

Part 1 1982-1983: The Year Abroad

When in Turin...

Near Turin, summer 1982

Try as he might, Hugh Stalwart was never to forget the day, or rather the night, that he crossed the French-Italian border and entered Italy for the first time. He and his friend John, both in their early twenties, were two of a group of weary travellers on a long-distance coach from London to Florence. They were both students of Italian at a British university, and were heading for Florence to attend a summer course in Italian language. At university they had followed a number of modules on Italian literature, art and history, as well as the language courses, but at this stage their spoken Italian was still poor. The other people on the coach, almost all British, were for the most part holidaymakers.

It was 5 o'clock in the morning, and not surprisingly, considering the early hour, most of the travellers were fast asleep. In the seats behind Hugh and John were two Londoners, who during the journey had made friends with a Scot sitting opposite them. The coach pulled into a motorway service station. The Italian driver stood up brusquely and yelled in wobbly English: 'Break fast! 'alf hour! If you please come again to the bus at five and 'alf!'

John, who had regularly been snoring himself awake during the previous few hours, sat bolt upright. 'Breakfast? At 5am?' He yawned and stretched. 'Well, the driver's obviously got a keen sense of humour. Where are we, anyway?'

‘Just past Turin, I think,’ replied Hugh, who was having difficulty sleeping. ‘These bloody seats are murdering my back. I’ll have to walk around for a while.’

John rubbed his eyes. ‘I could do with a coffee, though I might lay off the cream croissants at this hour. And I could also do with a pee.’

As they prepared to get off the coach, Hugh considered regretfully that their long-awaited entry into Italy had been something of an anticlimax. As they had passed the border patrol he had felt far too uncomfortable and sleep-deprived to register any sort of emotion or excitement. Still, they were now to tread Italian soil for the first time. And what did it matter if it was only the soil of a service station? They were in Italy! The country whose language, culture and mores they had been studying so assiduously for the past year. Italy – the domain of the vineyard, the land of the beautiful, the setting of cloud-topped mountains, cypress-girded lakes, sun-kissed beaches! Home to the Roman Empire, to the language of Dante and Manzoni! The cradle of art, the fulcrum of culture, the pinnacle of cuisine, the cauldron of history-

‘Oi!’

Hugh’s musings had been cut short by a peremptory London accent in the row behind him. ‘Oi! Are you blokes off for breakfast?’ The man was in his mid-thirties and balding. ‘Speak the lingo?’

‘Er, yes, certainly,’ Hugh replied uncertainly. ‘We study Italian at university.’

‘My warmest congratulations, gentlemen.’ The voice was that of the Scot, a tall man of around fifty. His accent was highly educated, his delivery careful and ironic. ‘You bring us truly excellent tidings. Since you’re acquainted with the local parlance, perhaps you could assist us in procuring a traumatically early beverage.’

John tried to be nonchalant. ‘Er, yeah, of course. No problem!’

Joined by the other, defiantly fat Londoner, the five of them got off the bus and headed towards the service station café.

‘Well, how about that?’ said Hugh to John softly so the others couldn’t hear. ‘An hour into Italy and we’re already interpreters!’ He was feeling elated and heady. ‘On the cusp of two different cultures!’

‘Do you think we’re up to the job?’

‘Oh come on! After all those language lessons I think we should be able to manage ordering breakfast!’ He turned round to the others cheerfully. ‘Hey, are you all having coffee? You see, there are different types. There’s cappuccino, of course, and espresso, very small and very strong.’

‘And there’s *caffé macchiato*,’ added John knowledgeably, ‘which literally means “stained coffee”, an espresso with milk. And the milk can be hot or-’

‘Why?’ asked the balding Londoner.

‘Why what?’

‘Why’s it called stained coffee?’ His accent was unmistakable – “stained” sounded more like “stined”.

‘Well I suppose-’

‘An insightful query if there ever was one,’ interrupted the Scot. ‘Coffee often stains, but it doesn’t as a rule become stained itself!’

‘Oh I see, no, it’s just a figure of speech,’ replied John. ‘I mean a literal translation. It actually tastes very good.’

‘Well I’m tellin’ you right now,’ said the fat Londoner darkly, ‘I don’t want no stains in my coffee.’

In the steamy café there were about ten other customers, with two barmen busily at work behind the counter. There were no tables – all the customers were standing at the counter as they had their breakfast. John rubbed his hands together heartily.

‘Right, what are we all having?’

They all stated their preferences. Although the barman had not yet taken their order, the balding Londoner produced his wallet.

‘Oh don’t worry about paying yet,’ said Hugh breezily. ‘In Italy you pay afterwards.’

‘You what?!’

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ John confirmed. ‘Eat and drink first, pay later.’

The fat Londoner gazed at him incredulously. ‘Sounds great. I fink I’ll have a few pints!’

‘An intriguing idea!’ chuckled the Scot. ‘I think we should suggest introducing it back home, though I’m not sure the publicans would be too impressed. “Oh good evening, landlord. Please set up twenty whiskies with chasers for me and my friends here. I’ll pay you when we’ve finished!”.’

The two Londoners laughed noisily.

‘Yeah, by the time you stopped drinking,’ guffawed the balding Londoner, ‘you wouldn’t remember ‘ow many pints you’d ‘ad and you’d be too pissed to pay anyway! Ha ha!’

‘*Buon giorno.*’ One of the barmen, who spoke no English and so had no idea what they were laughing about, was ready to take their order.

‘Ah!’ said John, clearing his throat and preparing his best Italian. ‘*Bene, due cappuccini-*’

The barman interrupted him. ‘*Scontrino?*’

This extremely succinct interrogative from the barman signified that first of all they had to go to the till, positioned behind them, in order to pay for their coffee in advance and to be given the so-called *scontrino* – a receipt which they should then take to the counter and hand over to the barman in order to get served. In Italy this is standard practice at cafés in service stations, bus stations and railway stations, though not in other places, where the rule is to pay afterwards. The barman had, in a rather mocking tone, expressed this as a question rather than a simple piece of information, as if to say ‘Don’t you think it might just be a good idea to get your receipt first?’, but the irony was lost on Hugh and John, who had never previously heard the term *scontrino*.

Before they had time to react to this, the barman was called away by one of his colleagues to deal with something urgent at the other end of the counter.

Hugh looked at John inquisitively. ‘What did he say?’

‘Dunno,’ replied John, turning his back to the others and whispering out of the side of his mouth. ‘Sounded like *con trino*.’

‘*Con trino*? Ah, well that would mean “with trino”.’

John gave him a sarcastic look. ‘Right, well thanks for clarifying that one, Einstein. What the hell is trino?!’

‘Search me.’

‘Whass goin’ on?’ asked the fat Londoner impatiently.

‘Ah, well,’ answered Hugh, embarrassed by his own ignorance. ‘Ahm, the barman asked us, er, if we’re having our coffee’ – he tailed off wearily – ‘with trino.’

‘Trino? And what would that be?’ asked the Scot condescendingly.

‘Well, ahm, you see, it’s- it’s difficult to – ahm – pinpoint the *exact* meaning – because, well, in a sense-’

‘It’s a liqueur!’ exclaimed John, suddenly inspired.

The others looked unimpressed.

‘Yes, a liqueur,’ continued John authoritatively. ‘You see, Italians like to have a liqueur or spirit in their coffee. It’s common practice!’ He gave Hugh a pleading look.

‘Oh I see! Yes, yes. It – er – kind of cheers up the coffee!’ confirmed Hugh.

‘Right,’ said John. ‘It’s known as a *caffé corretto*. Literally a “corrected coffee”.’

The balding Londoner was even more unimpressed than before. ‘Corrected coffee?!’

‘Sounds logical,’ laughed the Scot. ‘After all, if coffee gets stained I suppose it *would* need some type of correction!’

‘Coffee with liqueur in it! Flamin’eck!’ cried the fat Londoner incredulously. ‘At five o’clock in the morning?!’

Hugh decided it was time to start showing his spurs. ‘Of course there’s a saying over here: *Paese che vai, usanza che trovi* – literally “The country you go to, the local habit you find”. In other words – when in Rome, do as the Romans do!’

The Londoners regarded him doubtfully.

John rubbed his hands together again. 'So, what do you reckon? Who's having trino?'

There was a pause. The Scot seemed amused. 'Well, gentlemen, though we may not be in Rome, they say all roads lead to it, and our road may too. So I think I might just say aye to a wee dram!'

The balding Londoner shrugged his shoulders. 'Yeah, why not? Count me in!'

'Yeah, I'm up for it too,' Hugh chimed in.

The fat Londoner was far from convinced. 'You're all off your 'eads, you are. Have you forgotten what bleedin' time it is? Just get me a nice frothy cappuccino with no crap in it.'

'Well, I'm not a big fan of liqueurs,' announced John, who had by now managed to persuade not only the others but also himself of his very approximate translation of *scontrino*. 'But maybe I'll have just a dash!'

They sorted out who exactly was having what, at which point the barman returned. John cleared his throat once again and delivered some confident-sounding Italian. '*Allora*, one espresso with trino, and another normal espresso – that is, without trino.'

The barman stared at him, completely mystified, but John ploughed on regardless. 'And two cappuccinos, one with trino, and another one with only a small amount. Best not to overdo it this early in the morning! And a *caffé macchiato* – with trino.'

The barman continued gawping at him, bamboozled by this stream of nonsense. Particularly distracting was that although John's knowledge of Italian was not great, his Italian accent, perhaps in part owing to the fact that his mother was Spanish, was quite convincing. But it was all drivel.

'Eh?' said the barman.

John was taken aback by this reaction after the prodigious effort he had put into expressing himself correctly. The Scot and the Londoners were of course unable to understand anything of this. At this point Hugh decided to take the reins. His Italian, however, was slow and awkward.

'*Dunque*, we'd – like – one – espresso – with – trino, and – one – without – trino, please. And – two – cappuccinos, one – with – trino – and one-'

'Teeket! Teel! *Cassa!*' These strange sounds were from the barman, clearly able to stand it no longer. With one hand he was waving a used receipt at them, while with the other he was pointing towards the till behind them. The penny finally dropped. Hugh and John looked round at the till, which had a large sign above it: "CASSA".

'Now what?' asked the balding Londoner.

'Further problems, gentlemen?' inquired the Scot.

'Er, no, good heavens, it's nothing!' Hugh replied, doing his best to be blasé. 'We just have to pay at the till first. Over there.'

'But you said we'd pay afterwards!' the balding Londoner noted observantly.

'And now you're tellin' us,' exclaimed the fat Londoner, 'that we've got to cough up before! Make up yer bleedin' minds!'

Hugh was piqued. 'Well I suppose they have a special system in service stations. I was sure you paid afterwards.'

'What escapes my modest understanding,' added the Scot, 'is why we are thinking in terms of *before* or *after*. Wouldn't it be simpler if we paid ... *during*?' More and more pedantic, he went on. 'We ask for the drink. The barman brings the drink. We pay the barman who, as a result of his manager's truly ingenious initiative, is possessed of a till behind the counter! Even the worst dives of Glasgow can manage that one!'

This was greeted with snorts of laughter from the Londoners. 'Nah, that's too simple for Italians, ennit?' the balding one chuckled. 'Everyfink's so effing complicated over 'ere!'

Hugh was feeling mildly irritated by this criticism of the people and culture he had been studying for the last year. 'Look, let's just go and pay, shall we?' he said curtly.

There were four people waiting to be served at the till.

'Oh bleedin'ell, now there's a queue!' said one of the Londoners.

‘This is totally mental!’ said the other. ‘We have to queue ‘ere, and then queue again at the counter!’

The Scot added his contribution. ‘Finely observed, gentlemen. Especially inconvenient if you have a coach to catch!’

Several complaints later they finally reached the front of the queue. The cashier was a middle-aged woman with a no-nonsense look about her. ‘*Buon giorno*,’ said Hugh warmly, sounding very English. He then launched once again into the ponderous but now well-rehearsed order – two espressos, one of them with trino, and one with no trino at all. One *caffè macchiato* – with trino. Then one cappuccino with trino, and another cappuccino but with less trino than before...

As this torrent of bilge gushed from Hugh’s mouth, the cashier watched him carefully. Whereas with the barman John had delivered his twaddle in reasonably authentic-sounding Italian, Hugh’s twaddle was announced in a ghastly foreign accent. The cashier, however, having decided that she was in all likelihood dealing with a mental case, pragmatically ignored all references to this mysterious trino and gave him the receipt.

Hugh handed over the money uncertainly and returned to the counter with the others. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw the cashier making a gesture to the barman. Could she really have been pointing two fingers at her head to simulate a gun? Undeterred, he gave the receipt to the barman.

‘*Buon giorno. Due cappuccini, uno con trino-*’

‘*Non si preoccupi, ci penso io!*’ interrupted the barman, telling them not to worry and assuring them that he could sort it out on his own. He then grabbed the *scontrino* and scuttled off to get the drinks before any further madness could ensue.

They all watched the barman’s movements, curious to know exactly what he was going to add to their coffee, but their attention was distracted by the arrival of a busload of tourists. Presently the barman returned.

‘Right,’ announced the Scot. ‘We finally have the opportunity to sample this local speciality. And, if I may be so bold, not before time!’ He sipped the coffee and let it slosh around in his mouth in

the manner of a wine-taster. 'Umm, that trino's got a real smack to it!'

'Has it?' said the balding Londoner, evidently not persuaded. 'I can't really taste it.'

'Oh there's definitely something there', said a pompous-sounding John, whose belief in his translational abilities was firmer than ever. 'But what taste is it?'

His own doubts also now dispelled, Hugh paused for some serious reflection. 'It's aniseed. Not very strong, perhaps. But unmistakable all the same.'

'Bit of an aftertaste, though,' added the Scot disapprovingly.

The fat Londoner was staring at them. 'You're off your trolleys! All of you. Downing liqueurs at sparrow's fart!'

At that moment an exceptionally attractive woman, immaculately dressed, entered the café. They were all struck by her looks and elegance, and were unable to avert their eyes. She turned to one of the barmen and asked in Italian if she needed to get the *scontrino* first: '*Devo fare lo scontrino?*'

The barman confirmed this and told her to pay at the till.

Fortunately, this brief exchange might as well have been in Sanskrit for all the Scot and the Londoners understood of it, but John and Hugh stared at each other aghast. The scales had finally fallen from their eyes. When they first spoke to the barman he had said not *con trino* but *scontrino*, which was nothing more than the receipt.

They continued staring at each other, and then, gradually, the giggles began. Shortly after, the two of them were bent double, clutching their stomachs.

The fat Londoner looked at them in astonishment. 'What the bleedin'ell's so funny?'

The howls of laughter were now bouncing off the walls of the sleepy café. The cashier, shaking her head in disbelief, announced that the English were all off their heads: '*Sti inglesi! Sono tutti fuori di testa!*' The Scot, now rather miffed, tried to make himself heard above the peals of laughter. 'Would you care to share the source of your mirth with us, gentlemen?'

‘Oh really ha ha ha,’ Hugh spluttered. ‘It’s nothing at all hee hee. Just a bit hysterical, that’s all ho ho. Early breakfast and all that!’

‘Ani- Ani- ha ha Aniseed!’ John spluttered.

The balding Londoner looked concerned. ‘It must be that liqueur. Bleedin’ firewater!’

‘Yeah,’ confirmed the other Londoner. ‘Best lay off the trino, mates!’

John and Hugh were now on their haunches, holding their sides and gasping for breath.

‘My sentiments entirely,’ pronounced the Scot. ‘It is becoming painfully obvious that these two young gentlemen cannot take their trino!’