

The Luigi Revenge

Some years ago I lived in Italy. My office was right in the middle of Rome. In times past I would have been within hearing distance of Benito Mussolini as he waved his arms and stuck out his enormous chin. My wife and I found an apartment overlooking the main park, the Villa Borghese. Beyond the park, we could sometimes see the sunset over the huge dome of St. Peter's Basilica. Life was splendid.

My commute to work went like this. I would walk through the park, past the magnificent Borghese museum, down the Via Veneto, to the Spanish Steps, across to the Trevi Fountain where children would troll for coins with magnets on a string. Then into the Piazza Venetia, past Trajan's Column and into my favorite bar for a cornetto and cappuccino. Every day was a wonder. Each walk to work presented new, ancient things to my eyes.

One splendid morning, I stopped in a bar along the way to get some cigarettes. I spoke virtually no Italian. I knew words like *pasta*, *pizza*, *cambio*...change... and how to say thank you, but all in all, I now realize I was fair game

So I said, in my best Italian, pointing to the green box in back of the kiosk, "*Per favore, signore. Un cartone di sigarette.*" He smiled, handed me a carton of French, menthol flavored death weeds, my preference at the time and took my 20,000 lire note which I had obtained by exchanging my money at the bank.

Expecting considerable change, I was perplexed when the proprietor, still smiling, put a handful of candy in front of me.

"No," I said, also smiling at the obvious error. "*Cambio, per favore.*"...change, please.

"Si," he replied, pointing to the candy. "*Cambio.*"

I was new to this land, so I was polite and unwittingly abetted a clandestine practice probably dating back to early Roman times. At first I tried to argue the point but my Italian just wasn't up to it. So I took the damn candy, threw it into my damn briefcase and stalked away to my office. For the very first time I didn't salute the balcony where Mussolini bellowed his tirades. I chomped my cornetto and gulped my beloved cappuccino. I was pissed.

At first, I thought, I would damn well get my cigarettes at some other kiosk, even though this was a really convenient store on the way to work. But the more I stewed over it, the angrier I became. I never discovered the real name of the proprietor and he was not anxious to give it to me, so I named him “Luigi” since, as far as I know from my extensive movie experience, that is the name of all Sicilian bank robbers. I wondered where he stashed his fedora hat and violin case.

And so began my Luigi Revenge.

The very next day, on the way to work, I asked Luigi for another carton of these appalling cigarettes. I brought with me a little notebook. He handed me back a handful of candy with a big, I presumed, Mafia smile, and I took it with a smile that at least rivaled his. Just after leaving, I noted the date, the amount of the transaction and the equivalent amount of candy. Then I went to my bar, on the way saluting my buddy Benito, his spirit yelling on the balcony across the Piazza Venetia, sat and read the two week old news in the English newspaper, the Daily American, ate my cornetto and sipped my cappuccino leisurely. Life was once again wonderful.

From then on, I faithfully bought cigarettes at Luigi’s Mafia candy parlor, took the change in the form of candy that I would never eat, smiled at Luigi who always smiled first, and later would make an entry in my notebook.

Three years passed. Being in Italy was better than I could have ever expected. But, alas, all good things must come to an end. I had to move. I had to abandon my scenic apartment in the city of noise, to go on. We were moving to France to my new job. I was utterly sad at leaving.

With scarcely one week to go, on a beautiful fall morning, on my daily stroll to work, I began whistling something from *La Traviata*, the sun was up, women were hanging clothes out on lines from the balconies, merchants were delivering food to shops. This would be a morning to remember.

I turned into the Luigi’s *tobaccaria* con shop. Luigi smiled. I smiled. He asked, “*Sigaretti, signore?*”

“*Si,*” I answered in my, by now, impeccable Roman dialect: “Ten cartons of cigarettes, please.” He arched his brows questioningly. After all, ten cartons is a hell of a one time purchase even for my penchant for lung cancer. But he

looked around at the shelves and reached for ten cartons of those noxious mentholated French fags. I took them.

“Nineteen thousand lire, please” he said with his now familiar, swindler smile, probably by now uniquely reserved for this particular sucker.

But Luigi was not dealing with a novice any more. Provoked, I could retort fluently with curses like, “Your grandmother smells like fourteenth century gorgonzola.” I had hand gestures that were completely authentic. Taxi drivers could no longer take me from the airport to my house by way of Monte Carlo and get away with it. In short, I was ready for Luigi.

I sat my briefcase down on the bar, opened it, and brought out a huge bag of candy. Then I deposited my ten cartons of ghastly mentholated morgue alluring lung assassins from Gaul in the briefcase, closed it with a flourish, and proceeded to twirl the combination locks. Then with a great swashbuckling, Anthony Quinn-like sweep of my arm, I smashed the bag of candy down on the counter. With my absolutely authentic and practiced Italian smile of my own, I said, “*Questo e il mio lire, signore, questo, e questo*”....this is my money, sir, this and this....as I let the candy dramatically trickle through my fingers. Then I stood back to admire the anticipated volcanic Italian eruption about to transpire.

As God is my witness, this was the finest moment of my life.

Luigi stopped smiling. He peered at me in disbelief. He opened his mouth. He closed it. He opened it again as if to say something, and....he stalked past me to the door, walked just out in the sidewalk, stomped back to peer at me again, took in my most splendid grin, stomped back to the sidewalk and screamed “*Polizziaaaaa!*” at the top of his well seasoned Italian lungs. He kept shouting while jumping up and down simultaneously. Passersby stopped to look at him. In America, he would have been instantly judged insane, but here, near the Piazza Venetia, Mussolini’s hangout, nobody thought anything other than Luigi was being...well, Luigi. They were curious. A crowd began to gather as he started a rapid fire staccato diatribe, laced with expletives.

I knew all the words. My daughter taught them to me, I am proud to say. He was red in the face, pointing to me as I sat on a bar stool awaiting the Carabinieri, smoking one of his death weeds. I was not to be intimidated by such epithets involving coitus with one’s self and lacing this improbable wish with a descriptive of that self same person’s head made of bodily eliminations.

Luigi continued his diatribe, getting angrier by the minute as I calmly sat at the bar, reading the Daily American newspaper about the Yankee/Red Sox game of two weeks ago.

Finally, before Luigi choked on his own drool, a policeman appeared, swished his cape over his shoulder and listened. From time to time, he would look over at me, frowning, then back to Luigi as spittle flew towards him like snowflakes from the torrent of accusatory, deprecatory and overly wordy denigrations. Finally, the policeman put up his hand as if to stop traffic and sauntered over to me. He looked me up and down, pushed his Benito-like jaw in my face and said loudly... as if I were deaf... "*E vero, signore?*"...Is this true?...

I smiled, pointing to the large bag of candy on Luigi's counter. Then I said, "*Si. E vero*" and showed him my meticulously annotated three year ledger.

He looked intently into my eyes, scanned the notebook, looked several times at the pile of candy, paused and then took me by the shoulder. We marched over to Luigi now surrounded by dozens of entertained Romans, every one of them gesturing and laughing and all talking at the same time. He looked a brooding look at me, sternly looked at Luigi and, while the entire entourage suddenly fell deathly silent, he said, "Luigi...the foreigner has you. You are truly f**ked." He began to chuckle, then laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks. The crowd began to laugh. Finally he stopped, looked at the crowd, said something to disperse them and turned back to me.

He clapped me on the back, shook my hand and ushered me back to the bar. We had a "*Sambucca con mosca*," a licorice tasting liquor with three coffee beans in it which look like flies floating. The beans are supposed to be crunched while drinking the liquor. He poured three drinks, distributed nine coffee beans among them. Unfurling his cape with a flourish, he solemnly extended one to me and one to a very petulant Luigi.

"Luigi," he said...and now I'm translating roughly. "Luigi, explain to the gentleman what the beans are for."

Luigi rolled his eyes and said in perfect English, "The three beans are for *pane, amore* and *fantasia*.... bread, love and imagination." And looking directly at me, said, "And I hope you die an excruciating and prolonged death from those appalling French weeds."

We all laughed until we wept, we three Italians.