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Michael Gets Weighed...In Italia

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Michael Gets Weighed...in Italia!

Today is one of the rare days when it rains on the Gargano. People are up and about but they are huddled under umbrellas clutching their bags of groceries for “pranzo.” Fresh breads, meats, arugala which is now in season, or other vegetables are stuffed into bags of every size and color brought from home by the shoppers because each market, including those many in the streets, charge a small fee for a bag for whatever you buy. It’s a conservation method I am told.

I live only a few doors from “al Forno” the local bakery and when the wind is just right, the smells of the morning’s breads and pastries waft into my “apartmentino.” I can’t buy anything I smell, as much as I would like to do so. I am trying to lose weight. I have stopped drinking Coke altogether, and aside from a tempting glass of locally produced wine, I’ve been drinking lots of water. I eat very little of the breads which could tempt the most devout of weight watchers. My cousins still invite me to “pranzo” almost every day (it’s the main meal) but they have all conspired to “help” me drop the pounds, or “kilos,” which, of course, is the notation for weight in this small town as it is in most metric countries.

They cook wonderful dishes from fish, meats, vegetables, and even an occasional treat like a small dish of pasta for me. I usually do not have the first course, which is pasta of one kind or another. They serve me only the second and third courses which consist of meat, chicken, fish and a vegetable of some kind and then a salad---I had no idea the number of ways in which one could create a salad nor the number of spices one can use to really perk a salad up! All of this diet talk between me and the “famiglia Italiana” began on the beach at Torre Mileto. I indicated how much I wanted to lose weight and to get my eating habits under control. They were thrilled to hear this, and Michele and Lucia, to whom I had been talking, immediately began giving me advice. I knew most of what they had been telling me from friends and physicians in Kingston but I liked hearing it all again and in Italian. As much as I wanted to lose weight and to begin that effort this summer, I was not very happy at what happened on the third day after my conversation with Michele and Lucia on the beach.

Michele took me shopping on the third day to stock up on food for my casa. As we walked the aisles, he voted “yea” or “nay” on my selections based on their efficacy for dieting. It was a very hard morning for me as I chose and he mostly said “No.” I finally gave up and suggested that he make all the choices and he did so happily. We couldn’t buy cleaning products at this market because there was another store across the town that sold them at a discount. We couldn’t buy water for drinking because he had a friend who sold water, the best brand, and at a discount. We couldn’t buy toilet paper or paper towels because he knew a place that was cheaper than anywhere else. Of course, he was right, but, again, it was a very hard morning. I finally had all the food and household products that Michele thought would stand me in good stead as a bachelor living alone in the Mezzogiorno.

As we drove home, Michele indicated he had another friend that I hadn't met yet and he wanted me to meet him. He stopped at the town's pharmacy. As we parked the car, Michele greeted five or six men standing outside the pharmacy as we entered. As Michele approached the counter, a middle aged man greeted him heartily, "Don Michele!" It was the pharmacist. Michele greeted him and said something I didn't understand.

The next thing I know I am standing on a new, technologically sophisticated scale that also measures your height. I jumped off to Michele's surprise and to the surprise of the pharmacist and his assistant who plugged the scale in for us.

"Che fai?" (What are you doing?) Michele screamed at me.

I told him as calmly as I could that I didn't want to be weighed in a public place with all these people AND with him watching and seeing just how much of an overload I am carrying around. The five or six men standing outside who had heard the confusion inside had joined the circle that had now formed around me. I was so embarrassed. Michele, also calmly, explained that everyone would step back and nobody would look at the numbers shown in analog on the new scale, nor would anybody read the printout of my current weight and height that would generously be produced by the machine. After some cajoling and after everyone stepped back with some even turning around so as not to see what I didn't want them to see, I agreed to step back on the scale.

Big mistake.

The new scale literally had bells and whistles and lights. It was like a carnival, music and everything, as the new machine sought my weight and height! It registered my disgusting numbers and I could hear, and after I turned around, I could see that the entire eight or nine men in the pharmacy had formed a semi-circle around this spectacle. As they each saw the weight, they screamed, each and everyone, "Wow" or its equivalent in Italian, I even heard "Madonna!" and "Mama Mia!" As if this were not embarrassing enough, as the machine spit out the record of my self-inflicted problem with obesity, Michele grabbed it, stood there and shook his head in disbelief and passed the card around for everyone to read. Again, they all registered their disbelief with vocal moans or exclamations I've never heard before. Luckily the Church bells sounded one p.m. and all the men dispersed for "pranzo" as quickly as they had congregated. Michele and the pharmacist shook hands and we headed for the ride home.

Before we entered the auto, Michele graciously handed me the card with my criminal weight and height and told me to "conserve" it because just before I leave "We will do this again," he said in all seriousness. "I don't think so," I thought to myself. That night I had dreams about a skywriter printing my obesity numbers for all to see, but to my horror, and as I woke, I realized that in a town this size and with the number of witnesses to my disgrace, a skywriter would not be necessary!

