, to a table.

The Freemantles were the other tourists staying at the *albergo*. Katherine had smiled and said “*buongiorno*” when she passed them in the hallway or saw them in the street, but had otherwise avoided them. Although she would have liked to exchange impressions of the country with other visitors—and though she would have loved to hold an entire conversation in rich, untrammelled English, without having to wave her arms or flap her hands to illustrate her meaning—she was reluctant to ratify her outsider status by socializing with other outsiders. She thought it important for her research that she blend in—that she behave like a local and be treated like one. It seemed to her that her first duty as a local was to snub foreigners.

But when, inevitably, the waitress seated the Freemantles at the adjacent table, Katherine consoled herself with the thought that, after all, everything was potential material, even the experience of being a tourist chatting with other tourists in a strange land. She closed her notebook and said, “Good evening.”

Mr. Freemantle, a stooped, wiry man with brown hair and a white beard stained yellow by nicotine, asked what she had been writing; and, perhaps to encourage reciprocal confidences, went on to admit that he was something of a journalist himself—what he called a “photo-journalist.” His photography was quite highly regarded in Europe and North America, he assured her, but lately he had found that journalism paid better, so he was focusing on that for the time being. Had she seen the Colosseum yet? He had just written a rather interesting article about it. He regretted that the best parts of Italy were “off limits,” to coin a phrase. He would have dearly loved to see the Malabria Waterfalls . . . Mrs. Freemantle, a prim, well-groomed woman who spoke quickly and absently as if rehearsing the speech she was about to deliver to a much larger audience, said that Katherine was

quite brave to be travelling alone, especially in Italy, especially *now*. But then she supposed one could hardly be surprised by the mess the Italians had made of things when one considered their innate baseness. One could see it in the disgusting way they spat everywhere, the filthy way they scavenged for cigarette butts, the shameless way they inflated their prices for tourists. One could hear it in the very way they talked; she could not imagine an uglier language—unless it was German. She hoped that Katherine was not drinking the water? And the Freemantle boys, giggling and jostling and punching each other brutally, asked for her opinion of something they referred to as the “bogs.” The bogs here were something else, weren’t they? They did take some getting used to, didn’t they? One had to cultivate a knack for them, as it were, or one might miss them altogether. The bogs *inside* the showers were their favorites—such convenience, such sophistication! Gradually it dawned on Katherine that “bog” was British for “toilet.”

The next day, Katherine found herself walking through the streets of a different Italy. The taxi drivers now seemed greedy rather than solicitous, the vendors aggressive rather than generous, the garbage pathogenic rather than picturesque. She had the Freemantles to thank for this transformation. Over the course of dinner, she learned that she had been overpaying for everything, that she had been drinking contaminated water, and that, quite possibly, she had been defecating in the wrong basins. She felt foolish, and ashamed—until she reminded herself that this must be the experience of many travellers, and that, therefore, it would make very good, very genuine, very human material.

She was puzzling over how best to present this material in her afternoon’s letter home to Jeremy when the first vendor of the day called out to her. She grinned and waved and was about to cross the street when she remembered what the Freemantles had taught her. She frowned, stuffed her hands in her pockets, and walked straight ahead, stiff and resolute even as she passed through the spicy perfume of whatever delicacy the man was grilling. She had not yet had breakfast, and her stomach groaned, but she was determined now to not buy anything offered to her, lest she feel manipulated or taken advantage of. She eventually managed to initiate a transac-

tion, while conforming to this principle, by sneaking up behind a fried bread vendor while he served another customer and shouting "*Quanto!*" in his face when he turned around.

In English blank verse the man said that, for Katherine, the price was only fifty lire. Or perhaps he said fifteen. It didn't matter—for Katherine had fully prepared herself for this moment: She was primed to haggle.

In labored, periphrastic Italian she asked the man if it was not possible that maybe the amount of money being requested for the item was too much money? The vendor said in Italian that the price was more than fair. Katherine tried hard for about ten seconds to remember the Italian word for "What?" Finally she resorted to, "Huh?" The vendor, reverting to English, said, "Is good, the price."

This satisfied Katherine, so she happily gave the man fifty lire and walked away, munching her bread, before he could give her her thirty-five lire change. Only later did she begin to have doubts about her performance. Perhaps she had been wrong to take the vendor at his word. Telling the customer that the price was fair was probably only a formality, a sort of prologue or invitation to further bargaining. Katherine decided she could do better, and sought out a street market in which to practice.

And, in fact, she soon proved herself a worthy adversary in the marketplace. Because she did not know the value of things, or indeed the value of money, she was as difficult to read and as impervious to influence as a novice poker player who does not know the value of her cards; and, like a novice poker player, she was determined to play every hand to the end. Some of the same vendors who had, earlier that week, sold their wares to her for ten times the usual price now found themselves forced to give their products away at one-tenth their actual cost, just to get rid of her. Unfortunately for many of them, Katherine's guard was now up, and she interpreted every gesture of sacrifice or defeat as a clever ruse—and promptly cut her offer in half. Some of the sellers discovered that, for whatever reason, they had so aroused Katherine's suspicion that they could not give away their wares, or even pay her to take them. This unprecedented experience so undermined their confidence in their own merchandise that their sales suffered for a

week.

On her way back to the *albergo*, laden with colorful and aromatic goods, she was intercepted by a vivacious man with a moustache like a shoe brush and twinkling green eyes that seemed to move independently of each other. He inundated her with greetings, character references, avowals of affection and undying fidelity, and all manner of offers and invitations, before perceiving her puzzled and apologetic look. Then a change came over him. His brow and chin became furrowed, his expression clouded and brooding, and his posture hunched and diffident. He had switched to English.

“Uhhhhhhhhhh,” he said, to hold his place in the conversation until he could dredge up, from the remote parts of his mind, the perfect English greeting, the one salutation that would operate on any English speaker like a magic incantation, like an Open Sesame. “Uhhhhhhhhhh . . .” Finally it came to him. “What your name!” he cried.

Katherine told him, and despite the Freemantles’ instructions, could not refrain from asking his name in return. Among the syllables of nomenclature that the man proudly recited were what sounded to Katherine like “Giuseppe” and “Carlo.” So she called him Giuseppe Carlo, and said that she was pleased to meet him, but that she had to be getting these bags back to her hotel.

Giuseppe Carlo, sensing her imminent departure from her posture rather than her words, blurted out the other magic phrase that he had as a child stored away for just this occasion. “Do you speak English!”

Katherine pointed out that that was what they were doing. Giuseppe Carlo nodded fiercely to indicate his total agreement with what the Signorina Catarina had just said, and even looked around with gallant pugnacity for anyone who might hold a different opinion. Katherine again tried to excuse herself, but Giuseppe Carlo’s intense desire that the conversation should continue acted as a sort of gravitational field. Besides, to walk away from someone in the middle of a sentence would be rude. So she shifted the bags she was carrying and tried honestly for a while to decipher what he was telling her; then she gave up and waited for his spiel to be over; then, much later, she went back to trying to understand.



He was, in fact, painstakingly transliterating his standard pickup pitch, word by word. When he did not know the English word, he said the Italian, but with a flat, nasal, “English” intonation, and illustrated each idea with a unique impressionistic hand gesture. Katherine eventually extracted some of his meaning: that he was a good man, that he and she were now friends for life, and that he wanted very much to take her to see the Colosseum, the Vatican, the Pantheon, and many famous churches and popular museums and romantic *trattorie*, which he began to name and translate.

A wave of fatigue washed over her. She suddenly wanted very badly to be back at the *albergo*, relieved of her purchases, out of the sun, and away from this man. “And then you will take me, I suppose, to the famous suit factory?”

Giuseppe Carlo, not understanding, wracked his brain for friendly, obliging, noncommittal words.

“Never mind. And how much will you charge for all this, I wonder? *Quanto?*”

“No!” Giuseppe Carlo shook his head fiercely and slashed his arms through the air in repudiation. “For you, my friend—is treat.”

She sighed. Well, the Freemantles were right: The Italians were all con artists. Or, at least, the Italians were like men: the nice ones never talked to you.

“No thank you,” she said. “Goodbye.”

“But—is treat!” he cried, chasing after her.

“I don’t want to go to those places. I have been to those places.”

He began naming other places. She shook her head and walked more quickly. They did not have to limit themselves to Rome, he said: his cousin owned a truck. She declined the kind offer. In desperation, he began naming towns and attractions at random, places he had never been, places which were not even in Italy. Suddenly the Signorina stopped.

“Yes?” He clasped his hands together and pressed them to his lips, daring to hope. “We go, we two, to see the Tower of Eiffel?”

“No. Before that. You mentioned the waterfalls.”

“The water fall, yes! So beauty! So romance! We go! We go?”

She shook her head sadly, almost pitying him now that she had caught him in a lie. "The waterfalls are closed."

He denied that this was so. He was offended that anyone should be spreading such slanderous untruths about the waterfalls. The waterfalls were a phenomenon of nature, and the beauty and majesty and inspiration of nature were available to everyone, at all times. The waterfalls could not be "closed." It was impossible. It was nonsensical.

This, at least, was what he meant when he said, "No! Not close! Open!"

She shook her head and continued on her way. When he saw that she would not be persuaded, he became angry.

"You stupid!" he called after her.

She turned and stared at him, aghast at his rudeness.

"Very stupid! The water fall . . ." He allowed a voluptuous gesture to complete his thought. "So stupid!"

He flagged down a taxi and rode away, looking back occasionally and shaking his head with pitying contempt.

She managed to keep from crying until she reached the *albergo*, by which time she no longer felt the need to. She had already begun to see how this ordeal might be transmuted into a rather amusing letter home. Indeed, when she came to write it down, she found that the anecdote required very little finessing. She had to render herself only a little more naive and flustered than she had actually been, and Giuseppe Carlo only a little more flamboyant and ridiculous than he had been in reality. But that, after all, was the novelist's job: to magnify life, without distorting it; in fact, to magnify life *in order not to* distort it—for only the amplified transmission reaches its destination intact.

That evening at dinner, however, she must have told the story wrong, for the Freemantles did not find it amusing. Mr. Freemantle was annoyed that, without even trying, she had found someone to take her to the waterfalls, and even more annoyed that she had, to coin a phrase, "passed up the opportunity." Mrs. Freemantle thought that Katherine should have refused to pay more than five lire for the excursion. It was important not to spoil the

locals, or getting a fair price for anything would become impossible. She drew an enigmatic analogy to the feeding of wild animals. And the Freemantle boys were of the opinion that Giuseppe Carlo was a pervert, and took turns demonstrating on each other how best to beat up a guy like that.

The Freemantles were all in agreement on one point, that Katherine needed a chaperone. So the next day they took her to see the Colosseum, the Vatican, the Pantheon, and many famous churches and museums and monuments. The boys read to her descriptions of these attractions from their guidebooks, Mrs. Freemantle helped her to purchase postcards of them, and Mr. Freemantle took documentary photographs of her standing in front of them. The Freemantles kept her firmly on the beaten path, where the crowds were. They protected her from touts and vendors and taxi drivers by coldly ignoring everyone. They laughed indulgently at her unnecessary attempts to speak Italian, and showed her how easy it was to order coffee, or anything else, in English: you just shouted “coffee” repeatedly and stood your ground until it was served to you.

Katherine was grateful, as she was for any kindness, but she was also dissatisfied. She had already, she felt, exhausted the Freemantles’ peculiarities of appearance, mannerism, and speech in her letters home to Jeremy, and as guides they were showing her nothing new. She also felt guilty; she was afraid of bumping into Giuseppe Carlo, who had offered to take her to these places. In her memory, she, rather than Giuseppe Carlo, had been rude; and in her mind, she kept seeing him riding away in the taxi, looking back at her and shaking his head mournfully. The thought occurred to her that probably he had a large family to feed.

“Filthy, filthy,” Mrs. Freemantle was saying. “The way they crouch in the shade like dogs.” She let out a sigh like a shudder. “But I suppose one has a right to be filthy.”

This was too much for Katherine.

“He’s not a dog!” she spluttered. They all looked at her. “And . . . I think the language is lovely.”

Mr. and Mrs. Freemantle attributed this outburst to sunstroke, and quickly ushered her inside the nearest art museum, while the boys waited

outside, splashing in a Bernini fountain with their shirts off. Mrs. Freeman-  
tle read aloud to Katherine the biographical and historical information from  
the placards beside the paintings, pausing to exult in the errors of spelling  
and grammar in the English text.

After an hour of this, Katherine quietly asked to be taken back to the *al-  
bergo*, where she drank a tall glass of water from the tap, then lay in bed,  
thinking.

The next morning, mistaking the first symptoms of dysentery for re-  
morse, she set out to find Giuseppe Carlo and hire him to take her to the  
Malabria Waterfalls.

HE DID NOT understand what she wanted. Over the last three days he had  
taken her to see the Colosseum, the Vatican, the Pantheon, all the most  
popular churches and museums and monuments, but the Signorina Cata-  
rina was not satisfied by the best that Rome had to offer; she was not satis-  
fied by anything. She just shook her head and frowned and delivered one of  
her harangues in that flat, nasal language of hers, sounding to him like a  
snoring squirrel. He could not imagine an uglier language—unless it was  
Spanish. Each time he reassured her, agreeing passionately with everything  
she said and swearing on his life that the next attraction would be better, but  
each time she was displeased. After three days of failure he began to wonder  
if perhaps some little misunderstanding had occurred. What exactly did the  
Signorina wish to see?

She told him again, and tried to show him: she waggled her fingers and  
stiffly raised and lowered her arms, like a zombie sprinkling fairy dust.  
Giuseppe Carlo nodded, slowly and gravely, to indicate his strong desire to  
understand—and, on a hunch, took the Signorina to see the Pope giving a  
benediction. She frowned and shook her head and tried again, this time let-  
ting her arms go loose and wriggling them in their descent. Giuseppe Carlo  
nodded slowly—and took her to the most expensive spaghetti restaurant in  
the city. The Signorina sighed and frowned throughout the meal. She tried  
again, this time slamming her splayed hands down on an imaginary key-

board and making a noise at the back of her throat like a large crowd's cheers heard from afar. Giuseppe Carlo did not know any popular pianists, so he took her to a burlesque music hall. After the show, he translated and explained to her some of the best, most crude jokes, but she was not to be diverted. She tore a sheet of paper from her notebook and drew on it a picture of a girl with long flowing hair as seen from behind. Giuseppe Carlo, though beginning to enjoy this game, was more perplexed than ever. The Signorina wanted to buy a wig?

Finally Katherine resorted to her phrasebook, which unfortunately had no dictionary or index. So they sat on the edge of a fountain in the center of a cobblestoned *piazza*, and, with their heads nearly touching, while the gulls wheeled in the sky overhead like tourists on mopeds, they read the book from front to back.

In the process, they learned a few things. Katherine learned that Giuseppe Carlo was well, thank you; he learned her phone number. She learned that he liked the weather today; he learned that she spoke only a little Italian. She learned that he was thirty-seven; he that she was thirty-four. She learned that he had two siblings; he that she had none. He learned that she was from America; she that he was from Florence. He learned that her middle name was Florence; she that his was Antonio—or Marcello—or possibly Fernando. She had indigestion; he had a toothache. He was divorced; she was married. (He said that this didn't matter to him. She said, "Huh?") He was a mechanic (when he was not being a guide, presumably); she was a writer. "What write?" he asked eagerly, with the unqualified interest of the aliterate. Like every novelist, she found this a difficult question to answer. She felt like a painter being asked what colors she painted with; she believed that she used the entire palette. Finally she said, "Life—*la vita*"—and for once was grateful for the excuse of the language barrier.

They laughed and asked each other silly, stilted questions about stamps, trains, and passports. Then, on the last page of the book, Katherine found the very phrase she was searching for.

"Why will you not take me to the Malabria Waterfalls?" she asked in Italian.

Giuseppe Carlo clapped his hands, grinned, nodded, and sighed as if hearing his own feelings perfectly expressed by beautiful music. “Ah!” he cried. “Water fall!”

“Yes!”

“Yes! Not possible! Water fall is close!”

“No!” said Katherine. “Not closed! Open! You said so yourself, three days ago.”

He nodded and shook his head rhythmically, as if conducting an orchestra with it, and repeated, with complete satisfaction, that that part of the country was indeed temporarily off-limits. “Very danger.”

This information, however, did not satisfy the Signorina. She shouted and pointed at him and stamped her feet; then she became very quiet and still—only her chin quivered with resentment. His heart gasped. These American women were so feisty!

“Okay,” he said at last, looking into her eyes. “We go.”

They could not go immediately, however; the trains were not well at the moment. Their health had not improved by the following day, or the next. Katherine reminded him of his cousin’s truck, and he was fulsome in his praise of her memory. The foredoomed search for his cousin, who did not exist outside his imagination, provided the excuse for further delay. In the meantime, Giuseppe Carlo wooed her savagely, plying her with seven or eight expensive and therefore romantic meals a day. Although the Signorina scrupulously insisted on paying half, he soon ran out of funds, and finally had to resort to feeding her at home or at the homes of friends. His shame, however, was allayed by her evident enjoyment of these visits. He could not understand it, but she looked around his mother’s dirty kitchen like it was the Sistine Chapel, taking pictures with her eyes and sometimes with her pen.

His mother explained it to him: Writers write when they are happy, just as mechanics destroy automobiles when *they* are happy. “She likes you.”

His mother, his brothers, and all his friends were charmed by Signorina Catarina. They were tickled by her accent and her childish diction. They marveled at her appetite and used it to shame their fussy toddlers. And they

were positively mesmerized by her stupidity, which seemed boundless; and, like visitors to the Grand Canyon, they kept walking up to its edge and shouting down into it to see if any echo would emerge.

“What is your favorite color!”

“Do you like tomatoes!”

“What is two plus two!”

She didn't know! Again and again, she smiled and shook her head and said, “I'm not understand.” She was better than a movie. They sincerely hoped that Giuseppe Carlo would marry this girl.

For Katherine, however, the novelty of seeing how the locals lived soon wore off. She was tired of being given strange new things to eat—including small creatures and the organs of large ones—and being watched for her reaction. She was tired of being stared at and talked about. The impression that she was the sole topic of conversation was strengthened by the fact that, whenever anyone did lapse into English, the comment was invariably about or directed at her. During the rest of their talk—and there were cataracts of it—she could only sit there and try to appear genial and satisfied. At first, out of politeness, she concealed her boredom by operating her utensils with panache or scratching unitchy parts of her body with absorbed assiduity; but eventually she abandoned the pretense, and fell into a wheezing trance, slumped upon her stool like a jellyfish washed up on a rock. Giuseppe Carlo, the only person in the room who might have acted as translator, did not seem to understand the need for one, or the responsibilities of one. Occasionally, seeing her not laughing, he would translate for her the punchline of an elaborate joke (“But the duck, he have no leg”) or the conclusion of a long, involved story (“He need his car to be fix”) and consider his duty discharged. When she herself said something clever—even if she advertised its cleverness by broadcasting it in a loud clear voice through a smirk—Giuseppe Carlo just smiled doubtfully and kept the comment to himself. She decided that he was immune to English witticism. Indeed, before seeing him in his natural habitat, she had assumed that he was dour and humorless. But when speaking Italian he became unbuttoned: he gasped and whistled and goggled, he waved his arms around like a drowning man signaling for

help, he howled with laughter at nearly everything that was said. He was like a boy—a boy on summer holidays, drunk on sugar. She could not have imagined a man, could not have invented a character more different from Jeremy if she had set out expressly to do so. His happiness was contagious at first, but soon became grating. She reminded him about the waterfalls. Perhaps they should be catching their train?

Giuseppe Carlo looked pained, and, for a moment, almost frightened. He promised that yes, tomorrow they would surely go.

*THAT IT IS not true what they say about trains, planes, and automobiles; they make the world larger, not smaller.*

Already, after only twenty minutes on the train, Katherine and Giuseppe Carlo had travelled beyond the parts of Rome that had become familiar to her; and within an hour they had escaped the city altogether. She was almost too excited by the sight of the voluptuously rolling hills, fading to a purple haze in the distance, to enter her new epigram in her notebook—but duty prevailed.

The novelty of the train and the countryside revived her curiosity. Her enthusiasm could not be dimmed even by Giuseppe Carlo's sullen, unsatisfying answers to her questions. She pointed at two men across the aisle drinking a strange brown beverage; Giuseppe Carlo said that it "eased the sleeping envy," which she took to mean that it was tea. She pointed at a crowd enacting some ancient mystical ceremony; Giuseppe Carlo said that it was a "paradise of shopping," which she supposed meant that it was a street market. She pointed at a colorful shrine on the dashboard of a taxi; Giuseppe Carlo said that it "made the air delicious"—in other words, it was an air freshener. She pointed at a group of boys kicking their shoes at a wall; Giuseppe Carlo said, "They kick they shoe." When she saw a man sitting by a pond with a rifle at his side, she did not point. She supposed that Giuseppe Carlo would tell her that the man was fishing.

The train tracks cut through the country like a scalpel, laying open its tender viscera to her gaze. They passed through fields, orchards, and farms,



within arm's length of the farmers working on them; they tunneled through hills; they bisected roads at oblique angles; they plunged through the central *piazzas* of small towns, and sometimes through the very walls of buildings. There were no stations; the train stopped and started seemingly at random. At one point, it came to a halt in what appeared to be a large family's living room. Katherine was in the bathroom car at the time (she had spent half the morning there). The window was wide open, and the toilet itself was nothing more than a hole in the floor; she looked down between her legs and could see carpeting between the railroad ties. The family stared at her mutely, with blunted expectation, like people who had been at the zoo too long. Her bowels shriveled. She nodded and waved. Some of the children waved back. Then with a lurch the train pulled out again. The countryside restored her privacy, but half an hour passed before she could relax enough to do what she had come to do—and then the result was dramatic, odious, and alarming. She returned to her seat on shaky legs. She tried to think of herself as the heroine of her novel—*Kelly Newcombe returned to her seat on shaky legs*—but the situation was too ignoble, and too personal, for fiction, or even a letter home to Jeremy. Jeremy did not admit to having bowel movements.

She stumbled and nearly fell in the aisle. A moment passed before she realized that other passengers had been thrown from their seats, that suitcases had fallen from the overhead bins and broken open on the floor, and that the landscape outside had suddenly ceased to glide by. Everyone stuck their heads out the window or climbed down out of the cars to see what the train had hit. After a few seconds of surprised silence, a great chatter of opinion and speculation arose.

“Is truck,” Giuseppe Carlo informed her. He spoke with excitement, which she mistook for satisfaction, and scolded him.

“What if someone's hurt!”

“Is empty.” His hands flew apart in a gesture of vacuity.

“Then how on earth did the conductor manage to smash into a parked truck?”

Giuseppe Carlo's torso undulated in a massive shrug. “Someone push

him,” he said, meaning the truck. “And run fast away.”

Katherine’s face contorted into a mask of incredulity and disapproval.

“Bad people,” Giuseppe Carlo theorized. “We ride motor-bus now.”

“This would never happen in North Carolina,” Katherine muttered—but the thought did not cheer her.

They trudged along a dusty road under a blazing sun for an hour before coming to a town. From the tone and appearance of a conversation that Giuseppe Carlo held with a fat man seated drowsing outside a *trattoria*, Katherine inferred that no bus passed this way. She went inside to get a glass of water, but the place was deserted. She used the toilet anyway, and drank tepid tap water out of her cupped hands. Her stomach made noises like a dying animal, and a great belch worked its way slowly out of her throat like a snake shedding its skin. Her mouth tasted like burnt rubber. She did not feel good.

She went back outside, where the men were now smoking cigars and obviously discussing her. Katherine tried simultaneously to look indifferent and impatient. The local man, sweating apparently without discomfort, looked at her appraisingly, held up an empty glass for her inspection, and asked her a question in Italian.

“Huh?”

“In America,” he said slowly, “how much money to wash this glass?”

“To wash one glass? I don’t know.” She started, or considered starting, to divide the minimum wage in North Carolina by the number of glasses a dish washer could wash in an hour, but it was too hot for math. “I don’t know. A dollar,” she said carelessly.

The local man whistled through his teeth and shook his head sadly. “So much!”

Katherine did not like the way he was looking at her—as if she were a fat wallet lying on the sidewalk. She began pacing to evade his gaze, while he and Giuseppe Carlo discussed the wonderful, lamentable excesses of America. At one point, a woman appeared in the doorway of the *trattoria* with a baby slung carelessly over one hip, like a bag of newspapers that she was in no hurry to deliver. She took the three of them in with one long, wide-angle

glance, then went back inside. Neither of the men paid any attention to her.

Katherine planted herself, arms akimbo, in Giuseppe Carlo's gaze and said, "Okay."

But it was the fat man who clapped his hands together, put on his hat, and said, "*Andiamo.*" He distributed coins across the table and stood up. They followed him across the street to a battered truck, Giuseppe Carlo bowing and flinging his arms around in praise of the man's generosity.

"Where?" she asked.

"*La cascata.*"

"But surely it's too far." In fact she had no idea how far it was. She had not even bothered to find Malabria on a map; as a psychological novelist she had as little use for maps as she had for politics. She did not even know which direction they had come out of Rome, let alone what distance. "You can't drive us all the way."

The fat man slapped Giuseppe Carlo on the shoulder, guiding him into the cab of the truck, and said that, on the contrary, the waterfalls were near enough to bite. Then he gallantly helped Katherine up onto the uncovered bed of the truck and pointed to a jagged sheet of aluminum siding, whose sun-shielding virtues he extolled.

She grasped his meaning once they were moving and the sun was again beating down on her, but the metal cut her hands so she resorted to hiding her head inside her shirt. This had the added benefit of keeping enough of the dust and exhaust out of her mouth for her to breathe. The road, if it was a road, had been corrugated by past rains and baked and cracked by the sun; she had to grip the side of the truck with one hand at all times in order not to be bucked out. She prayed silently and angrily—but whether for the man to drive faster or to drive slower, she did not specify.

The voice of the driver drifted back to her occasionally. She could not make out the words, but something about his tone made her think of Jeremy. He sounded like he was telling Giuseppe Carlo something for his own good.

The idea of Jeremy speaking to Giuseppe Carlo gave her a shock of dissonance. What would those two ever find to talk about? This trip had made

her realize that despite all his worldly airs, Jeremy was decidedly parochial. She, on the other hand, was cosmopolitan and multilingual, could move easily between cultures, and make friends anywhere. When she tried to imagine her husband and her tour guide in a room together, she could only hear arguing. *You shut up*, said Jeremy. *You don't talk now*, said Giuseppe Carlo.

"You don't talk now," said Giuseppe Carlo. He was looking at her through the rear window with an expression that she had never seen on his face, and which seemed as out of place there as a scar. The truck was stopping. She removed the shirt from her face and looked around, blinking and squinting in the dust.

Two men in grey uniforms approached the truck. In the road beyond them was a cluster of grey covered vehicles, where other men in grey caps squatted, some of them smoking, all of them clutching rifles.

"A checkpoint?"

"*Sta' zitto!*" said the fat man through his teeth.

Was it a border? They were in the middle of nowhere. She saw nothing but endless rows of young pear trees supported by wooden stakes, which rolled away across the black fields in perfect formation like gravestones in a military cemetery. A great setting for a chapter in her novel, she decided. But the guns would have to be removed; they were too vulgarly ominous.

The two men in uniform slowly circled the truck, muttering thoughtfully to each other. Then one of them, the shorter one, leaned against the passenger side door and made an observation—at least it did not sound like a question, and neither man inside the truck apparently felt obliged to answer. Then the tall man began making observations which the short one repeated, still without eliciting any reply from Giuseppe Carlo or the driver. The uniformed men's lackadaisical manner struck Katherine as deplorably unprofessional, and she made this opinion public through the angle at which she held her head. She was as urgently conscious of the passport in her bag as of an ace of trumps in an otherwise mediocre hand, but the officials gave her no opportunity to play it. Finally, Giuseppe Carlo and the fat man spoke a few unemphatic sentences, also as if speaking only to each other, and after some more circling and philosophizing the two men in grey backed away

from the truck and waved them on, as if dismissing a crackpot theory.

When they were moving again, she asked why they had been stopped, but did not pursue the matter when neither man replied. She had learned that her own impressions were more interesting than Giuseppe Carlo's explanations.

KATHERINE, WHO HAD been to Niagara Falls, was not terribly impressed by the Malabria Waterfalls, which seemed to her more like a long winding water-staircase. She concealed her disappointment, however, from Giuseppe Carlo, whose every hair and muscle trembled with bated triumph, like an athlete or a magician awaiting his audience's thunderous applause.

They dipped their feet in the cool, dirty water, and Katherine washed the sweat and the dust, which the sweat had turned to mud and the sun had cooked to a brittle crust, from her arms and face and neck. Then, for five seconds, they sat, side by side, listening to the trickle of the stream through little corridors of stone, and watching the overlapping coins of sunlight dance across the shivering membrane of shadow cast by the trees; then Giuseppe Carlo turned, and, as if tuning a radio, put his hands on her breasts.

The blood in Katherine's body redistributed itself in strange and uncomfortable concentrations; her head seemed to have too much of it and her heart too little. She staggered to her feet and stood there for a moment, alternately gaping and squeezing her fists, before remembering to slap him. She did this twice, once with each hand, but without any manifest result: Giuseppe Carlo continued to leer at her hopefully, his eyes wide and moist and not quite calibrated. The scene acquired a muffled, drunken quality when she stooped to collect her shoes, a prosaic action which clashed ludicrously with Giuseppe Carlo's assault.

She hurried away, trying to escape her embarrassment and confusion. She had reached the road by the time her emotions cooled enough for thoughts to be precipitated out. What had he been thinking? Had he forgotten she was married? Didn't he care? Had this been his plan all along? Was

this the way all Italian tour guides behaved? Did he suppose that *she* was attracted to *him*? Was she?

In any event, she had not come halfway around the world to kiss a man other than her husband. If all she had wanted was an affair, she could have stayed in North Carolina.

But that was not the sort of novel she was interested in writing. She was not that sort of novelist.

A sinking despair, almost like lightheadedness, came over her at the realization that none of this could be salvaged, none of it could ever be converted to fiction. For the second time that day, and the second time in her life, she had undergone an experience that her art could not translate. But if there were things of which art could make no use, of what use was art?

A phantasmagoria of bad, unusable material, a nightmarish procession of illness and obscenity, paraded through her mind. These images percolated into her body as nausea—or perhaps the nausea percolated into her mind in the form of these images. She stumbled off the road into the ditch and was sick in several different ways, all of them spectacular, and all of which will be left to the reader's imagination—for some things, alas, remain unprintable.

Sickness and the sun scoured her mind clean of thought for a long time. When next she looked up, she found that she was no longer alone. Two men in grey caps were standing next to a grey covered truck, asking her questions which they punctuated with thrusts of their rifles.

*Kelly Newcombe wiped her mouth and smiled queasily, but with a feeling of relief, almost of deliverance.*

She had left her bag behind with Giuseppe Carlo, and so was without money or identification; but, whoever these men were and whatever it was they wanted, she felt confident that their mutual misunderstandings would be instructive, their setbacks fortifying, their struggles ennobling. She felt that she had reentered the territory of the writable.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Italian," she said in quite passable Italian—which was how the two men knew that she was a liar, and therefore most likely a spy.