

The background of the cover is a painting of a narrow, cobblestone street in Italy. In the foreground, a man and a woman are riding a white scooter. The man is wearing a white shirt and a white cap, and the woman is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. They are both looking towards the camera. The street is lined with stone buildings and potted plants. In the background, another person is visible in a doorway. The overall style is a soft, painterly illustration.

The Seven Senses of Italy

la luna di miele

Nicole Gregory

Lisa and Bobby's Itinerary



Introduction

Dear reader, let me introduce myself.

Sono io, Nina, la nonna di Lisa.

I am long gone from this earthly world. But from my heavenly view, I keep watch over my family. I am hovering over my beautiful granddaughter Lisa and I see she has found a nice young man—this makes me happy. I watched her grow up when I came to America to live with my daughter, Lisa's mamma, and her family. Little Lisa and I, we loved each other very much, until, well, my time on Earth came to an end. I showed her how to grow herbs in our backyard, how to pick the ripest tomatoes for the finest sauce.

I want Lisa and her boyfriend to see my country—some people call it the Old Country, but it is old *and* new. If I can pull the strings of fate just a little, they will soon be on their

way to Italy to see all its beautiful treasures. I will watch over them, and maybe push a little in this or that direction all during their adventure. Of course, they will not know I am watching, guiding, but that is as it should be, eh?

Another thing—*per favore*, I have asked this writer to help me describe Italy—you know, there is so much beauty, history . . . so many stories and people who changed the world. I hope you don't mind. She will help me explain why we Italians are so good at what we do. I don't mean only the famous ones—Leonardo da Vinci, Sophia Loren, Luciano Pavarotti—but a nonna like me: women who feed their families every day, the people who go to work, sweep the streets, teach the children, the ones nobody writes about. You'll see.

Now I pray that Lisa and Bobby—and you too, dear reader—keep hearts and minds open to all of Italy's treasures, some in plain sight, some hidden.

Watch with me—these two, they are in love!

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Bobby is uncharacteristically quiet. Lisa notices it immediately when she meets him to walk along the promenade in

Brooklyn before going out to dinner. He is slightly agitated, even though it is Friday, the end of the workweek.

The city glitters majestically across the water in the twilight of the autumn day. Lisa happily rattles on about her graduate studies in resilience as they walk. She loves her work, but it is challenging. Tall, with dark eyes and curly brown hair, Bobby listens attentively. Lisa and Bobby have been together for two years and feel completely at ease with one another. So obviously in love, the couple attracts the notice of passersby.

“I just want to start interviewing real people rather than just studying theory,” she complains. “I want to find out what really makes people resilient, why some survive and thrive and others don’t. And I have to identify my thesis topic by the end of the year.”

Bobby takes Lisa’s hand affectionately. “Lisa,” he says, slowing his pace. Then he stops and looks at her. “Lisa . . .”

Now she stares at him intently. *Is something wrong?* she wonders.

Suddenly, he kneels in front of her and all agitation vanishes from his face. “Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?” His voice is calm and even, and his dark eyes look directly at hers.

“What? I . . . yes! Yes! Oh, gosh, Bobby!” She throws her arms around him as he stands up. Passersby observing the scene start to clap. Bobby brings a box out of his pocket and opens it—inside is a thin gold ring with a diamond that catches the light of the streetlamp. He gently puts it on Lisa’s finger. Both their hands tremble.

“Well, now, I guess we are engaged!” He laughs and hugs Lisa. Happy tears form in her eyes. “We will have a life of joy, love, beauty, and adventure. I want us to try new things together, learn together.”

“We must go to Italy for our honeymoon,” Lisa says with a smile. “My nonna Nina—she always wanted me to see Italy. She grew up in Sicily. I have a cousin there I haven’t seen in years . . . her name is Lucia.”

“Excellent idea,” Bobby says. “And we can visit our friend from college, Marco—he’s in Sicily now.”

“We can see Rome and Florence and Venice,” Lisa says.

“And swim at those beautiful beaches.”

“And eat amazing food and drink incredible wine!” Lisa stops and smiles. “But first, we have the small matter of a wedding to plan.”

“And right now we need to eat dinner.” Bobby puts his arm around Lisa and leads her down the cobblestone street to their favorite Italian restaurant.

MILAN (six months later)

The small hotel room is filled with morning sunlight. Red geraniums on the window stand out against the blue sky above. Bobby and Lisa are jet-lagged, exhausted, and still reeling from their wedding in the US. Slowly, they wake and open their eyes on the first morning of their honeymoon in Italy.

“*Milano*,” Bobby says, looking up at the small chandelier dangling from the high ceiling. “I will never say ‘Milan’ again, because the locals call this city *Milano*—accent on the N.”

Lisa smiles. “As you wish. I just can’t believe we’re here. I’m so excited!” She hops out of bed to open the windows.

“Lisa, there is one thing you might not know about me—I wander,” Bobby intones with mock seriousness.

“What do you mean, wander?” she asks.

“I like to walk with no guidebook—no guidebook written for foreign tourists, that is. I know you are a fast-moving woman, with places to go and people to see. But I want to go slow sometimes so we can get to know this country. In fact, while we are here, I don’t want to take a taxi or bus—ever!”

“What about a romantic gondola ride?” Lisa asks.

“Oh, yes, a gondola.” *How lucky I am*, he thinks, smiling. *I’ve married a smart, beautiful woman with a sense of humor.*

Bobby is an architect, just beginning his career. Before he and Lisa left the US, he had applied for his dream job at a small firm. He was glad to let Italy distract him from his underlying anxiety: Would he get that job?

“I *will* bring the guidebook,” Lisa says, running a brush through her long red-brown hair. She has wanted to visit Italy for years to understand her grandmother, and even herself, better. She’s looked forward to seeing her cousin again too—as an only child, Lisa has always longed to have a big Italian family.

In her study of resilience, she recalls stories about how

her nonna grew food for her family and then left Italy when her husband died. It seems to Lisa that her nonna was incredibly resilient—Lisa wants to understand where that resilience came from.

Bobby is intent on seeing all the city's architecture and its art—but Lisa's mission is to discover the inner lives of Italians. Suddenly, she sees a symmetry: He wants to understand the *external* expressions of Italian sensibility and she is fascinated by their *internal* workings.

“Wandering is fine,” she says, “but I don't want to miss places like the Leonardo da Vinci Museum in Florence—it has all his designs for helicopters and submarines . . .”

“Yes, of course, we have to see that. But do you mind if we wander a bit every day? Put away the see-every-famous-sight list and just see what we see?”

Lisa nods silently. She has just noticed the outfit Bobby has chosen for the day: faded shorts and a T-shirt. His curly dark hair is barely combed. She adores her new husband, but . . . those clothes? *How can I convince him to dress a little better?*

Soon the newlyweds are strolling along the cobblestone streets of Milan. Lisa is short, Bobby is tall, yet they saunter comfortably with each other. A sight up ahead makes them both smile: a sign for a *caffè* bar. They follow their noses to the source of freshly made espresso.

“*Buongiorno*,” the barista welcomes them with a friendly smile.

“*Per favore, espresso—due. Grazie*,” Bobby says, pleased

he memorized this phrase from his Italian language book that morning.

But the barista replies to him in English. “Of course. Are you on vacation? Did you just arrive?”

“Yes—*sì!*” Lisa says. Was it so obvious they are sleep-deprived Americans? “We just got here last night.”

“Ah, very good!” the barista says cheerfully while preparing their coffee.

Bobby turns to Lisa. “You know, Milano is the banking capital of Italy.”

“I thought it was the *fashion* capital of the *world*.”

“Aha! Sounds like shopping is in your future,” Bobby says with a smile.

As the barista brings their tiny espresso cups, Lisa asks, “*Per favore*, what do you suggest we see on our first day here?”

“There is plenty to see in Milano, old and new, all within walking distance,” the young woman replies. “You must visit the Duomo—the *cattedrale*—you can go to the top and see all of the city. And then you must walk along the Naviglio Grande, the canal. And you must go to Galleria Vittorio Emanuele for shopping.”

“Oh, I want to go there!” Lisa says.

“I recommend you just start walking,” the barista says. “Put away your map for now. You don’t need it. Have your *caffè*, then let your eyes, ears, and nose take you on an adventure.”

Bobby throws a satisfied glance at Lisa.

“Okay, you win—for now,” Lisa says to him. After paying,

now charged up with strong Italian coffee, the couple heads out.

“Ciao!” the barista calls out after them.

Stepping out into the sunshine, Lisa says, “I love the word *ciao*. It’s just so happy.”

She and Bobby stare, utterly fascinated by the scene: Milaneese people walking quickly to work, shop owners getting ready for customers, cars and scooters pushing their way down the street. A child trudges past, carrying a heavy backpack—she calls out to her mother ahead and runs to catch up with her. A bus lumbers by. A man carrying a basket of flowers strides past, wafting a sweet floral fragrance in his wake. A church bell rings in the distance.

They turn to look at each other and laugh. “Which way,” Lisa asks, “left or right?”

“Well . . . let’s turn right!” And their adventure begins.

Within minutes they come upon an open piazza next to a basilica.

“What is this?” Lisa asks. They halt and turn around, taking in the old brick structure, before Lisa leads them inside.

Bobby has to walk fast to keep up with her. They enter the basilica’s courtyard, then find their way into the church itself. Flickering votive candles sit on top of long rectangular tables along the sides and the red and white archways of the church ceiling separate the structural sections.

“It’s the Basilica of Saint Ambrose,” Bobby whispers, staring at a bronze plaque explaining the building’s history. He gazes up at the frescoes on the walls that depict the life of the saint.

“I know from my Italian architecture class that part of it was designed by Donato Bramante—he also worked on the design for Saint Peter’s in Rome.”

“Wow, how do you remember these details?” Lisa whispers back.

Bobby smiles. “I just like history—especially when it comes to art and architecture. It’s the story of our past.”

They quietly step forward to better hear the angelic voices of a small choir. A service is taking place, and everyone is respectfully silent, even turning off their phones. Some people sit, eyes closed, in the dark wooden pews.

“Saint Ambrose—he’s the patron saint of Milan,” Lisa says under her breath. “He was the bishop of Milan, and in fact, he is the one who baptized Saint Augustine.” She pauses, thinking back to the lessons about him from her nonna and Catholic school. “I think he’s the one who didn’t even want to be bishop, but everyone who met him knew he was right for the job. He gave away almost all his land and belongings when he became bishop and that made people love him even more.”

“Saint Augustine’s famous line is, ‘Grant me continence and chastity, but not yet,’” Bobby says. “I guess he admired virtue in theory, but he was not ready to give up his concubine.” They laugh quietly.

“I can see why Ambrose liked Augustine—they both understood human weaknesses,” Lisa says thoughtfully.

“Does Ambrose have a feast day?” Bobby asks. His wife is an expert on the saints and knows their feast days. *His wife!* The word sounds strange and wonderful.

“December seventh,” she answers, giving him a look that says, *Doesn't everyone know that?*

Bobby considers an idea: *Maybe a happy marriage doesn't happen when two people are alike, but when they perfectly complement each other.* He doesn't have to know the feast days, because Lisa does.

And she doesn't have to know the names of the architects who designed Italian cathedrals, because he has that covered.

The Sensual Nature of Italy

No country thrills and delights the senses quite like Italy.

The sense of taste, for instance—one of life's great sensuous pleasures—is brought to new heights by Italian food. From Italy's north to the south, food is a gift of love and friendship, deeply gratifying for the cook and greatly appreciated by the eater.

Or the sense of hearing, for which beautiful music is created. Music is simply part of Italian life and expression. Remember how Italians responded to quarantines during the coronavirus pandemic? Spontaneously, they went to their balconies to sing together, boosting morale for the whole world. They instinctively knew music unifies people, lifting their spirits and hearts. At one point in history, an act from Verdi's opera *Nabucco* was sung as a kind of patriotic anthem. Hearing music, making music, singing—these are essential Italian experiences.

Italians appreciate the sensuous—the warmth of the seaside sun or the heat of a natural thermal spring. They like the look

and the feel of fine, well-made fabrics. They are famous for dressing well.

As soon as visitors arrive in Italy, a certain seduction begins. They feel their muscles relax in the warm climate. They sigh with the first tastes of flavorful food, the first sips of rich wine. They gaze at the stunning art, moved by its mystery and beauty. And they are drawn to the lifestyle that puts simple human pleasures first.

La dolce vita.

Their values and priorities reorder. Writers who've fallen in love with Italy articulate clearly this life-changing effect. One is Frances Mayes, who wrote about it in her memoir *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Her book touched a nerve, becoming a bestseller that sold millions of copies in multiple languages

Dear reader, *sono io*, Nina. I am whispering into the souls of Lisa and Bobby, telling them to be open to all Italy offers. Let's see what happens . . . I have seen my country's magic touch the hearts of people, and now I hope it touches theirs.

With the senses, *prendere nota*—take notice!

When Italians tell you stories, listen—they know a few things. Waiters, shopkeepers, bus drivers, and train conductors will all open whole worlds for you if you take time to listen. My papà, a farmer, would take vegetables and herbs into our town to sell, but what he liked best was talking

to his friends—the other farmers, the village women who bought from him, the children wandering through the piazza, all of them.

And if he came upon a stranger—lucky for them! My papà would begin his long stories about the village, how the river once overflowed and flooded the streets, how lightning once struck a pig far on the edge of town and sent the other pigs running in every direction. He knew all the families who lived there—he knew their good fortune, their unlucky times. He wanted everyone to know how beautiful that place was, so he would ask visitors if they had seen the church yet. I went to church every Sunday, of course—everyone did!

I wish Papà were still living in the world with my Lisa and Bobby. He could teach these young ones a thing or two about being a good person; about sharing what you have but getting a good price for what you sell; about taking care of your family, your children; about looking at people in the eye.

Italians are very friendly—*amichevoli*. Watch how they go about their day, how they greet each other in passing, how an old man lingers on the street to chat with friends.

I urge Lisa and Bobby to allow Italy's warm welcome to pour into their souls.

Sight

TREASURES FOR THE EYES

CINQUE TERRE

“Oh, my gosh!” Lisa gasps at the fairy tale–like scene before her. “It’s so . . . pretty!” But “pretty” hardly describes the colorful view of buildings and rocks and ocean.

The tiny seaside village of Vernazza, awash in glorious summer light, spreads out before her from the high, rocky promontory where she and Bobby have stopped. The village appears as if from a child’s dream: the colorful boxy houses perch around a harbor like birds on a fountain. At the water’s edge, long boats and wide bistro umbrellas dot the scene. The broad blue sea stretches out to infinity.

The two have been hiking through Cinque Terre in the region of Liguria. They arrived having driven from Milan the day before in a rented car.

It's hot, and to catch his sweat, Bobby has wrapped a red bandanna around his head. Lisa is glad she packed a wide-brimmed straw hat. The bright sun beats down and the trails force them to climb steep hill after steep hill. The hardy hikers' reward is a succession of spectacular views of the charming villages and the rugged, irregular coastline. Other hikers are also enjoying the trails today—too many for Bobby.

"Let's go down there and find lunch," Lisa says, and Bobby enthusiastically nods his head. They begin the descent into Vernazza.

Soon they are happily seated at a table in Piazza Marconi next to the water. While they wait for their food, Bobby pulls a book from his daypack and reads about Vernazza. Lisa stares at the passing people, the steep hills dotted with little houses, and the glittering sea, while appreciating the glass of white wine the waiter delivered promptly. *My legs are going to be sore from all this hiking—but it's worth it*, she thinks.

Surrounded by natural and man-made beauty, Bobby and Lisa scan the intensely picturesque spot. Cinque Terre—or five small towns—along the Italian Riviera are connected by walkable coastal paths. The hills were made into steep terraces that dip toward the sea. For hundreds of years, residents of the ancient towns have tended crops and vineyards on these terraced hills. In 1997, Cinque Terre was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in recognition of the unique beauty and geography of its villages.

"I could die now—this has to be one of the most beautiful

places on Earth,” Lisa says as she lifts her face to the warm sun and stretches out her arms as if to welcome it all.

Over time, the vineyards of Cinque Terre became increasingly difficult to maintain and some of the famed stone buttresses collapsed due to lack of care. The Italian Ministry of the Environment stepped up to help preserve the towns, in a unified effort with the World Monuments Watch and funding from American Express. By conducting architectural surveys and training local researchers, they created a plan for sustainable development.

“I like that the towns can be reached by ferry or train—but not cars,” Lisa reflects. “And it’s amazing that these villages sit on top of cliffs and promontories. Each town looks like it is the home of princesses and princes.”

“Let’s review all the towns,” Bobby says. “Monterosso is where we started, of course—it has the long beach and medieval center.”

“We deserve a medal for the hike here from Monterosso!” Lisa says.

“It should get easier as we hike down the coast,” Bobby says, examining a map.

“We must visit the Doria Castle while we are here in Vernazza,” Lisa says. “It juts right out into the sea.”

“Okay, and next we will hike to Corniglia,” Bobby says. “It looks like an amazing, beautiful town perched high above the sea. Then we will keep going to Manarola, and finally Riomaggiore, which has a fishing village, vineyards, and a thirteenth-century castle that overlooks the sea.”

“And how many hours will this take?” Lisa asks, tilting her head skeptically.

The waiter appears carrying two plates of spaghetti with clams, shrimp, and mussels, and places them down carefully—so Bobby doesn’t answer the question. They dig in hungrily.

“The charm of these villages,” Lisa says, taking a sip of chilled wine, “is that they are small, built to a human scale around the promontories of the coast.”

“It’s the whole scene,” Bobby adds. “Ancient churches and castles . . . homes painted in all different colors . . . and with the blue ocean in the background.” He looks at his map again, then adds, “This will probably take us another four to five hours.”

“Ohhh, I hope my legs can do this!” Lisa says.

VERONA

Dear reader, do you see what I mean? Yes, I have been to these little towns before, a long time ago, when my legs were strong and I could hike any hill or mountain!

In my country, in these little towns, I see my people. I am from Sicily, but still, in little towns are families that are knit together because they share the market, the church, the schools, and their histories. Their children grow up together, and they help each other.

When I was young, families stayed together—do you understand? Everyone knew each other for years and years. We didn't leave, or most of us did not; we stayed with our families.

But now I see Lisa and Bobby are resting from their hiking. You watch—by tomorrow, they will be completely revived. Myself? I would need a week . . . my old joints are resting fine here in heaven.

That night, Bobby and Lisa recuperate at their hotel restaurant, relishing the triumph of having hiked through Cinque Terre, even though their muscles ache. After a delicious dinner, they sit back at their outdoor table to enjoy a coffee. Tourists stream by, wide-eyed and happy.

“Lots of tourists here,” Lisa says. “It’s amazing Italy can accommodate so many of them.”

“I read there are about thirty-two thousand hotels—large and small—in Italy,” Bobby says. “They do a good business!” Too fatigued and full of good food for an after-dinner walk, they head back to the hotel.

Bright and early the next morning, the couple rents a tiny car to drive to Verona. It’s going to be an incredible night. Months earlier, Bobby bought tickets to *Aida*, which is being performed at the Verona Arena, about a three-hour drive away.

But the drive there proves to be harder than he figures—the road signs are utterly confusing.

He grips the wheel of the rented Alfa Romeo. “Why didn’t I learn more Italian?” he shouts when he misses the turnoff he wanted for the third time.

“Don’t worry, it’s okay to get lost, remember?” Lisa laughs, then sits up straight and pushes her hair out of her eyes. “Go that way!” she shouts. Bobby makes an abrupt sharp turn, wheels squealing, and within minutes they spot Verona.

Located in the Veneto region, Verona’s population is about 250,000 people. It’s known to most people as the setting for several of Shakespeare’s plays, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Though *Romeo and Juliet* is fictional, the fourteenth-century Casa di Giulietta was supposedly the home of the Capulets. A steady stream of tourists visits the casa and a statue of Juliet nearby.

After finding their hotel in Verona, Bobby and Lisa—their legs now accustomed to walking hours each day—pick up their daypacks and set off on foot to explore the city. They are intrigued by ancient rose-colored buildings and the slow-moving Adige River.

“*AH-deejeh*,” Bobby says, practicing the correct pronunciation.

That evening they are eager for the big event of their Verona visit. They walk to the Verona Arena, a large and impeccably restored ancient stone structure. A crowd of well-dressed opera lovers gathers near the entrance, humming with excitement.

They pass through the entrance and Bobby clammers up the steep stone steps with Lisa close behind. He notices everyone

makes way for the older adults, patiently waiting as they slowly climb the steps. They find their seats and, along with thousands of others in the arena, they eagerly anticipate the performance. As the sun sets, a large, bright full moon rises in the darkening sky. Lights on the perimeter create a magical atmosphere.

“This arena used to hold thirty thousand people,” Bobby says in a hushed voice. “Now they let in only about fifteen thousand.”

Ushers hand out small candles to the audience, and one by one, each person shares the light with the next in their row. Lisa turns to two older women next to her to light their candles, then she and Bobby follow the lead of everyone else: they hold theirs aloft. The sight of thousands of dots of shimmering candles cascading down the rows of the arena readies the audience for the magic of the epic story.

In a moment of absolute silence, the conductor raises his baton and the violins and orchestra suddenly begin. The stage lights up slowly on the magnificent set, and a collective gasp ripples through the crowd. Singers quietly file onto the stage and the performance begins to unfold.

At the first intermission, Lisa strikes up a conversation with the two women beside her. They are cousins who’ve traveled from Florence to see the performance.

“For us Italians, opera has personal meaning,” explains the woman who introduces herself as Ariana.

“There is silly opera, and serious opera,” chimes in her cousin, Antonia. “When you hear serious opera, the range of

the human voice, it's magnificent. Did you ever hear Luciano Pavarotti? So handsome, so charismatic. His characterization of Radames was beautiful . . .”

“*La sua voce era bellissima.*”

“*Sì, sì,*” Ariana agrees, sadly shaking her head.

“His voice—I shall never forget that voice.” The two cousins speak as if mourning the loss of a lover.

“He started a foundation, you know. It continues to help new young opera singers to this day,” Ariana says. “He was very generous.”

“That’s wonderful,” Bobby says.

“*Aida* was first performed in Egypt,” Antonia says. “Not many people know this.”

“Commissioned by an Egyptian sultan!” Ariana adds.

“She knows a lot of history,” Antonia whispers to Bobby and Lisa, “but so do I—so I like to test her. What year was that?” she challenges.

“1873,” Ariana says.

“*No, hai torto*—it was 1871!” Antonia corrects triumphantly.

“*Aida* was first performed in *this* arena in 1913 at the hundredth anniversary of the birthday of Verdi,” Ariana says confidently. “Operas have been performed here ever since, with the exception of two periods during World War I and World War II.”

“How interesting!” Lisa says with genuine appreciation. The air is chilly—she pulls her sweater over her shoulders. The whole place feels like another world, and these two cousins are like walking encyclopedias, telling its history.

“Oh, we could talk about opera all day and all night—we’ve been coming here for years,” Ariana says. “You know, Verdi didn’t like it when *Aida* was performed in Cairo, because only rich people were allowed to see it. So, when it was performed in Milano, at La Scala, to him that was the real first performance because it was open to everyone to see, rich and poor.”

What a treasure trove of stories older people carry with them! Bobby thinks. He decides to take his cue from Italians and show senior citizens the respect they obviously deserve.

God willing, one day he and Lisa will be old too, and would wish for the same.

VENICE

Dear reader, what did I tell you, eh? To hear *Aida* in that ancient arena. *Mamma mia!* The opera is . . . *bella*. I have not been to that place, or to any opera theater, but my uncle Giuseppe, he liked to sing all the time. He sang at parties, while he worked, and even at funerals. He was a baker, a chef! Don’t think he was always happy—he had trouble with his wife, as I remember. But he sang through it all. I grew up hearing that deep voice around our house, coming through the windows. But wait . . . where are our two lovebirds now? I’ve lost track of them!

Ah, there they are—the young newlyweds are seated on that sleek high-speed train. I don’t understand this fast

pace—those two are trying to see so much in so little time! I fear they are missing something, the simple everyday joys of my country.

But this is their first visit, and hopefully there will be many more.

Look, I see now that their train is pulling slowly into Stazione di Santa Lucia in Venezia, and they have just awakened from a pleasant nap in their seats . . .

Lisa shakes herself awake as the train jolts slightly and the conductor strides down the corridor. She is amazed how much of Italy can be traversed at high speed. The Italian rail network—about ten thousand miles of mostly electric lines—is a major modern achievement. During World War II, Italy's train lines were severely damaged, and rebuilt as soon as possible. Today, rail passengers can explore Italy via comfortable, high-speed trains between most of the country's main cities.

"*Venezia!*" the conductor's voice booms over the loudspeaker as passengers gather their belongings.

"I'm calling it *Venezia* from now on," Bobby says as he grabs his bag from above, and when it falls heavily into his arms he thinks, *Why, oh why, did I bring so many books?*

Before he can hoist the bag on his shoulder, Lisa has already pushed ahead to get off the train and onto the station platform. He rushes to catch up. They leave the station together and are immediately confronted with a lively crowd of people streaming

along on the wide waterside street named Fondamenta Santa Lucia. Warm, hazy sunlight fills the atmosphere.

Such a rich scene! Lisa's eyes latch onto a quick-moving vaporetto—or water bus—sleek black gondolas, and small motorboats as they course along the sparkling Grand Canal.

Bobby's heart jumps at the sight of the San Simeone Piccolo across the water, a commanding eighteenth-century church with long steps, a massive green dome, and a temple-like entrance supported by Corinthian columns. *I've got that church in my books!* he thinks. Next to it in line are the facades of more aging but elegant buildings, like a row of old friends on a bench.

Down a bit, the bridge called Ponte degli Scalzi crawls with crowds of tourists who drag their rolling suitcases first one way, then another, and finally stop to examine their maps.

"Oh. My. Goodness. This is beautiful," Bobby says reverently as he surveys the scene.

"Venice! I've seen hundreds of photos of this place . . . but to *be* here, surrounded by these pink, green, and orange buildings, and the canals. I can't believe it!" Lisa exclaims.

"The Accademia, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, the Doge's Palace, the Correr Museum—all gold mines," Bobby muses. "And they're all here in this little city. I wonder how we can see them all."

"By walking from one to another," Lisa deadpans. "Unless we go by one of the boat taxis . . ."

"There is a lot of modern art here too," Bobby says. "Every other year, the Biennial, or *La Biennale di Venezia*, is held here."

“Okay,” Lisa says urgently, “let’s find our hotel so we can drop off our suitcases and start exploring this amazing place!”

They hurry along the crowded street, aromas of food, coffee, canal water, and strong cigarettes filling the air. Sunlight sparkles off the water and lively conversations of Italians and travelers surround them. They finally find the door of their small hotel and go inside to register.

“We must go to Piazza San Marco,” Lisa says as she finishes unpacking in their little room with tall windows. “I know there is so much to see, but let’s start there.”

“Just to remind you, I hate tour groups,” Bobby says, changing his shoes and socks. “I am preparing for major-league walking.”

Minutes later, a block away from Saint Mark’s Square, a voice echoes off the stone walls. “You are standing in the middle of San Marco, the famous Venice piazza!” shouts a young man leading a tour group of mostly older Americans who listen attentively.

Lisa and Bobby look at each other. Bobby starts to head in the opposite direction, but Lisa pulls on his sleeve. “Can’t we just listen to a little of what he’s explaining?”

“I told you, I do *not* like tours,” Bobby says firmly. But, he admits, they could just listen in without having to actually join one. So, the two quietly step forward to hear the guide’s words. The young man’s dark hair is brushed straight back and he holds aloft a little orange flag so his group can find him. Lisa eyes his clothes. He wears a white shirt and clean, pressed jeans. *Very neat, and very Italian*, she thinks.

“Let’s do a three-sixty turn and take in these facades and open spaces—they have been the same for hundreds of years,” the guide says. He points up and the Americans’ eyes follow. “First, you see here the magnificent Basilica di San Marco, or Saint Mark’s Basilica. It is outrageously beautiful and colorful, don’t you think? It features five entrance portals.” The guide spins on his heels. “Keep turning, everyone—and now gaze upon the Palazzo Ducale, the Doge’s Palace, an example of Gothic architecture that has survived fires and floods. It served as the doge’s apartments and government offices at the end of the Piazzetta di San Marco—that long space—you can see the Grand Canal.”

“I’ve seen photos of San Marco completely flooded,” comments an American woman.

“Yes,” the guide replies, “that does happen, and it is a constant worry because of the damage to the buildings.”

Bobby looks around and wonders what it would be like to see this whole space under two feet of water. He shakes off the image, too terrible to contemplate.

“Now look up, *way* up,” the guide says, “to the *Campanile di San Marco*, a three-hundred-twenty-three-foot-high brown brick bell tower.” The tourists crane their necks all at once. “It has survived fires and earthquakes, and in 1902 it fell down. We rebuilt it ten years later—with a gilded angel on top. And now, keep turning!” he calls.

Everyone turns in their places, taking in the entire piazza scene with restaurants, bistros, and shops. “Come back in the evening and you will be treated to the sound of competing

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