

Not Scotland

By Anne Donovan

The heat whaups ye the minute ye set fit oot the plane. The brightness too – blue sky barely skiffed wi cloud.

‘This is the life,’ says John.

‘Cannae believe this is September.’ Ah pull aff ma jaicket. ‘It’s like the middly summer.’

Ah’d thought it’d be like autumn at hame: bright, but wi a nip in the air. Hudnae expected this.

The airport was buzzin, everybuddy checkin screens and dodgin aboot, jabberin away. Hudnae a scooby whit they were sayin. We always went tae Spain fur wur holidays and ah could make oot the soundy their lingo, but Italian was doubledutch tae me.

Boabby takes charge. ‘C’moan, guys. Sergio’s meetin us in the car park. Hope we’ll recognise each other – it’s years since ah seen him.’

‘Let’s hope he husnae had a facelift then.’

Sergio was sittin in a big black Merc, parked oan a double yella line. He was listenin tae the radio, wan airm restin on the rolled-doon windae. He’d on an immaculate white shirt and a fancy watch – lookin at him ah felt even mair sweaty and scruffy efter the journey.

When he spotted us he jumped oot the car. He was a wee guy, packed wi muscle; deep tan, perfect hair.

‘Sergio!’ says Boabby.

‘Roberto!’ Sergio pits his airms round Boabby and plants a big kiss on each cheek.

John looks at me and then at Boabby. ‘Roberto?’

‘It’s ma name,’ says Boabby.

Sergio turns tae us. John kinda leaned back in case Sergio started kissin him too but he stuck oot his haund and shook John’s, pattin him oan the back. Then he started pumpin ma haund up and doon – thought ma wrist was gonnae break.

Boabby pointed at us. ‘John ... Jimmy.’

The way Sergio pronounced wur names the J sounded like a cross between S and Z.

‘Whit’s the Italian for Jimmy?’ ah says.

‘Giacomo.’

‘Okay, ah’ll be Giacomo then,’ ah says. ‘If you can have an Italian name ah can have wan too.’

‘But it is ma name,’ says Boabby. ‘It’s oan ma birth certificate – it’s just cause Boabby was easier when ah went tae school.’

John says, ‘So who ah’m ur then?’

‘Giovanni.’

Sergio grins. ‘Giovanni, Giacomo, welcome to Italy.’

Afore this job come up ah'd never really thought about Boabby bein Italian. His ma was a baby when his grandparents had come ower tae Scotland in the 1930s. They retired and went back years ago but his da's fae Glasgow so he'd always been Boabby McCulloch. Ah never thought he looked Italian, but noo we were here ah could see that a lot of the locals had the same strong stocky build and squarish face. Boabby's Italian wasnae great but he managed to get by wi Sergio as we made the journey in the car.

Ah was dead beat efter the early start and just sat, slumped oan the leather seat, in a dwam, watchin the scenery flee by. Woods in autumn colours, small-holdins, wee villages wi orange and pink and yella buildins. When we got tae the city the traffic was mental: folk zoomin and beepin, bikes and scooters everywhere, joukin in and oot the traffic. Sergio double-parked on a main road outside a buildin wi scaffoldin all round. He unlocked the door and there we were in a close, just like a Glasgow close, marble stairs and a coupla doors on each landin. He was bletherin away tae us, even though me and John couldnae understaund a word he was sayin. But everythin had already been arranged afore we came, wi the help of Boabby's ma.

The buildin was gettin done up inside and oot. All the apartments except wan were finished, wi new kitchens and bathrooms and all that, and we'd be decoratin them. We'd stay in the apartment that hudnae been refurbished yet. There was a big livin room wi an open-plan kitchen at wan end, a bathroom and a bedroom wi three single beds.

'That's for Daddy Bear, that's for Mammy Bear and here's wan for little Baby Bear,' ah says, shovin Boabby doon ontae wanny the beds.

'Let us know when Goldilocks gets here,' he says.

There was a layer of plaster dust all ower, but the flat had everythin we needed, and when Sergio opened a cupboard in the hall it was fulla sheets and towels and about fifty flowery quilts.

'They'll come in handy,' says John.

'Aye,' ah says, 'ah was worried we'd be cauld at night – bein fae Scotland, we're no used tae it.'

'Widnae want tae huvtae snuggle up thegither tae keep warm.'

Sergio haunded Boabby the keys tae the apartment and explained the complicated mechanism of the lock. He left us tae get settled, said he'd come back later and take us oot for sumpn tae eat.

When the idea came up for this trip, John was all fur it, made it sound as if it was a holiday camp wi the odd bitty paintin thrown in on the side.

'They Italians are dead laid back ... long lunch breaks, siesta time, nippin in and ooty cafes furra wee cuppa. Skoosh case.'

Ah knew he was exaggeratin, but ah'd nae idea how much. Noo, we're grafters, me and John, always have been, and Boabby's a good worker too. Runnin yer ain business you just dae whit hus tae be done. But here we were on the job at seven, nonstop till five. Only difference is we sit outside tae eat wur pieces wi the guys workin on the scaffoldin. And they don't hing aboot at dinner-time, just eat their chits and get on. As for tea breaks, forget it. You can go intae the bar doonstair anytime but it's two minutes in and oot – these guys can knock back a coffee in the time it takes us tae bile a kettle.

At hame ah'm mair of a tea drinker but wan week intae the job and ah'm a convert. Doon tae the bar for a cappuccino and a bun afore we start, then another mid morn, this time

wi a sangwich. In the efternoon it's a wee espresso, a blast a caffèine tae the brain that keeps you awake till work ends. Apart fae that it's watter, watter, watter, cause the weather's still like summer.

And every night we're knackeroso.

'Whit happened tae aw they siestas, Roberto?' says John. 'Ah thought everybuddy had a snooze in the efternoon.'

'Aye, right,' says Boabby. 'In the south, where it's dead hot in the summer, but no everywhere. The shops close furra few hours but they open again till late. And the workies keep oan workin. Just like hame.'

'Might a known,' says John. 'These guys are the goods but. Bloody perfectionists.'

The boss had come round at the endy the week tae see whit we'd done. And he didnae gie it a quick onceover – he examined everythin, even pointed oot a wee corner where somebuddy'd left a brushstroke showin. John was a bit narked at that; we've aye prided wursels on good workmanship and when you've been yer ain boss for a while it's hard tae have somebuddy else checkin yer work. But then Sergio turned round and said, 'bene,' and haunded each of us a rolled up wad a dosh.

'Jeezo,' said John, when we were sittin in the bar on the Friday night. They're flamin fussy in't they? At hame if you're daein up a flat tae rent oot, it's an elsie on each wall and don't be too pernickity round the windae cause the curtains'll cover it.'

'We've never been like that.'

'Naw but we've done enough jobs for guys who can barely let the paint dry cause they're wantin tae get the hoose aff their haunds. Too many of these bloody property shows on the TV.'

'Aye well,' says Boabby, 'that's wan good thing about the recession. Ma missus wis aye watchin thon Laurence guy, gettin fancy ideas. 'Could you no stencil wee hearts roond the bedroom ceilin, Boabby?'

Ah pat his haund. 'Aw, nice tae see romance isnae deid.'

Boabby sups his birra. 'Ah'd miss wee Kirsty but. She can relocate me any day.'

They're fussy about everythin but, no just decoratin. The bars and shops are clean and tidy, everythin's that organised compared tae hame. No how you expect – we think they're aw drama and chaos, but really it's no like that.

Mornins here are perfect. A wee nip in the air and a beautiful light.

The Italians turn up in jumpers and scarves. John's slaggin them aff, usin sign language.

'Bit chilly the day, in't it Marco?' he says, mimin puttin oan a big coat and scarf.

Marco pulls his airms round hissels as if agreein.

'La Scozia e molto freddo,' says John. He's pickin up a few phrases noo but they sound funny in a broad Glasgow accent. Marco nods, smiles and gets his gear fae where it's stored in the corner of the room.

Wan morn ah woke early, first light. Ah pulled oan ma kegs, tiptoed past the others and heided oot. Round the apartment it's aw busy streets and traffic but you only huvtae walk fur ten minutes tae get tae a dead quiet bit wi trees and greenery. Magic. Light and shade on the wee path, specks a broon leaves under the trees and way in the distance the sound of the city wakin up: traffic rumblin away, scraik of metal shutters hauled up fae a bar or a shop, a voice shoutin a greetin. For the first time since we'd arrived, ah was at hame here. Maisty the time ah felt like a tourist, even though we were workin. But here, in the saft light, ah felt fine.

Ah sat on a bench and thought about home. What would Liz and Francis and Anne Marie be daein the noo? Only another coupla weeks and ah'd see them.

Oan the Saturday we heided for the beach, aboot hauf an hour away on the train. The seaside toon was lovely and clean and tidy, beautiful wee cafes and bars all round the front, everybuddy just walkin up and doon enjoyin theirsels.

Ah'd never been on an Italian beach afore and if it hudnae been for Boabby, who knew the drill fae his young days, we wouldnae of knew whit tae dae. The beaches here are nearly aw private, divided intae sections, each colour-coded. All you can see for miles is stripey loungers and umbrellas.

'In the summer this'd be covered in folk – it's actually quite quiet the noo,' says Boabby. He picked wanny the places and spoke to the wumman.

'Quanto per la spiaggia?'

He haunded her the dosh and she showed us a changin room and toilet, gied us sun loungers and an umbrella. We got wursels settled and ah heided doon tae the sea. Though the beach was carefully organised – neat furniture, smart towels, everythin orderly – the sea was wild. Huge big waves shoomin in, some near as big as me; in they raced, careerin ontae the flat sand, were tamed like the beach, then returned to the wildness.

It's that different fae Scotland. When ah was young and worked up north wan year in the forestry, ah spent all ma spare time on the local beach, a big empty stretch of near-white sand. Wild all through it was, hammerin agin the rocks: ruthless and dark and threatenin.

This sea's deceptive. All they smilin, laughin Italian families, kids playin a ball game on the edge of the shore, couples strollin airm in airm, cloudless sky and lovely mountains risin above the pink and white and yella wee toon. But the waves: loomin, powerful, like horsemen oot the watter, as if they could snatch ye aff the beach and drag ye away tae the fierceness of the sea, never to be seen again.

Naebuddy's swimmin, only a few folk paddle in the ripples. Ah'm staundin at the edge; freezin watter crackles round ma toes though the sun's warm oan ma back. Ah close ma eyes and breathe it in, breathe in the freshness and aliveness of it efter a week's work in a stuffy room, breathe away the paint fumes, the nights fallin intae a stupor of tiredness only tae wake in the middle of the night, nose dry fae the closed windaes. And ah breathe in somethin untamed and fresh and clean; hints of the Scottish sea so far away but nae Scottish beach ever has such heat, no even in the middly summer. Ah breathe in and oot and in again, open ma eyes and walk intae an enormous wave rearin ower me, and it hits me and blatters round me, cauld and shiverin droplets. Ah staund right in the midst of the thunderin, crashin waves as they come and go, wan minute starin oot tae sea and the next enveloped in a huge pulsing shock of watter.

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