

SHORT STORY

A Cultural Exchange

by Elena Traina



"Perspective" by Ahmed Osama

“Penzance is the end of the line, if you know what I mean,” one of you said to us, eventually.

We knew it: we had travelled on the train all the way from London. Il-Resnati, one of our teachers, had said that we could doze off and not worry, Penzance was the last stop.

As if anybody could have fallen asleep.

On that evening, Italy was playing France at the World Cup final and we were too busy speculating on how it would go. Well, that’s what the boys did, while the girls were busy with other kinds of conjectures: who would make out with whom, who would break up, who would do something stupid like drugs or lose their virginity in the two weeks of our *vacanza-studio* in Cornwall.

One hour before the train was due to arrive, the match started. One of us, a boy, fiddled with a small radio until he found a station covering the game. He ran to la-Mariani, and begged her to interpret the live commentary.

“*Neanche per sogno*,” she said, which meant not even in dreams.

La-Mariani was known to have a *scopa nel culo*, a broom stuck up her ass, and football must have ranked quite high on her hierarchy of nonsense.

“*Ma pro-o-of!*” whined our schoolmate, but she didn’t budge.

Suddenly, the crowd roared from the tiny speaker and we all asked, “Who’s scored?”, “Who was it?”, “Was it us?”, even the girls.

Some other passengers, your lot, picked up their stuff and moved to a different carriage, making sure we noticed their eye-rolling and tut-tut noises. “*Sorry, sorry*,” we said, rolling our r’s on purpose.

“Zidane, it was Zidane,” someone said, and we fell silent again.

Ten minutes later, Materazzi scored and we made the carriage tremble with all our jumping. Shortly afterwards, the train inspector showed up and told us off without raising his voice.

“Animals,” we heard him say to another passenger as he walked back out.

“Girls, make us up,” the boys demanded. Those of us who were girls obeyed, fishing our eyeshadow palettes and our kohl pencils out of our Eastpak bags. We decorated each other’s faces, writing *Forza Italia* and drawing hearts and colouring them green, white and red.

“What are the host families going to think?” said la-Mariani.

“Speaking of, I’m going to have to give the school director a call, aren’t I,” sighed il-Resnati.

“What do you mean?”

It meant that we had done the maths and we would be in Penzance right in the middle of the second half. We'd made him promise to take us to a pub so we could watch the rest of the game.

La-Mariani shook her head in disbelief, while il-Resnati phoned the school director and asked him to tell the families to pick us up later, at ten pm. "No, the train is perfectly on time," he said, and then he told him about the match.

"Did you *have* to tell him?" said la-Mariani, and then, "*Che figura*," which meant that the teachers had made asses out of themselves because of us, and we hadn't even arrived yet.

When we got to the town, the streets were eerily empty, only us thirty-six rolling our suitcases, walking so fast we were almost running, with la-Mariani leading us reluctantly up the high street and into the first pub she found.

We asked for beers and the owner, one of you, told us no, and that the only beer he could serve us was ginger beer. We ordered a dozen of them, while the rest of us drank Coca-Cola and some of us nothing. At the first sip of ginger beer, there was a series of sneezes, followed by "*ma che cazzo è 'sta roba*," which meant what the hell is this stuff.

By then, the Azzurri had gone into extra time, though nothing much had happened since Materazzi's goal. In the 104th minute, Zidane gave Materazzi a headbutt, and we were all outraged until one of us headbutted someone else as a joke and we all followed suit, laughing.

Then there was the penalty shoot-out. Your people, the customers in the pub, instead of being glued to the screen like we were, were watching us, entertained; one of you said he'd never had so much fun, not even during that Manchester United v. Arsenal game two years ago.

Trezeguet missed and Grosso scored, and we stormed out of the pub and ran back to the station singing the po-po-po riff from "Seven-Nation Army" by The White Stripes. With all the singing, the cheering and the suitcases rolling, the host families must have heard us coming from a mile away. When they saw us, it looked as if they had suddenly realised they were not paid enough for this.

La-Mariani was struggling to catch up behind us, panting, "*Ragazzi, calmatevi*," which meant calm down, and "*Che figura di merda, che figura di merda*," whereas il-Resnati was telling her to cheer up a bit, we were the champions of the world.

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By the first weekend, we had had enough of our host families. Mostly, we had had enough of what they fed us: toast and baked beans or tinned soups, or pre-heated meals that came wrapped in hard plastic, or sandwiches *freddi di frigo*, which meant fridge-cold.

Some of us chewed and spit into tissues; others gave food to dogs when the adults were not looking. Most of us stopped by the fish and chips shop on the way back from school and then told our host families that we were not hungry. After dinner, we phoned our real mums and told them how much we missed vegetables and salad and *minestrone*.

“Italian students have very small stomachs,” said one of you, instead of plainly calling us “picky”, because that would have been rude.

On our language trip, we were learning more about your idea of politeness than how to speak English properly, because the lessons we had with our summer school teachers were a waste of everybody’s time.

By the end of each day, the whiteboards were filled with idioms like “kick the bucket”, “push up daisies”, “bite the dust” and “meet your maker”. As a joke, one of us asked how many expressions do you guys have so you don’t have to say the word “sex” out loud, and one of you, a teacher, gave us some very weird answers.

By the way, our romantic conjectures on the train had failed to take teachers into account, since we didn’t know that some of them would be as young as first or second-year university students. After a week, the male members of staff were giving out their personal phone numbers to those of us who were girls and pretty and over sixteen, and arranging rendezvous in parks or pubs at the edge of our printed-out maps of Penzance.

If nothing else, that gave us an excuse to skip the social activities — the pub quiz!/cinema!/karaoke!/barn dancing! — none of us found remotely as fun as the plethora of exclamation marks on our schedules suggested.

One late Saturday afternoon, they took us to a club whose carpet smelled like stinky feet and we were all sulking because we were not allowed to drink alcohol, again, and we didn’t know any of the songs.

Nobody was dancing aside from the older teachers, your lot and ours, with those ridiculous reminiscing expressions on their faces and embarrassing signs that maybe it wasn’t just the young people who would be “bumping uglies” later on.

The most fed-up of us snuck out of the club with some Spanish students and headed towards the fish and chips shop. Some of the Spanish kids stopped along the way for take-away pizza, which we refused to eat on nationalist principles.

Once we had food in our stomachs our mood generally improved and we launched into a trilingual conversation about the horrors of our host families. Apparently, some host parents had made one of us babysit their three-year-old while they went to the pub in the middle of the afternoon. The toddler was obsessed with Dora the Explorer, so now she had the songs from the show in her head all the time.

We were singing Dora the Explorer songs at the top of our lungs, and gossiping and sharing a pack of M&Ms amongst the twelve of us, when a drunk man shouted something in our direction.

He came closer and approached a girl who back at home worked on *Festa in piazza*, a regional TV show in which old people ballroom-danced with teenage girls paid five euro per hour. The drunk guy spoke but she didn't understand what he was saying, and neither did us, as he was slurring his words.

"What?" she said and we said, and he kept mumbling stuff to her, while we were all starting to get a bit nervous, because his face was getting redder and his voice louder, and he was still holding the bottle from which he was drinking.

"DO. YOU. WANT. TO. FUCK?"

So she said, "*ma fuck you, pervertito,*" and we chanted, "*Vaffanculo, vaffanculo,*" with the Spanish students joining in. We all laughed at the guy whose face was now turning purple; we laughed until he broke the bottle, brandishing the remaining half by its neck and shouting, "SPEAK. ENGLISH."

We turned back on our feet so we could run downhill, but some of us lagged behind, provoking the guy. They told him to go push up daisies, bite the dust, kick the bucket, but not before he'd had a chance to bump uglies with his mum.

He threw the broken bottle at us and missed. One of us swore with a blasphemy bad enough to have earned him suspension, had la-Mariani been there. We started to cry for help and run for real. No one appeared at the very few lit-up windows above the closed shops on Causeway Head, which, coincidentally, a few days earlier, we had all agreed was our favourite street in Penzance during a stupid group activity meant to improve our oral skills.

A young man who was putting in the A-board of a cinema café let us in the lobby and quickly locked the doors behind us. The drunk English guy squashed his face on the glass doors and banged on them, shouting, banging and shouting, banging and shouting the same word over and over again.

The cinema attendant, who smelled like buttery popcorn and sweat, called the police. We prayed the same God whose name had just been used in a very rude way that the glass would hold until police cars with sirens wailing arrived to arrest the guy.

There were no sirens and no cars, only a fifty-something policewoman in a yellow high-vis jacket who had arrived on her bike. She spoke to him for five minutes and walked away with him, pushing her bike up the hill.

We promised each other not to text our parents because maybe they would call *la-Mariani* and *il-Resnati*, and it would somehow turn out to be our fault, as it usually happened when something went wrong on a school trip. But we did tell one of you, a young male teacher who taught us on Monday morning and made a joke about how quiet we all were.

He didn't flinch at our story; he just shrugged and said, "Oh, well, Penzance is the end of the line, if you know what I mean."

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Some of us came from places which were at the end of the line, while some of us had been born *nella bambagia*, which meant in cotton wool, like the posh kid who had been given all that cash to buy himself a fishing rod, and would eventually manage to take it through passport control because he'd been taught from a very young age not to take no for an answer.

Those of us who'd been brought up at the end of the line were taught differently — to do as we were told and not get above ourselves, and study hard and work harder. And if we ever dared speak up in our angsty teenage fits, someone would tell us, "*È così che gira il mondo*," like *la-Mariani* used to say, which meant this is how the world spins, the way it's always been. The best that we could hope for was to never, ever, embarrass our mums in front of priests, teachers, and future employers, in that order.

We thought about the drunk Englishman with the broken bottle and felt sorry for his mum, and talked about what he was shouting at us while banging his fists on the glass doors of the cinema: "You, you, you."

We never knew how that sentence was meant to continue. Maybe he didn't know, either, or he was just making caveman sounds to go with his banging.

We were speculating about all this while sitting on the rocks at sunset on one of our last nights in this strange country, waiting for our Spanish friends to join us.

One of the boys surprised us with a bag of marijuana, big enough to make three or maybe even four spliffs, but as he started to roll the first one, we heard gunshots from the big car

park near the station and we ran to see what had happened.

“Help, help!” the Spanish students were shouting with their raspy h’s.

One of them had been shot by a gang of kids our age, who had already run away, and it was chaos deciding what to do first.

“*Alguien llame a una ambulancia,*” which meant someone call an ambulance.

“*Chiamiamo anche la polizia,*” which meant the police too.

“*Quale polizia, la Signora in Giallo?*” which meant the lady in yellow, but also Jessica Fletcher, as that’s how Rai had decided to translate *Murder, She Wrote*.

“*Vamos a por ellos,*” said the Spanish boys, which meant let’s go after them.

Nobody really knew what direction the gang had taken and the plan was to look for them on the high street and up Causeway Head. It was a shitty plan, as some of us pointed out, while the Spanish girls were crying and tugging at the clothes of the boys who wanted to go after the guy who had the gun. It turned out that it wasn’t a real *real* gun but some type of rifle that knocked people down but didn’t kill them.

The boy who’d been shot was sitting on the tarmac, shaking. He told us he was fine but he thought his arm was broken. Someone said that if his arm was broken, he would be screaming in pain, and there was a bit of back and forth, and the Spanish boy finally agreed that maybe his arm wasn’t broken but it still hurt. He took off his hoodie and showed us an impressive red bruise on his skin.

He deserved a medal for his war wound, so we offered him an entire spliff and we went back to sit on the rocks, together, with the Heineken cans and the M&Ms and two tiny cold pizzas the Spanish had bought to share.

“What is *that?*” someone said, pointing at a bright red slice emerging from the sea in the distance.

“It can’t be the sun already?” We checked the time and announced it in two languages, saying to one another, “Are you sure? *Solo?!?*” which meant only.

And then we all laughed because it wasn’t even half past eight, and how was it possible that the sun was rising if it only set an hour ago, or *was* it an hour ago? And what were you English people doing shooting people at dinner time? Maybe you didn’t have mums cooking you proper meals with green stuff in them and maybe your dads were at the pub drinking their faces off.

Maybe the whole night had passed and we hadn't noticed, because we too were off our faces with beer, marijuana and sugar-coated chocolates, which the Spanish told us they had invented during their Civil War so they wouldn't melt in the heat. We all agreed that that was a good outcome for a war but that our M&Ms didn't risk melting because a) we were eating them too quickly and b) it was actually quite chilly that night.

In fact, that odd big red sun hanging low on the sea line was not warming us up one bit and it was starting to look a lot like the moon. As it happened, we were yet to learn about basic observational astronomy, let alone the ways of the world or how it spins.

We all hugged each other, because we were cold, we said, and some of us who were girls cried and whispered, "*Ci mancherà tutto,*" which meant we will miss everything, this place, us, each other, even you and your strange ways.

Some of us said that we would be back and some of us really were — for another *vacanza-studio*, for Erasmus, then a short internship leading to a permanent job that made our mums proud and desolate in equal measure. And now we live here, and work and speak and love and grow old in two different languages, or more.

We, we, we would be back.

But never to Penzance, because Penzance was the end of the line, such a long journey by train, and what were the chances of another legendary football match to while away the time like the 2006 World Cup final between Italy and France?

Imagine, though, if it had been Italy v. England, what fun we would have had.