

True Tales of a Traveller Series

03: The Long Way Home

The vehicle which stopped for me and Di on the coast road north of Brindisi was a truck. The driver was heading all the way to Rome. This good news came to me from Di, who spoke Spanish with the driver, and seemed for the most part able to communicate successfully. I felt a great sense of relief. Finally, we were moving. I began to take more interest in our location, even looking at where we were on my map of Italy. We headed up the east coast to Pescara, a city of about 100,000 residents at the time of our trip, the most populous city in Italy's Abruzzo region, and one of the top economic, commercial, and tourist centers on the Adriatic coast. We then turned west to cross the mountainous terrain of the central Appennines. Just before we did, there was a violent thunderstorm some way out in the Adriatic, with dramatic lightning flashes in the distance every few seconds. Seeing it all from the warmth and safety of the truck cabin - and this was a 'state-of-the-art' vehicle for the time, and very comfortable - made me appreciate getting this lift all the more.

The driver, a stocky and muscular, jovial, crew-cut character in his 30s seemed to enjoy conversation, with Di speaking Spanish, and him Italian, frequent misunderstandings, much gesticulation, puzzled expressions and all. Unable to add anything to the conversation, I just watched the scenery go by, glad we were finally on our way. I also felt very glad to have Di with me. Hitching had been terrible so far, but how much worse it would have been without her didn't bear thinking about.

By evening, and a couple of short stops later, the landscape had changed. Not only was it more mountainous, but as I discovered when stepping out at one of these stops, it was also a lot cooler, and wetter. We eventually stopped at a restaurant with a large parking area around 7 or 8 pm, the driver explaining that we couldn't get to Rome the same day; we would be there early the next day, however. We could sleep in the cabin of his truck, he explained, adding that this was one of his regular stops, and he often slept here. Was that alright by us?

It seemed fine to me; more than fine. I marvelled at the swiftness of our change of luck. I felt it was almost incredible, but I was in no mood to ponder on it. I just accepted it. This was the way to hitch, I said to Di, as we jumped down from the cabin. "It looks like our luck's changed. Pity he isn't going all the way north to Milan." I felt some regret at not being able to communicate with this amiable, and rather funny character. As we walked into the restaurant, there was much back-slapping, and then the man suddenly grasped one of my hands in his, giving me an intent look.

"He says he's your brother!" Di told me. "I don't feel good about this," she added as we took our seats.

"You better tell him we don't really want to eat," I said to Di, "we have to conserve our funds."

The driver made a gesture that needed no explanation: he would have none of it! The meal was on him, drinks and all. A bottle of red wine arrived before our meal even started, and he made sure the three of us joined in a toast, or several. By the end of our meal, we were on to the second bottle, this time strong port. As the driver repeatedly clinked his glass with mine, Di repeatedly warned me, ominously, "He isn't drinking! You're the only one drinking. He's only on his second glass. Don't get drunk! I don't trust this character."

"Of course he's drinking," I finally responded. "C'mon Di! He's just a really friendly fellow, and he doesn't want to finish the whole bottle himself. You can't refuse the man's hospitality. Have another glass yourself!" I was in a very merry mood by the time we clambered into the cabin of the lorry, and this much I do remember clearly.

A couple of hours later, according to Di's description, she managed, after several kicks, to wake me up. I was sleeping towards the front of the cabin, while she was between me and the driver. I remembered nothing of it, due to alcohol intake, but have no reason to doubt her word.

She told me: "Wake up! He's got his hands all over me. Do something!"

(According to Di) my response was: "No he hasn't, Di. Go back to sleep..."

A few moments later, she managed to break free from his grasp by herself, and clambered over me,

deliberately digging her heel hard into my thigh in the process. I did indeed feel that, and awoke, wondering what was going on. "Get up!" she commanded "Get our things. We're sleeping outside!" I had never seen her so angry.

"But Di," I protested, "it's cold outside."

I looked to the driver for something in the way of explanation. He shrugged his muscular shoulders with such a comical 'I'm innocent!' look that I had to laugh. At that precise moment, Di looked back at me from the door of the vehicle. From her viewpoint, it must have seemed that I was laughing with the driver, rather than at him.

Cold it certainly was. "But Di, what's going on? Why can't we sleep in the truck?" I asked, hauling our luggage with me as I walked behind her from the parking lot to the road. "We can't sleep out here," I added, "it's freezing."

"He just tried to rape me is what's going on! While you told me to go back to sleep! And then you laugh with him like an old friend! What kind of boyfriend are you? I'd rather be cold than raped!"

She was too angry for me to argue with. I told myself I would have to ask her more about all this the next day. But right now, I had the conviction that my head had turned into a heavy block of lead. What I needed now was someplace where I could just rest this heavy block.

I resigned myself to sleeping in the cold. My main concern as I sat down at the roadside resting my back against a small tree, quickly became whether or not Di would still be too angry to let me rest my 'lead block' close to the warmth of her body. Then I noticed that she was not by my side.