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JUST YOU WAIT

I have a bone to pick with 58,751,711 people, otherwise known as Italy. Please form a line. You know. One person in front of the other.

Anytime you do anything in this country, you must wait. And there is always someone behind you tapping a foot, tsking or drumming fingers. My question: If everyone is so Swissly time-conscious, why does everything take forever?

Don't believe me? Pick a day, any day. Last November, a Tuesday.

After spending a whopping \$180 last year to send two 10-pound boxes of Christmas goodies to my family in North Carolina, my partner Diego tells me there's a special offer at the P.O. If you send one package by Express Mail, the second one is free, as long as it weighs less than 10 pounds.

"What's the catch?" I ask. Nobody does anything for free.

"You have to send it off by November 23rd," he says. "That's it."

That doesn't give me much time, but it's such a good deal that I'll have to *make do*. This is a verb that I have learned to use since living in Italy. Translated as *arrangiarsi*, the Italian is tinged with the proud sense of being able to take care of oneself, whereas in English it is somewhat of a compromise. Italians are indeed masters at making do. I make do. You make do. We all make do.

I pick up a good panettone, everybody's favorite Christmas treat. Diego puts together assorted chocolates and candy. I throw in some snapshots from last summer.

First thing, I'll need two boxes and some bubble wrap. Easy enough. We live in the historical district of Bergamo, a town of 130,000 people. Historical means cobblestone streets, gurgling fountains, majestic churches. It also means do-making *extraordinaire*: fist fights over parking spaces, lugging groceries up four flights of stairs and monumental curbside pet turds. Nonetheless, you can find everything you need with a little effort and money. Usually.

Boxes. My first instinct is to ask the tobacconist located on the ground level of the building where we live. Though he has shortchanged me more than once, I find him and his elderly wife charming. They sell everything from lottery tickets and dolls to magazines and postage stamps, and of course, cigarettes.

I walk in. He is engaged in an unintelligible conversation in Bergamasque dialect with another man who is reading a newspaper that he is obviously not going to buy. I only need five seconds of the tobacconist's time and some boxes he's going to throw away, but

I have to wait until they have thoroughly exhausted whatever topic they are discussing.

I can see his wife working in the kitchen they have in the back of the shop.

“Signora Lina, have you got a couple of boxes for me?” I pause for dramatic effect.

“I want to send my mother a panettone for Christmas.” I see her expression begin to soften and glow. I have hit a double whammy and I know it: mother + food, an unbeatable combination in this country.

“Panettone is the envy of the entire world,” she says. I nod in agreement, stroking her national pride. “Your country sent a man to the moon, but no panettone.” These are fill-in-the-blank observations. This week it’s panettone; next time it might be coffee, pasta, fashion, sports cars, history or art. I continue nodding.

“And how is your mother?” she asks.

“Fine, except for the usual health problems”, which is not true. My mother is well, but this is not what Signora Lina wants to hear. You can usually capture an Italian’s attention by whining about health or weather. A combination of the two, such as aches and pains caused by a cold rainy spell, will solicit a response from even the most reluctant conversationalist.

“Has she been blessed with grandchildren?” Signora Lina asks. This is dangerous territory. My sister and I have indeed masterminded the world’s downfall because we have spawned no young. I am losing ground, so I remind her of the boxes. She pulls out a red one from under the counter and my heart sinks. I cannot put a panettone in a Marlboro box.

“I was hoping for something a little more Christmassy.”

“Try the paint store or the post office,” she suggests.

I thank her and head down the street. Though times are changing, Italy has lots of little shops dedicated to just one item, such as a knife and scissors shop, a necktie boutique, a cobbler, a stationer. Paint stores, for some reason, sell everything from gardening tools and hardware to wallpaper and packaging materials.

The first weeks of life in Italy were crazy as I tried to understand where to find things. In any self-respecting drugstore in the United States, you can buy Afro-Sheen, a Whitman’s Sampler, lawn darts and Christmas decorations. And in some, you can sit down and eat while you have a prescription filled. This makes sense to us but not an Italian. Here, a pharmacy is a bleak place with syringes and ancient wood counters manned by grim professionals in white smocks. You go there for health concerns. If you want something to eat, you stop at a bread shop or café. Come to think of it, who really wants to eat a tuna fish sandwich in front of a Vagisil display?

Though I do not want to buy an easel or plaster of Paris, I am confident I will find what I need at the paint store. Inside, a single clerk is serving a long line of people, so I am treated to detailed schooling on decoupage and wall paint, interwoven with soccer scores and manly gossip. What gets me is that the clerk asks what the customer needs and goes to retrieve it, *one article at a time*, then returns for a gruelling demonstration that would have gotten Job off his dung heap and out the door in no time.

My turn. No boxes for shipping. Or bubble wrap for that matter. The clerk tells me to try the other paint store at the end of the street. Oh joy. I came *here* to avoid that place. Its owner is a notorious grouch. But I go there anyway.

When I walk in, I am greeted by a single arching eyebrow. I know the answer even before I ask: *Whatever it is you're looking for, we don't have it and never will. Leave because we hate you. Why waste money on Christmas presents for your family? They all hate you too.* Instead he tells me to try the post office. But I'm nowhere near there now.

11:30 and no box or shipping materials. I go to a more upscale neighborhood where there is a stationer, another specialty store like the tobacconist that would soon go out of business if it only sold envelopes. I wait my turn while Bergamo's most upstanding housewives coo over velvet ribbons and candles for the holidays.

No one makes eye contact with me for fear of having to speak English, as I am obviously a foreigner. At this point, I am craving existential validation from anyone. Maybe I should ask for an envelope or writing paper. How can they not have those?

My turn. I get my nerve up. "A box for shipping, please." The clerk/probable owner looks at me over the top of her Gucci bifocals as if I have just asked for kiddie porn. "A plain box?" says this overdressed tanned-in-November grandmother so that the entire shop can hear. "We have no P-L-A-I-N boxes in this store. Just decorative ones." She too suggests *sottovoce* that I go to the post office for *that sort of thing*, dismissing me with her bejewelled crablike hand.

I leave, thankful that my mother has body fat, a JC Penney wardrobe and looks just like what she is: a 70-year-old woman.

I am also on the lookout for specialty foods for my sister, pasta in particular, so I head for via Sant' Alessandro, a busy street in the historical district. I enter my second stationer shop. No boxes but I do find a tiny baroque tree ornament and a dinky Christmas card. The clerk/probable owner is helpful and suggests that I go up to Città Alta, the walled upper city, the Fief of Quaintdom.

He's right. There are plenty of wine bars and food shops up there. It's not exactly around the corner though. In fact, it's an uphill hike over bruising cobblestones. But it is Bergamo's uptown jewel in every sense of the word.

Like a medieval Emerald City, you enter it by a long bridge that passes over a moat. On the right, a killer view of the lower city, the plains beyond and on clear days, the Apennines in the distance. It is a magical sight and what everyone wants when they come to Italy.

I make it to the Shoe Market Square and the name alone lets you know you are already swimming in *quaintessence*. It is not Williamsburg or San Gimignano quaint. It's the real thing. A fortress, a small university, a Romanesque cathedral, a town hall dating back to the 1190s, all surrounded by smart shops, restaurants and what else? A stationer! Just what I needed.

Inside is an extensive collection of dusty dolls and tired Christmas decorations but

no boxes. The clerk/probable owner is giving directions complete with a hand-drawn map to another customer. Bubble wrap? I only need a couple of yards. She's very friendly, and I wish there was something I could buy. She goes down into her basement and comes back with a remnant of bubble wrap and two boxes. The wrap had surely been used to line the boxes, but I don't care. She will let me have it for the immodest sum of one euro and will throw in the boxes for good measure. Mission accomplished plus human contact at no extra charge.

I go into a bread shop and buy some walnut sauce for pasta and a bag of Tarragna polenta made with buckwheat and cornmeal, but not without a good, healthy wait. I then hit up the herbalist for some toiletries and get a cute, perky sales girl who is willing to spill over into her lunch hour to help me with my purchases.

I am on a roll. I have two battered boxes, some recycled bubble wrap, masking tape and newspaper. It's going to be a Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas for my family, but then they can make do too.

A quick lunch and I'm on my way to the P.O. The Post Office wins honorable mention in the competition for the ultimate Italian experience, nipping the heels of the police station, the health care system and driving a car. There, you are absolutely guaranteed to argue with at least one total idiot, lose your temper, money and religion all under one roof, or your money back.

I always steel myself when I walk in. *In tranquillity, out hatred and anger. In*

tranquillity, out hatred and anger. I refuse to argue with anyone no matter what. I am calm and collected.

I get in line for the postal products, because the post office is also a bank. You can deposit, change and withdraw money here. You can also pay your bills. In Italy, you do not pay utilities by mailed check like in the States. Here you get in line with everybody else and pay with cash or your debit card, for a minimum charge for each bill. A great idea when you consider that every town in this country with a zip code has a post office. And even greater if you have nerves of steel and a lifetime to waste.

I am behind a man who is mailing a small heap of registered letters. *In tranquillity, out hatred and anger.* Soon enough my mantra works and another clerk calls me over to an empty window. My lucky day.

I pass my boxes to him through a strange door that prevents us from ever having contact. He then hands me what looks like the New Testament but in reality is the shipping form I must fill out in octuplicate. He pushes a pen under the glass, telling me to bear down and then disappears.

Five minutes turn into fifteen as I watch him perform various functions behind the glass, accompanied by the delightful banter he exchanges with his co-workers. By this time, everyone who was in line with me has been assisted and is enjoying the company of their loved ones at home. *In tranquillity, out hatred and anger.* I flag down another clerk and shove my forms under the glass. Her response, on a human readiness-to-aid scale

would fall somewhere near my mother's expression had she been asked to perform open heart surgery with chopsticks, blindfolded. In fact, the new clerk confesses to me, "I've never done one of these before."

"I'll help you," I tell her. "It shouldn't be too hard."

The clerk who had been helping me previously resurfaces with customs forms, which require an inventory of the food products I am sending. Is my panettone a significant source of trans fat, cholesterol, fiber or iron?

And then, from the back office appears a woman who *means business*. In just nine seconds, she pushes aside all of the employees, tears off the sheets from my forms, glues them in place on the boxes, brings down her stamp like a judge's gavel, informing me of the small ransom I must pay. The substantial line that has formed behind me issues a collective sigh of relief, whispering concern over my packages, my nationality and the wonders of panettone.

Some nod, others smile as I pass by them on my way to the door. Maybe good things do come to those who wait.