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Home Away From Home

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Last spring, I had the opportunity and privilege to study abroad in Florence, Italy. Although I give myself a certain amount of credit for this chance in a lifetime, I owe most of the reward to my parents. Without their unconditional support - a mix of love, discipline, and of course, additional money - and overwhelming faith in me, I would have never left the many comfort zones of home. However, I am so thankful I did. To my surprise, the connection I made with my surroundings in the spaces of Florence, in particular Piazza di Santa Croce, turned out to be what I consider my closest understanding of not only myself, but God. In such a short time - all but four months - my faith magnified before my eyes."



Gabby Dattellas

Home Away From Home

Dedicated to my loving, tender-hearted Great-Grandma Millie



Last spring, I had the opportunity and privilege to study abroad in Florence, Italy. Although I give myself a certain amount of credit for this chance in a lifetime, I owe most of the reward to my parents. Without their unconditional support - a mix of love, discipline, and of course, additional money - and overwhelming faith in me, I would have never left the many comfort zones of home. However, I am so thankful I did. To my surprise, the connection I made with my surroundings in the spaces of Florence, in particular Piazza di Santa Croce, turned out to be what I consider my closest understanding of not only myself, but God. In such a short time - all but four months - my faith magnified before my eyes.

My roommate Taylor had been out of town a weekend in March; she was traveling to Barcelona, Spain and I would be all alone with my homestay guardian, a sweet and welcoming older woman, who at times was more occupied than me. Her name was Marina. It was a Sunday morning and as usual (that is, if I was not traveling myself) I attended morning mass in a small church around the corner.

Unlike home, the service in Florence with Marina seemed much more personal than I know from St. Joseph's Church, my own parish in Syracuse. People seemed to be up and down at all different parts of the mass, there is no "pew-by-pew" order to receive communion (that is, only the host), and the parishioners come-and-go at will. In truth, at first all of this differentiated confusion was quite irritating. It distracted me from grasping any part of the service at all; plus, each gospel reading, as well as the homily, was in full-force Italian. Therefore, I had no hinted indication of what part of the mass we were even addressing. To say the least, I was a bit frustrated. Nonetheless, for some reason, I still found myself walking the cobblestone streets into

its massive, wooden arched doors every Sunday. I was reminded of home in this way; my mom preaching that mass is one hour of my day and I have more than plenty to be thankful for. Yes mom, I know.

I felt flustered when I returned back to Piazza de Peruzzi that morning. Marina knew. She asked if I understood father's homily. I lied. I did not want to spend more time trying to make sense of it. So instead, I decided to make myself a cup of coffee. I needed to snap myself out of the flustered mood that began to overwhelm me.

In Italy, one does not usually make a full pot of coffee at home. There is a unique, Italian-style espresso maker that will make enough for one to two people; it is done on the stove. Fittingly, I untwisted the metal parts necessary to add the grounded beans and water. Then after finagling it back together, I left it on the burner to do its thing. I did not know minutes later, the kitchen would be fuming with smoke.

At the time, I was in my bedroom waiting when I heard Marina yelling. I jumped out of my sheets and ran to her. My heart sank when I realized what all the fuss was about. "You told me you knew how to do this", she said. "Mamma mia...dio mio... fumare...stupida" were among some of the Italian words I picked up on before she walked away. I had forgotten to put the water in the cup, causing the metal bottom to burn. Frantic, I took the enemy off the stove and placed it on a pot holder. The sudden feelings of my frustration seared right through that too leaving a round, crisp burn. Nothing was going my way.

Marina had gone to work without any sort of goodbye and I was alone, though it felt like I had been all morning. It was the first time I cried in Italy. I felt so distant from everything around me and my heart was beating uncontrollably. It was like someone was poking and poking and poking at it just to get some sort of rise from me. I was talking out loud at this point, but I didn't know to whom or what. "What did I do to you? Didn't I go to church today?" As if someone was going to answer.

I needed to ease my emotion at this point. I threw on a light jacket and practically sprinted out of the house. In no time, I ended up where I always end up. Piazza di Santa Croce. An infinite square just behind Piazza de Peruzzi.

In this seemingly enclosed space, my breaths slowly contracted. I began to be at peace in its solitude. Small shops outlined the perimeter; locals rested on its benches, seeming to submerge into their own thoughts; children, without a care in the world, zigzagged throughout the square's massive middle; and I, just as other tourists did, gazed at the core of my private backyard, The Basilica of Santa Croce. The serenity in its collection of colors, its gothic architecture harmonious to medieval times, the stain glass window, and its marble archways incessantly transmitted sensations of liberty throughout my body. I instantly felt at ease again.

Days passed and it was as if nothing happened. Taylor returned and Marina went back to her usual ways. However, it was not long after, that the Great God Almighty decided to strike me again. This time, it was way worse.

Before leaving for Italy, I visited my great-grandma Millie with my grandfather. As always, walking into the distinct warming smell of her home brought back recollections of my past... how my cousin and I would tip-toe through the screen door while she was sleeping just to get a piece of Andes candy; how my sister and I would hang from one arm on the basement railing just to stare at the hundreds of pictures (of her grandchildren, of course) on the wall; how she allowed us to sit on her lap dripping wet after just cannon-balling into my aunt's pool...just a few memories that I can recall today.

She had not been doing well. She had been on oxygen for quite some time and struggled moving from her recliner chair to the basement rocker.

It was April in Florence, and although this recollection is blurry now, I received a text, the best sort of communication I had, from my father. We knew it was coming, but I did not expect it to be so soon. I felt like I could cry at any moment; my eyes were straining to hold the tears back. I didn't relate to pain like this and my only connection to Grandma - my family - was countries away. I felt more detached from Florence than ever. It was in that moment I remember questioning the validity of my religion with thoughts that have crossed my mind more than once. What is the point of such silly, robotic gestures and prayers if its meaning turns to this? Who gets to decide when *the time* is the best time?

I went for a run trying to make sense of all of it. But I couldn't. Just as I caught my breath, I thought of my mother and of my grandfather. Grandma Millie was not only a grandmother to me, but to my own mom. More so, she was my papa's mother. And a wife, a sister, a friend. Why would He take her away from us? I continued rushing by streets that quickly felt unfamiliar, despite the fact I was nearing my last month in Florence. I had no destination in mind, but my impulses led the way to the front steps of Santa Croce church. I had never actually gone into the Basilica, but that day I did. As soon as I put a foot in the door, I burst into tears uncontrollably. They just kept falling and falling and falling. I could not get them to stop.

To be honest, I paid no attention to my surroundings; I could barely see regardless. Soon I found myself in the chapel; less people seemed to be there. I knelt down in the tiny wooden pew to pray in search for the solitude that I had always found in Piazza di Santa Croce. I closed my eyes and buried my face into my hands and began repeating Hail Mary's. Hail Mary, full of grace, Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen. Again and again I prayed, hoping God would allow me to feel Grandma's presence. Hail Mary, full of grace, Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed...suddenly, I was tapped on the arm. An older woman with dark, sincere eyes was standing to my right. With her palms up, she reached out to give me a hug. I didn't even know who she was, but without hesitation I stood up and fell into her arms. No words were exchanged besides the heavy breathing of my own voice. She then kneeled down next to me and led her hand out for me to join. Together, we started to pray. However, this time my face was no longer buried; I spoke directly to Jesus, who was painted on the golden cross mounted above the altar. Hail Mary, full of grace, Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen.

Maybe it is all a twist of faith, but I knew Grandma Millie heard my prayers that evening. And so did my mom, my grandfather, and God. Physical presence is not in any way stronger than the spiritual presence within our hearts. Whether we confide in a higher Power, a stranger lending out a helping hand, or the voices of our own conscience, I am convinced we are never alone if there is faith. For those most dear to us remain by our sides in whatever struggles and losses we must bear.

I walked out of the basilica that evening absorbing the blessings behind me and before me. With a smile on my face, and Grandma by my side, it was time to return home.



Interior of Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme



Gabby Dattellas in the Piazza of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme