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As I was walking home to write this paper, the door of a parked car to my right opened up. A man leaned out and shouted something; the only word I could understand was “scusi.”

Panic came. “He’s talking to me,” I thought, “what on earth am I supposed to say?” But my fears passed when I realized he wasn’t talking to me, but a friend of his on the street. Whatever he said to follow “scusi” must have been funny- the two burst into laughter. Relief came, and then disappointment. Here I was, three months into a foreign country, and I couldn’t understand the brief sentence I had just heard, let alone appreciate the humor. It’s a funny thing, learning a new language. You don’t go into it blindly, you have some idea of what you’re getting yourself into. “I have so much to learn from these people,” you think, “and once I learn their language I’ll know all there is to know about them.”

I’ve visited Italy five times before. My grandmother immigrated to the US from Calabria in the fifties but still owns a home there, not far from the homes many other family members who stayed behind. We’re there every few years, visiting not just cousins, aunts, and uncles, but the types of relatives you’re not aware you have in the US. I’d never think of someone like my grandfather’s cousin’s son as being a significant part of the family, but the way my grandmother greets such people gives you the impression they’re much closer. Family’s important to my family in Italy, and I’m important to them. Which is why I can’t seem to escape the question “when are you going to learn Italian?”

It’s a fair question to ask. There’s plenty I’d like to learn from them, and I’m sure there’s a lot they’d like to learn from me- directly, and not through a translator. My high school didn’t offer Italian, and while I have no regrets taking Latin, it’s hard to argue that it *isn’t* a dead language- despite every Latin teacher’s claims to the contrary. It’s a language to be written, not spoken, and as such I hadn’t any experience with learning a language orally until coming here. Before I left, my family had high hopes, especially my grandmother. How excited she was to think she might finally be able to have a conversation with me in her first tongue. “You’ll pick it up right away my uncle told me.” I was cautiously optimistic. I hoped to pick it up but as an architecture student, I knew that the work required to learn the language might be sidelined by work for my studio projects. The suggestion that architecture students only take half a semester is an easy one to understand. I didn’t feel like I was able to keep up with the pace in both subjects at once- a problem exacerbated by the fact that I lived with fellow American students, and not a host family.

It’s hard to pick things up when you’re only using a language on a selective basis. We all fall into routines and I’m no different. I know the words to order a sandwich from a cafe, I’ve been able to hobble together a description of how I want my hair cut, and I can ask for a check- how to do the last being of paramount importance here. And in addition to these basic phrases, I understand some of the grammar and can incorporate new vocabulary into my existing vocabulary. But those opportunities rarely happen. I don’t know if it’s the way I dress- it might even be the way I smell- but Italians seem to know I’m an American before I say the word. And rather than having some fun watching me stumble through the Italian language, they’ll use it as an opportunity to practice their own English. And with that the norm, the few occasions where the language barrier is total become frustrations rather than benefits.

But maybe the barrier isn't as strong as differences in language might make it seem. In Graham Greene classic novel Our Man In Havana, one of the characters muses that "there are many countries in our blood... but only one person." And while I may not have learned much through speaking, I've still learned a lot about the people I've come across. After falling off my bike the other day, a man rushed up to see if I was okay. I was able to understand bits and pieces of what he said (Are you okay? Did you hit your head Do you need water?) I managed to say I was fine, that I only hurt my hands and that I was in front of my house, but I was grateful to him nonetheless. And it wasn't for anything in his words, it was for his compassion. It's possible to communicate things in a way that transcends language; while that conversation in Italian might be a bit simple, I'm sure I'll see some joy in her eyes when we have it. That will be more important than any words exchanged, and I won't need words to know it.

As I walked past that parked car, I smiled. I may not have understood a word of what those two were laughing about, but despite the language, laughter can be infectious.