

Reflections on Identity

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Dating a European: a football(soccer)-playing, ex-carabiniere, long-haired, designer clothes-wearing, motorino-driving Southern Italian

Several months ago, I fell into the typical cliché mold of an American student studying abroad by finding a boyfriend here. And not just any European, but a football(soccer)-playing, ex-carabiniere, long-haired, designer clothes-wearing, motorino-driving Southern Italian (from Salerno, not Florence).

It just kinda happened (though that's what they all say). I was eating in a restaurant near the Piazza della Signoria. I usually dine alone, so the waiter named Giovanni (naturally I changed his name so that his name isn't broadcasted all over the internet. I respect people's privacy...) started to talk to me about Florence, where I was from, and what I liked so far about the city—the usual



conversational pieces I have with waiters. When I was about to leave, he offered to leave me his number. It was forward, I must admit, but he seemed like a sweet guy.

Needless to say, I was initially thrilled to be hanging out with a European. It was exactly as I imagined it. But my aspirations for this relationship soon crumbled when I realized how different we really were, something that I never expected to happen. I always thought as an Italian American, my supposed European counterpart and I would be really similar. But my American identity soon overthrew that.

Take for example us going out to dinner together. It seems easy. But the dinner took over three and a half hours of idle conversation and tons of courses (appetizer, primo, secondo, dessert, and a caffè), and towards the end of it, I was getting a little antsy and started looking at my watch. He scoffed at me, asking if I had to catch a train, implying I was in a rush and that I should enjoy my time with him. My American attention span just can't handle eating dinner for that long. I had more important things to do, such as studying, doing my laundry, etc.

We naturally butted heads about our relationship in general. He considered us an "item" after one date, whereas in America, as we know, it takes a lot longer of casual dating to become "official." After the fourth or fifth date, he gave me a promise ring! I was shocked that our relationship was moving so quickly—what had I gotten myself into? (I still ask myself today if this is typical of all of Italy and Europe or if it's just a Giovanni thing). Not to mention he wanted me to call, text, or squillo him as often as I possibly could, which he expected as least two or three times a day (something I just couldn't take the time out of my day to do).

I had never heard of a squillo prior to my encounter with Giovanni. A squillo, as I learned, is basically just calling someone and quickly hanging up, so that the person sees the call and knows that the other person is thinking about them. You're supposed to immediately squillo back to return the gesture. The first time I didn't answer his squillo got me into some trouble. He thought I was mad at him or didn't like him. Meanwhile, I simply reasoned to myself after hearing the quick ring that his call was dropped or his battery died, so I just didn't bother calling him back. I then explained to him it was all a misunderstanding after he confronted me about it.

I didn't have the time to call him that much nor see him as often as I wanted to because I am still a student (most importantly) who is busy most days reading, studying, researching, and going to classes. Maybe I should have made the extra effort to contact him more often and see him more. I'm fully aware that the reason why our relationship didn't work was (mostly) my fault: my American mentality of studying hard to get the best grades possible and focusing my attention solely on my studies overrode any other concern.

The thing that hurt me the most was what he said to me upon his leaving my apartment after we broke up (of course he said it to me in Italian, since he spoke virtually no English; we always spoke to each other only in Italian): "You and I are really just too different. I tried to make this work, but we're just from different cultures." Ouch. I always thought that I fashioned myself after a European mentality and culture because I love it so much. Will I be stuck in this American mold forever? Perhaps after having lived here for a year broke some of those old pesky American habits.

It pains me to say this, but could I ever date another European? Are all Europeans as clingy as Giovanni? Are Americans and Europeans really that different? Of course I want those answers to be yes, no, and no, but only time will tell what my future relationships will be like here in Italy. And I sure hope my future relationships will be a more positive experience.



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