

Travels With My Lovers

By Erica Miner

<http://www.ericaminer.com>

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1. *Addio, Firenze*

I.

I was beside myself. Admittedly, I was hopeless at maps – this had always been my husband Eric’s job – and suddenly I found myself in my first European city without a clue as to where I was heading. Although I wasn’t a single mom, it certainly felt that way, with my two tykes in tow and a husband bailing out at the last minute to stay in New York. Like a relentless mama sheepdog, I pushed and prodded my precious kids along the cracked cobblestone sidewalks. Where was the shopping cart when you needed it? Or the red wagon, for that matter? I think there comes a time in every mother's life, when you just want to say, what was I thinking?

Don't get me wrong, I loved being a mom. But much as I treasured my two adorable little cohorts, I was beginning to be desperate for some exploration time alone. Julian and Regina, thank God, were not hyper kids; but they were both up for adventure and kept me going, going, going.

By mid-afternoon Florence had become, to my overloaded senses, a bewildering maze of crisscrossing streets and piazzas choked with tourists. Then, when the kids and I had finally got our bearings (I was feeling calm and we were on our way to a bar to reward ourselves with some *gelati*) the unimaginable happened. My son, who had insisted on chasing pigeons through the Piazza della Signoria, disappeared; and suddenly the phrase "sightseeing" took on a whole new - and frightening - meaning.

Julian was only eight - what made him think he could just take off like that, in the middle of an unfamiliar, foreign city? One minute he was alternately pursuing the ubiquitous birds and fidgeting impatiently while five-year-old Regina and I admired the imposing statues in the colonnade; and the next minute he was out of sight. Something was definitely going on with him.

He'd always seemed to be a mirrored image of his dad - "little Eric," we sometimes called him - and I'd always thought his affection for me reflected the genuine admiration and supportiveness Eric always demonstrated toward me. But lately, my husband had gotten less attentive; and strangely, Julian had filled the gap, vacillating between an annoying clinginess and a fierce, unpredictable independence.

I tried to remember how I had felt at his age and suddenly flashed on the exhilarating freedom I'd felt when I had put my own mother through a similar torment. Too impatient to wait for her, I walked home alone from my urban grade school, crossing a busy, dangerous thoroughfare all by myself. When I reached home I found

her, head bowed over the kitchen table, crying bitter tears of worry and grief. It was one of the few times I ever saw my mother cry. Now, I supposed, it was my turn to be fraught with anxiety over my own missing child.

I watched the bustling police activity all around me - a response to my impassioned plea to the *Carabinieri*, in my hit-and-miss Italian - to help me locate my son. I could barely describe Julian without bursting into tears. I was so flustered, in fact, that I gave the Police Chief my maiden name by mistake, then had to correct myself. I must really be overwrought, I imagined. This was very unlike me. After almost nine years of marriage, I was as wedded to my married name as I was to the robust, hair-curling espressos Eric made for me every morning.

As the hours dragged on, my sunburned arms felt as if they'd fall off from having to carry ill-tempered little Regina all around the Palazzo Vecchio. (Of course I couldn't blame her - what kid her age wouldn't be grumpy, traipsing through the Uffizi Gallery for two hours with her fanatic art-lover mom?) And in the midst of all the confusion, which was all the more so since it was Italian *confusione*, the poor kid's nose had started bleeding all over my shoulder and onto the sidewalk, completely annihilating a fledgling street-Michelangelo's masterpiece-in-progress. I handed him a five thousand lire note to start him off on his next one. He grumbled, "*Grazie*," and we fled before the crimson tide engulfed what was left of his artistic endeavor.

Meanwhile, impressed as I was with how seriously Italians seemed to consider the disappearance of a child, the reality was that no further progress had been made in the search for my little guy. In reality, Julian was a resourceful New York City kid and could probably hold his own on the streets of any city. But I was still fraught with

anxiety, all the more since I was plagued with fears about what Eric would think if he knew about the situation. I loved my husband dearly, and I didn't want to worry him needlessly, but I had no particular desire to incur his wrath. Finally, in desperation, I had asked the policeman in charge to phone our hotel, just in case my son had somehow managed to find his way back there: was Julian that clever?

Apparently so. The concierge answered my frenzied call from the cop's phone.

"Yes, my friend Julian, he is here." I could almost see the concierge's broad smile as he spoke. "I gave him the key to the room," he continued.

Relieved, but a bit embarrassed, I thanked the police chief and smiled at his *squadra*, who smiled back. Dragging a hungry and whiny Regina - who, being the bright-eyed early riser in the family, had been up since the crack of dawn. I hurried back to the hotel, ready to thoroughly chew out Julian - though I was secretly proud that he had negotiated the confusing streets successfully and without mishap. Thank God Florence was small - a lot smaller than New York.

My thoughts briefly drifted again to Eric, whom, I feared, would judge me harshly if he had been aware of today's events. Within a matter of minutes, however, Regina and I had entered the hotel lobby; and as we were rushing to the elevator to rejoin my precious but mischievous son, I glanced for a brief instant at the lovely drawing of ancient Florence, which hung on the lobby wall. It was labeled "*Fiorenza*" - very evocative. But I still preferred the contemporary Italian version of the name: *Firenze* - the city of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, the city with which I had fallen in love at first sight, the city whose heady atmosphere and burnished roofs embodied for me the phrase "*Italia*."

As we sped down the hall and to our room, I looked down at the delicate cameo locket dangling between my breasts, and I vowed I would someday give it to Regina for her unwitting bravery that day. As soon as she was old enough, I would say: “to remember our time in ‘*Fiorenza.*’ ” The wee one must have known I was thinking about her, because she turned to me and gave me the biggest, most grateful tired smile, as if to say, “I don’t want to go anywhere ever again.”

When we came in, Julian was sitting on the bed in our room, calmly occupying himself with his most cherished treasures, the Star Wars action figures I had deftly snatched up the moment they had hit the stores. The embodiment of “night owl,” Julian was always an absolute bear to get up in the morning; but by this time, late in the day, he was fully into gear – even more so from the adrenaline stemming from his adventure. I scrutinized his face, searching for signs of trepidation, anxiety or excitement. I wanted to ask him what he had been feeling during those hours when he had been on his own: was it fear, or pride in his accomplishment? He merely responded to my worried glance with a curious expression, as if to say, “I got here without a problem - where were you?”

Then my emotions took control as I raged at him, accusing him of foolhardiness, of having a false sense of confidence, of taking unnecessary risks - all the while wondering what had happened to my own sense of adventure. I thought once more of the tribulations I had put my poor mother through back in grade school. Had I now graduated to the unexciting world of grownup-hood, where taking chances was unacceptable? Had I lost my perception of a world beyond safety and levelheaded practicality?

After the tumult subsided I took Julian into my arms and hugged him fiercely, extracting a promise from him never to do this to me again, and all was forgiven. But I noticed afterwards he was more forthcoming than usual in giving Regina a turn with the Star Wars figures.

Musing on the events of the day as my cherished little ones played, I silently began to question again my wisdom in thinking I could come to Italy on my own with two little kids. Then suddenly it occurred to me that some of the blame should fall on Eric's shoulders as well. I had an undying affection for him, and our utter devotion to each other during our marriage was legendary, according to our friends and colleagues. But it was Eric, after all, who had done a complete about-face at the eleventh hour and unrelentingly insisted on my taking the Italy trip solo.

He had his reasons. I had been the one, he had pointed out, who was brimming over with curiosity about the continent where my parents had been born. It was I who had given up a scholarship to study in Rome when I became pregnant with Julian, and it was I who couldn't wait to see Italy. And in the past year of dealing with the frenetic pace of caring for two small children and balancing a strenuous workload, it was my body and soul that ached for the infusion of life-affirming spirit that, he was sure, the culture and history-steeped atmosphere of Italy would provide.

He also reminded me how much it had meant to me when my mother took me to my first opera (okay, it was in downtown Detroit, but it was still the Met.) How magical it would be, he had suggested, to bring my children to the birthplace of opera

and have them help me fulfill my own yearning, to share with them that wonderful country whose essence I had been deprived of for so many years.

But, I countered, being that both of us made our living as opera musicians – he as a conductor, I as a violinist – I felt Eric should by all rights come with us to the country where opera was born. For opera was the source of one of our most compelling mutual affections.

He won out finally when he pointed out he simply couldn't afford to take the time off. He had come to the realization that he needed to stay in New York for the entire summer and attend all the various festivals taking place in and near the city, in order to pave the way for his eventual rise in the hierarchy of up-and-coming conductors. He had been adamant about this, and I couldn't argue with his rationale.

Thus it was decided I should be the one to take the kids abroad, and now I found myself brooding resentfully about bearing the sole responsibility for shepherding them around a foreign country. I wondered how Eric could be so unconcerned about being separated from all of us for six long weeks, even though he had left open the possibility that he would come and join us. I was left feeling confused, abandoned and alone – and most of all, disconnected.

Suddenly, however, I began to agonize all over again about what Eric would think of my losing Julian. Should I even call my husband and tell him what had happened? Would he be sympathetic and understanding? Or would he blast me with the recriminations of an outraged husband, accusing me of being irresponsible and neglectful? It was odd that I didn't really know for sure how he would react. And what were my own feelings on the subject? Had I been a bad mother? Perhaps Julian's getting

himself lost had been a cry for attention. But what was going on with him that made him need to cry out?

For a time, I tormented myself with these thoughts. But after realizing my own feelings of remorse were sufficient to keep me in a guilt-ridden state of mind for the foreseeable future, I decided it would be better not to call Eric after all. Instead, I thought about how fortunate I was to have been reunited with Julian; and about the Police Chief with the impossibly cute face and dazzling smile – who had been so kind in helping me find my lost son.

“A volte queste cose succedono,” he had said consolingly.

Indeed, I had mused, these things do happen – but do they happen to good mothers?

*

The question remained what to do about dinner that evening. I was too worn out and not hungry enough to deal with a formal restaurant, and too mentally whipped to look for one; so I figured something light would do the trick – perhaps some of those delightful little *panini*, which came in so many tempting varieties.

Speculating on this, I got the kids all cleaned up (although Julian was particularly insistent on being independent in this regard) and myself changed into jeans and a sleeveless tee and decided that we would duck into the first place we came to. Luckily, our location right in the center of town, one block from the Duomo Cathedral, assured us of a quick find.

I hesitated at the glass doors of the *gelato* store and peered in the giant-sized picture window. The sign read: “*aria condizionata.*” Air conditioned. That was a must in this heat. And there seemed to be dozens of choices in the glass case. *Avanti*, I decided, this will do just fine.

The atmosphere inside was incredibly pleasant. The store was glassed in on all sides, and there was a small ledge at the front window where the kids could sit while they ate. I, on the other hand, had no appetite at all, for I was suddenly feeling so battle-weary that I again began to obsess over Eric’s seeming lack of concern about sending me away with the kids.

Behind his generosity and seeming sacrifice in giving up the trip, and his encouragement for me to seize the opportunity, I suddenly realized there had been an undercurrent of something unknown that left me with a feeling of anxiety and apprehension. What was Eric’s real reason for letting us go so willingly? Why was he not as uncomfortable as I was with such a long separation?

Such contemplation was unlikely to be resolved at that moment, for I had two hungry offspring tugging at me like chicks in a mama bird’s nest. Gathering up my courage, I stepped to the counter and contemplated the colorful sandwiches and endless variety of pizzas.

“*Può aiutarla, signora?*”

I looked up to find behind the counter a green-eyed, curly-haired young Italian with the warmest, most infectious smile I had ever seen. It took some effort, seeing the way he was looking at me, to recover my composure. He was looking right through me, his sparkling eyes in direct contact with mine. For a brief moment I forgot where I was,

even that my two starving kids were waiting patiently at my side. Presently I found my speaking voice and told my chirping chicks to pick out whatever they wanted.

I discreetly tried to figure out if the young man spoke English - no luck in that department – or French, my second language, which was at least somewhat close to *Italiano*.

Evidently not...okay, time to improve my Italian.

I tried not to be self-conscious, as I mustered my best *Italiano* to pronounce the names of the food items and inquire as to their contents. Having accomplished this, I felt in great need of a drink -- a glass of white wine, in fact -- a request my helper carried out without so much as missing a beat.

I deposited the kids on the window ledge with their repast; and while they munched happily, I savored the refreshing beverage -- a cool, invigorating liquid, which redefined the word *fresca* -- that soothed my soul and awakened my palate.

Apparently I did rather well with the language, for my helper began to converse with me in Italian. And amazingly, I understood him perfectly. I had heard Florentines spoke more clearly than other Italians, due to the fact that their form of the language was purer than mongrelized dialects spoken elsewhere in Italy

Was that the case, or was he speaking clearly for my sake? I asked myself this as I looked into the pool of his eyes, but I didn't dwell on the explanation. For the first time since my frightening experience of losing Julian, I was enjoying myself immensely, just sipping my wine and conversing with this handsome stranger.

We exchanged names, (his was Carlo, of course, what else?) and he asked me about my travels. I told him I had been all over Northern Italy, alone with my kids --

his eyebrows raised -- but I liked Florence best of all, which was true, despite the misadventures of the day (which I described to him in great detail.)

I found out that, along with his brother and the brother's wife and kids, he lived on the second floor of his parents' house, which was an ancient Florentine residence in the family for generations and was near the San Marco church, only a few blocks away from his work. I told him I was a musician in an opera orchestra, and he practically bowed down in respect. The ease with which we spoke was almost shocking, and I felt stirrings of excitement in ways I'd long ago forgotten.

And so it went, for an indeterminate amount of time. I later wondered how we had managed to talk for so long without any gap in the conversation. And I was amazed at his skill in taking care of his customers without having to neglect paying attention to me. He even had a routine where he juggled the empty ice cream cups for his customers before filling them with some of the most luscious-looking gelato I had ever seen. The kids made hardly a peep, except to express their delight when I handed them each a cup of this nectar of the Italian gods. It was as if there were some conspiracy in favor of the communication between this woman (me) and her "admirer" (him.)

"A most agreeable way to pass the time," I mused.

I had lost track, both of how long I had been standing there and how many glasses of wine I had consumed; but I didn't really care, for I was feeling wonderfully relaxed and pleasantly high.

It was at this point that my newfound friend, still smiling, informed me that it was the end of his shift and he regretfully had to leave, but that it had truly been a pleasure to talk with me. I acknowledged him with similar sentiments, and he departed.

The resultant glow of such flattering attention supplanted the slight pang of loneliness that came over me.

Finishing my wine, I reluctantly gathered up my kids, who at my query agreed that, yes, he was a very nice man, and headed out the door.

He was waiting outside. I could not suppress my astonishment at seeing him there and suddenly felt slightly uncomfortable. But when he flashed his winning smile and most graciously asked if he could accompany us up the street, continuing our conversation where we had left off, I did not protest. It was only when he offered to take us for a drive that I felt the signals go off in my head.

It could not have taken more than a brief second for my response, but during that moment all the pros and cons flashed through my mind.

He's only a stranger whom I just met and hardly know...I'm married, he may get the wrong idea...What will my kids think...?

But it's such a beautiful evening, and what else would my progeny and I be doing?...I'm dying to see more of the city, share it with the two most youthful members of my family...And what better way than with a Native?...And...

The battle between the cautious and fun loving "me's" suddenly halted. Something inside me snapped, as if another entity had taken over my psyche. Gone were the worried, angry thoughts of Eric, the feelings of being abandoned. The kids and I were going to enjoy ourselves – we deserved that. And almost before the words "why not?" had formed in my mind, they had already been blurted out: "*Perchè no?*"

(There. I've done it; the die is cast. Whatever happens, happens. *Chè sarà, sarà.*)

Carlo's smile broadened. Within moments, he had retrieved his tiny Fiat from the *garaggio*, Julian and Regina tumbled into the back seat, and we were off, leaving behind the frenzied pace of the city. The kids were content to be riding in a car for a change, and Carlo's company was delightful. He was polite and attentive, a fact made even more compelling by his ability to negotiate the insane traffic patterns and scintillating conversation simultaneously. I was ecstatic.

As we drove the cypress-lined road into the hills of Fiesole, the scenery that unfurled before my eyes was spectacular, completely beyond my imagination. There were awe-inspiring views awaiting us at every turn, a continuous succession of unforgettable vistas across rows of shade trees and beautiful villas, the breathtaking carpet of green-covered hillocks and fiery-orange roofs that unwound in the ever-increasing distance behind us.

No wonder everyone loved Florence. I imagined myself back in the Renaissance, gazing at the same panorama with a handsome young Florentine at my side. I was suddenly brought back to an image of ancient Florence which I had seen in my guide book: young people clad in long, flowing silks strolling along a passageway with the Arno River in the background: a view which had remained unchanged over the past five centuries.

The approaching darkness added an element of mystery to the surroundings. The cypresses took on an air of intrigue. I was in a fantasy world of unimaginable beauty, with no idea what new adventure awaited me at the next bend in the road. A sympathetic current began to flow between myself and Carlo, as if he was getting inside

my stream of thought, intuiting my reactions and taking vicarious delight in my appreciation of the magnificence which surrounded us.

Ever since Julian's pigeon escapade, he seemed to be seeking out birds. And when we soon came upon a brightly lit open square in which some sort of celebration was taking place, Julian quickly made friends with the feathered congregation in attendance. For the benefit of the human attendees, a huge red banner with the hammer and sickle was stretched high across the piazza. A dance band was playing on a large platform, and hundreds of people were dancing, eating, drinking, singing and generally carrying on.

"It's a *festa*," declared Carlo gleefully. "I had no idea it was taking place tonight!"

Carlo then asked me if I was familiar with the Italian Communist party, *L'Unità* – had I ever been to a Communist rally, would I like to see one?

I hesitated. My own personal leanings were liberal, but not that liberal. Before leaving New York for Italy, however, I had read that the politics in Italy were very different from those in the U.S. The Communist party in Italy was more like a free-thinking, more leftist version of the Democrats at home, and an inordinate number of Italian cities were run by this liberal faction.

After considering these points, I came to a decision.

"Yes, we'd love to go – it sounds fascinating," I affirmed.

With my acceptance, I was throwing all caution to the winds, unfurling my own red banner. Something told me I was in for an adventure the likes of which could never

be experienced back home. My breath quickened with anticipation as we approached the celebration.

I found the whole scene utterly enchanting and was completely taken over by the infectiousness of spirit that pervaded all those participating. There was also for me a certain excitement, brought on by the somewhat clandestine nature of the activities. After all, this was a gathering of *Comunisti*.

But their Soviet counterparts would not have recognized what was going on. There was no way such an event would ever take place in Moscow, or anywhere else in the Soviet Union, for the Italian gaiety and *joie de vivre* made this celebration seem to originate from a totally different brand of Communism.

I did my best to communicate my enjoyment of the festivities to Carlo, and his face flushed with pleasure at my reaction. Julian and Regina stared wide-eyed at the goings-on and gladly accepted Carlo's proffered hot dogs and soda. They sat on the edge of the platform while their mother and her friend drank wine – red seemed somehow more appropriate in this atmosphere – and danced along with the crowd. How befitting that I had worn a bright red shirt.

"Many of the cities and towns have Communist mayors," Carlo explained above the cacophony of noise. "They have done much for the country. Florentines are very politically oriented and have been for centuries," he added. "Politics has always been one of my main interests."

"I think that's wonderful," I enthused, easily picturing him as a charming, persuasive politico. For all I knew, I might unconsciously have been thinking that by the end of the evening I could be ready to sign up for membership.

The festivities showed no signs of slowing down, but we decided to move on farther up into the hills, departing to the strains of “*Bandiera Rossa*” wafting behind us. We drove higher, stopping when we reached a charming and rustic open-air *taverna* seemingly carved into the side of the hill.

“Would the kids like a *gelato*?” Carlo asked. “It’s a very special kind they have here.”

“You are much too generous...” I began.

But he would not listen to my protests. In an instant, he was back with two ice creams and two glasses of a strange-looking liquid.

“It’s Pernod – ever had it?” he asked.

I shook my head as I watched him stir the potion, which miraculously turned a greenish-yellow. Tentatively, I took a sip and immediately felt the fluid warmth spread through my body. My inner voice cautioned me he might be trying to get me drunk, but as I looked at him over the edge of my glass I decided my inner voice could take a holiday. So far, he was being a perfect gentleman, more so than I would have ever expected. I hesitated momentarily; then I continued to sip slowly, deciding after all that a few sips was more than enough if I was to keep a clear head.

Sensing my wariness, he suggested a walk, and I gladly welcomed the idea. I took Julian by the hand, as Carlo gently held Regina’s, and the four of us began to climb a steep hill toward an ancient monastery. As the walking became more difficult, I felt Carlo’s arm encircle my waist. I was beset with doubts about whether I should allow this intimate gesture; but when I glanced at the children to see if they had noticed anything, they seemed perfectly comfortable with the entire situation.

When we reached the top, I gasped audibly. I had never dreamed such a breathtaking view could exist anywhere on this earth. All of Florence was at our feet, aglow with sparkling lights. I could recognize the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio and the strikingly beautiful dome of the Duomo Cathedral. If there was a heaven, this must be its earthly equivalent.

I looked at Carlo, and he smiled knowingly as if thinking, “I know what you are feeling; and I am so glad you appreciate the beauty before you. And I think you understand how proud I am of my native city and of my traditions.”

At that moment, I was feeling exactly that. For the first time since I had touched down on Italian soil, I felt an intimate understanding of the Italian nature had been revealed to me. I was utterly intoxicated by the atmosphere - and by the sympathetic vibrations between Carlo and myself. In that paradise high above the most beautiful city in the world, I let myself lose touch with reality...

“Mommy, can we go soon?”

Julian’s voice brought me back to the real world; but for some reason, I hesitated only briefly when Carlo asked me if I wanted to stop by his house. He gently lifted Regina, who had been up for too many hours and was fading fast, into his arms and carried her back to the car while Julian and I followed.

The last vestiges of my usually abundant prudence caused me enough concern that I became preoccupied and perceived little of the landscape around us during the descent from the hills, or of the neighborhood surrounding Carlo’s abode. But I suddenly became acutely aware of our surroundings when the car pulled up on a quiet street in front of an ancient stone dwelling.

It may have been typical for an old Florentine residence, but I had never seen anything like it. We entered from the courtyard, and Carlo explained there were three floors in the family compound: the ground floor for his parents, the first floor for him and the second floor for his brother. So this was the Italian family togetherness I had heard so much about. Fascinating.

We all piled out of the car and entered the house from the courtyard. I was amazed at the mixture of old and new. Everything, even the floors, was stone, and very old; and there were crucifixes hanging in each room. But the furnishings and other personal belongings reflected a more contemporary, present-day flavor. I wondered if the house dated back to the Renaissance: was Carlo a part of a line of Florentines that extended from ancient times? The thought only made me more excited to be in the backyard of a city that had inspired so much of the music and art that I loved.

I mused on this as I regarded his profile – straight out of an Italian Renaissance painting – and he showed us his apartment: living room, dining room, tiny kitchen - of course, it was a bachelor pad – a middle room with a bedroom off to each side. The second bedroom was filled with toys; evidently his two little nephews visited him often.

“The whole family’s at the seashore,” he explained, picking up a smooth, rose-colored pebble, which he let Regina examine in her tiny hand as he showed us around.

Julian and Regina (now in her second wind) were only too happy to be sidetracked by their newfound treasure trove and, despite the late hour, dove into enthusiastic play with Carlo’s nephews’ toys. Then Carlo took my hand and led me back to the living room.

Somehow, I ended up in his lap. And somehow I was in his arms. And I did not resist his tongue inside my mouth, which filled me with such longing that I yielded entirely. The kids were a million miles away, and Eric was in a different sphere – and I was adrift in some forgotten Italian master’s Renaissance painting.

I had never in my life experienced such a long, impassioned kiss; and suddenly I did not care that my children were in the next room, that I had a husband, that I had only known this stranger for a matter of hours. Nothing mattered except this delicious feeling which he had awakened in me. I panicked slightly when his hand reached inside my jeans, but it felt so wonderful that I dismissed my last remaining traces of self-will and let myself become lost in the sheer ecstasy of that endless embrace.

The inevitable patter of little feet reminded us both that our privacy was only fleeting, and I forced myself back to the real world. I pulled myself from Carlo’s embrace and tried to act as natural as I could to the kids, but I felt my flushed cheeks betray me.

In fact, I thought I saw a flash of suspicion in Julian’s eyes. Guilt flooded my consciousness as I saw how tired the kids looked, and Carlo graciously and regretfully accepted my request to be taken home. Truth be told, I realized the kids’ interruption had saved me from going any further with the folly in which had carried me away momentarily, and I was greatly relieved.

“Are you crazy?” I berated myself as Carlo drove us back to our hotel. “What has gotten into you? Be reasonable, for God’s sakes.

But when Carlo asked me if I would come by when he finished work the following evening, I was torn. I told him I just didn’t know. I was not trying to be coy;

I truly had no idea what to do. There was a lot of thinking to be done. How was I to even imagine the consequences of placing myself in such a situation?

Dog-tired, the kids tumbled into the big bed (*matrimoniale*, they called it in Italy – big enough for three) in our high-ceilinged room as soon as they entered. I'd just let them sleep as long as they needed to, I decided. But I lay awake, my mind racing, trying to reconcile my emotions with my common sense.

I had been away from Eric for three weeks at this point and was planning to travel in Italy for another three. I would never survive that long. I had always been faithful to Eric, and I assumed he had never cheated on me. But I was used to a vigorous sex life – I was only twenty-nine, after all - and I felt my attraction for Carlo pulling and tugging at me. If I went back to meet him the next evening, I knew what might happen. I admitted to myself I was on an inexorable path to infidelity, which was fast careening out of control. And I agonized over what Eric would think if he knew what I had already succumbed to on this heady summer's eve.

Then I thought resentfully of Eric's insistence on my going away with the kids for the summer. Intuitively, I felt there was something going on back in New York I really didn't want to know about. What if he was already betraying me -- what if that was the reason he wanted the three of us to go away? Sudden pangs of guilt for thinking ill of Eric prevented me from going any further with this train of thought.

Then there was the demonstration of Julian's protective instincts toward me earlier in the evening. I was suddenly reminded of the poignant moment when he was only four,

his eyes gazing at me with the candid innocence of a toddler, when he asked me to marry him. It was a touching display of affection, stemming from a kind of logic only I could understand, and I had been profoundly moved. Now he had matured into a savvy eight-year-old, whose instincts had evolved to a higher level. For reasons he could not even comprehend, he was keeping a canny watch over his mother; and I was on the verge of betraying his trust.

Could he possibly have been aware of some trouble brewing between his father and me, noticed with his childlike intuition my ambivalence about traveling without Eric, anticipated my own reasons for wanting the company of an attentive male? These were questions that might never be answered, for such answers surely involved a kind of mother-son intimacy that might prove elusive by the time Julian reached the point of maturity that would allow him to understand such things. One thing was certain, though: on some level, Julian must have perceived Carlo as a sexual predator and wanted to protect me, just as someday I would want to protect my own daughter from her budding sexuality.

I tossed and turned, pondering all these dilemmas and possibilities, until my mind and body were in agonizing turmoil. Why torture myself from three thousand miles away – why not just imagine everything was okay? But everything was not okay. My conflicting feelings were on a collision course with each other, and I had to act quickly to avoid a disaster.

There was only one thing to do, I resolved; and thus settled in my indecision, I prepared myself for sleep. Musing on the events of the evening, I found myself

wondering how Carlo had managed to reach inside my jeans, which were the tightest ones I owned.

Amazing, I thought, as I suddenly discovered my white lace panties had a small rip in them...

*

“Eric, is that you? I know it’s late there, but -- ”

“Sweetheart, how come you called? The kids okay?”

“They’re fine. I just...wanted to hear your voice. I miss you.”

“Oh, I miss you, too, sweetie.”

“No, I mean...I really miss you. Eric, I...I want to come home. Now.”

“You can’t mean, that, hon, you were going to stay till...”

“I know it’s only been three weeks, but I’m miserable here. It’s really hard being alone with the kids, and the language is difficult...and I’m so terribly lonely.

“Sweetheart, don’t you think you should give it another try? I mean – you were going to stay for six weeks. There must be so much you haven’t seen yet.”

“Well, I know, but...I want to come home – or you to come here.”

“Darling, I can’t come there and I...I’m not ready for you to come home yet.”

“Not ready? What does that mean?”

“I – I really need to be by myself. I have so many people to meet with, and I...can’t focus on my career if...I’m distracted.”

“You mean, you don’t want us. You don’t even miss us?”

“Of course I do. I just need more time.”

“More time for what? What exactly are you trying to say, Eric?”

“Nothing, hon...”

He paused. The awkward silence between us made the gulf of three thousand miles immeasurable.

“Just – give it a try for a little longer. If you’re still unhappy, then by all means come back.”

I hesitated, torn, trying to summon up the courage to tell him, to scream at him, to find something to get his attention. I was about to do the unthinkable, to betray our marriage vows - and he had to stop me. Obviously he had no plans to come join us, as he had originally proposed, and given the circumstances I wasn’t about to bring up the subject. In strained silence the long-distance seconds ticked by, expensive grains of sand flowing unremittingly into the bottom of the hourglass of ruin. Finally, I relented.

“Okay. I’ll call you if I can’t stand it any longer.”

“That’s my girl. Give the kids my love.”

“Yes...yes, I will.”

I was crushed and felt my anger rising up inside of me. How dare Eric just turn his back on us? And worse, it was obvious he didn’t even want us to be there at home. Whatever was going on back there, he was going to be just fine without us; he even seemed to imply that we would only interfere. Well, if that was the way he felt, so be it. If he were sharing his espressos with someone else, perhaps I would soon be doing the same.

This was the midpoint in our trip. I saw now that it was up to me to turn things around, to live for the moment. If Eric could get along without us then, dammit, we would have a great time without him - the time of our lives. I refused to let his rejection make me feel unwanted. If he didn't want me, then I knew someone who did.