

The Briefcase

We had just moved into our new apartment in Rome. It was the top floor, a balcony overlooking the *Villa Borghese*, Rome's famous park, and beyond a view of the dome of St. Peter's Cathedral. My Audi Fox had just been delivered from Naples. I had removed the radio, having been warned that it was a matter of pride that something must be pilfered during the transition from New York. Sure enough, lacking anything valuable to take, the water radiator cap was missing.

So this fine Italian morning, I came downstairs with briefcase in one hand and the radio cuddled in my other arm. Placing my briefcase on the sidewalk, I walked around the street side, opened the door and proceeded to fiddle with the radio mechanism until it fit perfectly. Listening to some opera on the way to work, my stomach churned when I remembered I didn't retrieve my briefcase before taking off. This was long before the advent of the cell phone, so I couldn't call my wife. I turned around immediately, returned home to see, as expected, no briefcase on the sidewalk.

This was no ordinary briefcase, mind you. It contained my passport, work permit, a thousand dollars in traveler's checks, the only copy I had of a report I had worked on for weeks, our birth certificates and more. What really sucked was I couldn't blame anybody but me.

So after twenty minutes of cursing myself blue in the face, I headed to the American Embassy to report the missing passport. No problem there since everyone spoke English, but...shudder...my next stop to report the stolen briefcase was the dreaded *Questura*, the central Rome *Carabinieri* police station. I had heard horror stories about this place from colleagues who had to do some business there. I tried getting some attention from one of the many policemen who I dubbed, "Benito". They all had big jaws, boots, black capes which they swished around at every opportunity but Benito was the most flamboyant of them all. I didn't speak any Italian yet except *Si* and *No* and *Grazie*. Benito, not interested in learning English from scratch today, pointed to the bench where other customers were waiting to get served. I sat down to contemplate my next move. Beside me were two very well dressed American-looking young men seemingly unperturbed. The one next to me, hearing me muttering expletives under my breath, aimed only at myself, you understand, asked me if he could help. He looked to me to be about seventeen years old.

“I don’t really think so,” I said condescendingly. “I need someone who speaks both English and Italian so I can communicate with these cops.”

The kid smiled and said, “I speak fluent Italian. I can help you.” I was amazed, but took him up on his offer, having no other options at the moment. We grabbed Benito and the young man jabbered in Italian. The next thing you know, we are sitting next to a clerk. The young man and I managed to answer all the questions he asked. Out in the corridor I turned to my benefactor and his friend.

“Please let me pay you for your help,” I said. “I would have had to pay a translator and lose a couple of days in the process. I am eternally grateful for your kind help.”

“No, thank you,” said the young man. “I was glad to be of help”

“Well how about a beer or coffee?” I asked.

“No thanks again,” he said. “We don’t drink either one.”

Puzzled, I took them downstairs to the café and we had some sandwiches for lunch. I asked them, “So what are you guys doing in Rome, so well dressed and fluent in Italian?”

“We are from the Church of the Latter Day Saints and this is where our mission work is.”

My jaw dropped open. “Mormons *here*? Trying to convert people from the Roman Catholic center of the universe?” I asked incredulously.

We talked for awhile while we ate. They seemed to like their assignment and claimed some success.

As we parted, I thanked them again and gave them my parting shot. “I suppose your next mission will be Mecca?”

“Maybe not,” he said, laughing as they walked down towards the Via Veneto, waving.

Home again, my wife told me a sad story. Apparently a passerby saw my briefcase, summoned a policeman and went up the stairs to give it to her while

I was wrestling *carabinieri* at the *Questura*. They stood there after my wife opened the door. With a small cry of relief, she reached for the briefcase only to have the gentleman who found it step back. She reached again. He stepped back again. The policeman spoke something in rapid Italian my wife didn't understand. With an uncomprehending expression, the policeman and benefactor left without giving her the briefcase. They did leave her a note, when translated, said "You can retrieve your merchandise at the *Questura* with proper identification such as a visa, or passport."

The joke was on us. All they wanted was a modest bribe. The next day I went back to the *Questura*, this time armed with my beautiful, smart and *Questura*-savvy Italian secretary, Gabriella. After two hours of explanation, showing my temporary passport and much smiling by Gabriella to the very same Benito, he retrieved my briefcase.

With briefcase in one hand, he held out his other hand. I reached for my briefcase, but he backed away, hand still out, palm upward. There was, apparently, a charge for storage. I pressed the notes into his hand. The briefcase was immediately given, the cash hand going directly under his swishing cape, no doubt never to be seen again officially or unofficially.

Outside the *Questura*, Gabriella and I high-fived and went back to our office on Via 4 Novembre, my briefcase clutched to my bosom with both hands. I thought about the "storage fee." It was just about the same amount my wife's bribe would have had to be.

"In Italy, *bustarella*, bribes, come in many flavors," Gabriella whispered to me. "One day I will tell you about income tax here. It's a riot."