



The Maternal is Political

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*Women
Writers at
the Intersection
of Motherhood
& Social Change*

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A Signora and a Stranger Speaking out when enough is enough

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By Gigi Rosenberg

I watched them at the Piazza Gramsci bus stop as I waited for the number 1 in Siena. Him, so close: not touching, but whispering, quietly and insistently into her face. I wanted to look away, to leave them to their lovers' privacy, but I couldn't take my eyes off them.

How expressive Italians are in public, compared to us puritanical Americans, I thought, stealing peeks at them. Then, the woman turned her back on the man and he curved around to find her face again, trailing her with his incessant murmurs. Were they lovers? I couldn't tell.

I was on my way to meet Rita, my new Italian friend and language partner. We met once a week to practice speaking – she, English and me, Italian. Amid the double-decker tour buses and Fiats speeding by, the number 1 minibus arrived. I climbed on and so did the woman, sitting right behind me. The man stayed on the sidewalk,

his stare drilling a hole in the woman's head while she looked out the opposite window. She was in her twenties, with long brown hair framing a pale face, her body lithe but listless.

Because the bus was ahead of schedule, it idled at the bus stop, doors open. I picked up my book to read. Within a minute, the man climbed on the bus too, muttering words I couldn't decipher. As he closed in on the woman behind me, I saw his dark, bloodshot eyes and inhaled his smell of sweat, old wine, and sleep.

I moved towards the front of the bus and found a seat facing them. Was she in trouble? The handful of others on the bus, mostly single women, didn't seem to notice them. Wouldn't she call for help if she needed it?

She turned to him and talked for the first time, motioning with her hands both a question ("Why are you talking to me?") and a request ("Leave me alone").

I stared at my book. Let somebody else do something. This isn't my country.

When I looked up again, the man had grabbed his crotch.

Come on people, I thought. Do something. Why isn't this woman calling for help? I imagined yelling the one word that my Italian teacher in Oregon had taught me to use if I ever got hassled in Italy: "Via!" Or was it "Vai"? Shit. This isn't my language.

After four months of living in Siena, I still practiced Italian phrases in my head before I said them. As a foreigner, I was often on high alert in public, scanning body language and facial expressions when the words made no sense.

But while I wasn't a native, I wasn't a tourist anymore, either. I had moved to Siena for a five-month stay with my nine-year-old daughter and husband. He and I were chaperoning twenty-five students on a semester-abroad program from the college where he teaches. After 120 nights of sleeping under windows that opened onto the Piazza del Campo, I felt that Siena was my city, too. I might not have noticed this couple on a bus in Portland. But here I possessed an unusual combination: the alertness of a stranger and the pride of a citizen.

And something else: no matter my nationality, I was now also a mother and, since becoming one, I had discovered the she-bear side of myself. At home in the States, I had broken up playground fights when no other adults were present to intervene. I had stopped to help lost children in public places until their parents were found. But I'd never before lived on foreign soil as a mother. I didn't know the customs, the nuances. I was at a loss for words. But I did know: If this were my daughter, I would want someone to do something, even in a broken language.

Since living in Italy, something else had changed: I had noticed that shopkeepers and my daughter's teachers addressed me as "signora." At first I didn't know they were talking to me. I looked around, expecting to see an aged, buxom beauty dressed to the nines – a real signora. But there was nobody standing next to me. There was just me in my GAP jeans, Birkenstocks, and Patagonia raincoat. I was clearly no Italian. I was no signora either, in my eyes, but in Italy you become a signora, whether you want to or not.

No matter how much I imagined myself an eternal signorina, I didn't fool Italians. Was it the American in me that still acted perky and coy, even though I was too old for that? Or the middle-aged woman who hadn't looked in the mirror in too long? In Italy I was old – old enough to be a signora.

But signora isn't "ma'am," which I hate – like the bleating of a lamb: weak and of no consequence. "Signora" is grown-up and full-bodied. "Signora" is the staccato stamp of a high-heeled boot. "Signora" is a plunging neckline, revealing the power and beauty of her female body. She is also the gray-skirted grandmother in a long black sweater, with stockinged legs and flat, lace-up shoes. Signora lets her breasts lead the way, whether they are exposed or hidden. She is not perky, coy, or cute. She commands respect. She knows when it is time to stand up.

I stood up.

Get away from her, I wanted to shout. Stay away from this signorina. But I didn't want to make a fool of myself. I didn't want anyone to laugh at my Italian. But it was too late to stop myself. Basta. Enough was enough.

I remembered that we were on a bus and that buses have drivers. I found ours at the front behind a half-partition – a beautiful, boyish man with black hair trimmed close. I leaned toward the driver's fresh face and green eyes and opened my mouth. It was the first time in Italy I didn't rehearse.

"Un uomo disturba una donna qui," I said, which I hoped meant: A man disturbs a woman here. I pointed to the back of the bus. The driver looked at me with the confused look that native speakers have when their language emerges from a stranger's throat. He breathed in to speak. But before he could answer, the man backed up from my signorina, twirled to face the door, and wobbled off the bus with the sea legs of a drunk.

The man never looked at me. But he saw me. Signoras cannot be dismissed.

"Ahh, tutto bene," I said to the driver. All is good.

As I walked back to my seat, down the short aisle, I glanced at the signorina who

locked eyes with me.

"Grazie," she said.

"Niente," I answered, like I'd heard other signoras say.

As we pulled away from the stop, down Via Frederico, I saw the man lurch toward a group of robust signorinas, his lips moving non-stop. They listened for an instant and then all turned their backs on him. They looked tougher than my signorina, who had gone back to staring out the window.

I wanted to ask her: Did you know him? Why didn't you get help? But I tried not to gape. My body cooled down. I read my book. We descended off one of the seven hills that make up Siena's walled city, past San Domenico church, which houses the actual preserved head and right thumb of Saint Catherine – Italy's patron saint. It flew past Fortezza di Santa Barbara then down Strada di Pescaia, past gas stations and stone buildings, a mishmash of the tacky and the medieval.

On Strada dei Cappuccini, two stops before my stop, the signorina pushed the button to signal the driver to stop. The bus slowed. She stepped down one step, then two, then turned to face me. Looking me right in the eye, she said:

"Arrivederci."

"Arrivederci," I echoed. Her good-bye reminded me how Italians, unlike Americans, don't arrive or depart without formality: a kiss for friends, a buon giorno or arrivederci for acquaintances.

The bus doors squeezed shut behind her.

Arrivederci, I thought. Buried in that word is the verb vedere, which means "to see" and ci, which means "each other." The literal translation of the word is "until we see each other again." Within each Italian good-bye is the promise of the next meeting, the promise that the signora and the signorina will meet again.

Later, at Rita's kitchen table, over coffee and sweet bread, I tell her what happened.

"Brava!" she says.

"Non era niente," I say.

For a signora, it was nothing.