

The Miscommunication

Donald Chinn

I knew it was going to be a strange evening the minute I left work at 7:34 P.M.

I work on the ninth floor of a twelve floor office building, and my wait for the elevator was an unusually long one – unusual because there is almost no one in the building at that hour. As I wearily waited before the two elevators in the hallway just outside the office, I noticed that the left elevator was on the third floor heading down and the right elevator was on the fifth floor heading up. My money was on the right elevator; I guessed correctly.

What will I do tonight, I thought, observing that the 12 and 11 above the winning elevator stayed lit longer than the other numbers on its leisurely downward swing. I welcomed the friendly ding when it arrived and took a quick look at my watch. 7:36 P.M.

There were three people in the spacious elevator, two women and one man. I nodded to them, all of us seeming to recognize the rareness of so many people in the elevator this late. I turned to my left and checked that the ground floor button had been pressed.

The hallway I just left disappeared as the aperture of the elevator door slowly shrank. I stared at the buttons as we were silently taken down, the silence broken only by the occasional shuffling of the people behind me. Feeling the uncomfortable silence, I had an urge to strike up a conversation, but I decided to keep quiet. After a few seconds, I looked up at the numbers above the door. Fifth floor.

As my focus again shifted to the buttons, the lights went out and the elevator came to a graceful stop. I heard an “Uh oh” and a “What now?” from the other side of the elevator. I too was surprised by the disruption. We stood there in the silent darkness, looking for any sign that the elevator would resume its course, but nothing happened.

I gave a helpless laugh. There was a bit of grumbling by all, and with a mellifluous Southern drawl, the woman behind me said, “Looks like we’re out of power.”

“Sure seems that way,” I heard from the man in the opposite corner, who had a slight Hispanic accent.

“Could be a long evening,” I said.

“Maybe this is only a short power failure,” the other woman said.

The man in the other corner broke thirty seconds of darkness and silence. “I don’t know about you people, but if we’re going to be here for a while, I’m going to sit.”

I heard sitting noises: the sound of bending down, the soft thuds of reaching the floor and then leaning back against the elevator wall, the exhalation after reaching the sitting position. Even in the darkness, it felt strange that one of us was sitting and the rest of us were standing. The others must have thought so too, as we were all sitting moments later.

“Perhaps we should press the alarm button,” I offered.

“That won’t help,” the second woman said. “In a power failure, the elevators automatically stop and won’t run until power comes back.” Her voice was plain, but it sounded as though there were hints of a Brooklyn accent.

Here we were, four people who had nothing in common except that we happened to be in the same elevator at the same inopportune time, trapped by the technology we took for granted. At least, I thought, I was not trapped alone. After we had been sitting for a while, we entered the next phase of our relationship as prisonmates.

“I might as well introduce myself. I’m Julio, the head waiter at the restaurant on the twelfth floor,” the man in the opposite corner said.

Going clockwise from Julio, we introduced ourselves and told each other what we did. Mary was in charge of building maintenance. I was an accountant who worked on the ninth floor. Chris was an attorney at a law firm on the eleventh floor.

“You know, we could be here for a while,” Julio said. “Does anyone have any food?”

Even the most basic of human needs – food, warmth, the bathroom – are not guaranteed in this situation. After Chris produced some peanuts, the ice was broken, allowing us inmates to talk more comfortably with each other.

“How long you think this will last?” I asked.

“Not very long,” Chris said. “I’m pretty confident that whatever problem there is will soon be solved.”

As we continued to talk in the darkness, I began to form a mental picture of what my companions looked like, much like I do when I am on the phone with a stranger or listening to the radio. There was a short pause as we reflected on what the chances were that Chris was right.

For what seemed like a long time, we sat and talked about the weather, local sports, and occasionally about the prospects of escaping our suspended cage.

Julio decided to start another conversation. “What’s a lawyer’s work like? Is it as exciting as portrayed on TV: murder cases, courtroom drama . . .”

Chris let out a sarcastic laugh. “You’re joking, right? Most of the time, a lawyer fills out paperwork. You can’t believe how much paperwork is involved. What’s worse is that you have to make sure everything is done exactly right or else you can be sued in return.

“Have you heard about that recent case with William Dawson, the guy who raped and murdered six ten-year-old girls and buried them in his backyard? The amount of paperwork generated by the trial and all of the appeals to prevent his execution was mind-boggling – they used literally truckloads of testimony and records.”

Julio jumped in. “I followed that case closely. Do you think he should have been hanged?”

“Of course. The man, if you can call him that, was completely without feeling or compassion – he was sub-human. What he did to those children was heinous. He violated the moral code of society, and society has a right to punish those who break the law, to the death if necessary.”

Chris sounded as though she had recited the Pledge of Allegiance. Julio seemed disturbed by her matter-of-fact attitude toward this subject and passionately pursued. “And so that’s it? Any time someone deviates from the societal norms, the government should step in and punish, to take lives whenever it sees fit? Who allowed us to be God, to decide who lives and who dies?”

“Nobody did. I agree that in an ideal world, where we had unlimited resources to care for sickos like Dawson, we could institutionalize criminals, give them proper psychiatric treatment, and return them to society.

“But this is the real world, and there are extreme cases, such as Dawson, where society simply doesn’t have the time or effort to rectify the situation. In these cases, the crime is so repulsive and so against every societal value, that death is appropriate. The criminal is punished, the families of the victims feel some satisfaction that justice has been served, and society benefits by removing a cancerous element.”

At this point, both their voices echoed through the elevator shaft. I imagined their invisible faces getting red, especially Julio’s, as I quietly listened.

Julio was not satisfied. “Here’s my biggest concern. How can we claim that we have a justice system based on any kind of morality when there are situations where the best we can do is take a criminal’s life, to walk away from the situation and say to a human being, ‘We don’t think you deserve to exist.’? Isn’t it just a little inhumane to subject the criminal to a hanging and all that it entails: the spine snapping, the asphyxiation, the unloading of the bowels? It seems as though there ought to be a better ways to handle these cases other than through the barbaric act of a hanging.”

“Look, I understand your concern that the system might not be humane enough, that it leaves out compassion. But Dawson committed unspeakable acts, acts that society feels are

worthy of putting the perpetrator to death. That's the bottom line: if you don't behave by society's edicts, then you will be punished and perhaps put to death."

"Yes, Dawson violated society's code. But society's message doesn't reach some people – people like Dawson – trapping them like a rat in a Skinner box."

No one said anything for several moments, as we considered Julio's commentary. Chris seemed unconvinced as she let out a huff.

As suddenly as the lights went out, they came back on again, illuminating the tired faces of the people I had shared what seemed like an eternity. They were not the faces I had imagined.

We stood up and smiled at each other. I pressed the ground floor button and within seconds the door opened, allowing us to go our separate ways. My watch said 9:57 P.M.

Many years ago, I entertained the thought of the elevator scenario as a metaphor for all sorts of human activities – nations in a closed world, people striving for a common goal, any relationship between two people, or strangers just trying to go home. The elevator ritual was an indicator of the way a society's people deal with each other. I never really took my metaphors too seriously, but as I walked back to my car I realized that I had lived through one of them.

I later found out that the blackout was citywide. The cause of the failure was a relay in the complex machinery of the city's power company. A single miscommunication, a single fact, a single misconception caused the disruption of that day, even though precautions had been made to prevent such a breakdown.

A few days later, I ran into Mary in the hallway after work.

"Did you hear that a relay was the cause of the blackout?" I asked.

"Sure did. It's sad that this kind of thing happens every day at all scales – and I'm not just talking about technology," Mary replied.

I nodded.

It has been three months since the blackout.

I occasionally see Chris, Julio, or Mary in the hallways where I work. Whenever I see one of them, our eyes will meet and we will nod with a unique familiarity and then move on to our day's work.

I still use the elevator to get to ninth floor. Just before I press the Up button when I arrive at work, I hesitate for an imperceptible moment. I also pause to take a deep breath just before stepping into the elevator. In that split second, I wonder what kind of people I might meet in the elevator and how long until the doors that close behind me reopen.

Greg Goes to Italy

Greg Barnes

Introduction

In case you didn't know, I have a one-year postdoc in Germany, at the Max-Planck-Institut (MPI) für Informatik in Saarbrücken. This, of course, affords one with many opportunities for travel that just don't exist in Seattle. Throughout most of the winter, for various reasons, I stayed in Saarbrücken, but finally in late February I got sick of the cold weather, and decided to head for warmer climes. Italy seemed a good choice. After all, I wanted to see Italy anyway, and by going at this time of the year, I would beat both the crowds and the heat.

Conference deadlines and other annoyances kept me from running off on a long vacation, but by mid-March I had done enough work that I felt comfortable abandoning my job for two weeks or so. Giovanni Faglia and Lavinia Egidi (two Italians who have spent some time at the UW) had given me some travel tips, and Giovanni offered me his apartment in Brescia as a place to stay (he was in Seattle the entire time I was in Italy). After consulting my map, I decided I would travel to Brescia, a medium-sized city east of Milan, from which I would take some short trips in the north (to see Venice and smaller towns), and one long trip to the south (to see Florence, Rome, Pisa, and whatever else struck my fancy).

I went to Andrea Esser, an MPI secretary who helps arrange travel, even personal junkets like this one, to help me get a train ticket to Brescia. As it turns out, I should have just done it all myself. I thought the MPI had a special train discount I could take advantage of, but outside of Germany, it doesn't. Inside of Germany it's not helpful, either, since I bought a Bahncard, which gives me 50% off all train travel in Deutschland, much more than the MPI's discount. To make things worse, due to a miscommunication, she reserved a bed for me on the train. I had requested an overnight train, since, in my opinion, time spent on a train is largely wasted. Occasionally you might get some great scenery, but I don't think it's worth spending 7 hours of my vacation for a few good views, especially when I could be sleeping instead.

Anyway, I wanted a couchette, but I got a bed instead. Overnight train travel in Europe generally comes in three flavors: beds, couchettes, and fold-out seats. For fold-out seats, you don't need a reservation — just go to a compartment, unfold two facing seats, make a place to sleep, and hope no one comes by and tells you they need your seat (which they have every right to do, since you're taking up two). Couchettes and beds are nicer: there are either 6 (couchette) or 3 (bed) people in a compartment which is specially set up for

sleeping. There's also an attendant in the car. The attendant keeps out people who don't belong (meaning you don't need to worry too much about wandering thieves), wakes you up when you hit your city, and holds your passport and deals with any authorities when you pass into a different country in the middle of the night. Of course, for all this, you need to pay a little more and reserve in advance, but couchettes are pretty cheap (15-25 Deutschmarks (DM)). Beds are, on the other hand, about triple the price, as I found out. By the time I noticed I was paying 75 DM for the bed it was too late, since to change things I had to return the reservation to the travel agency Andrea bought it from, and the agency was in Freiburg, a few hundred kilometers away. Oh well.

I set off on the evening of Wednesday, March 17th. My itinerary was from Saarbrücken to Mannheim, switching trains to an IC to Karlsruhe, and then by sleeper car from Karlsruhe through Switzerland to Milan. In Milan, I was to make a short trip between two Milanese train stations (like many other cities, Milan has an outlying station where many of these overnight trains stop, and a different central station where the regular trains stop), and then take an IC to Brescia. IC = Intercity, a special kind of fast train that travels between large European cities, only stopping in major cities. There is another class of trains, Eurocity, or EC, that seems to serve the same purpose. EC and IC trains have priority over trains that are not IC and EC, and seem to have somewhat nicer seats, with amenities like dining cars and the like. For all this, of course, you have to pay a supplementary fare. For each of my two short trips, I paid 6 DM. I should mention that there are even faster, cushier trains, such as the Intercity Express (ICE) trains, which have priority over IC and EC trains, and for which (of course) you pay even more money. On the other end of the scale, there are local trains, which stop everywhere, and a wide variety of trains between locals and IC. The overnight train I took, for example, was probably what is known as a "direct" train, meaning it doesn't stop everywhere, just most everywhere.

The train from Saarbrücken was an Interregio, a particularly nice class of German train that features new cars with large compartments. I had seat reservations for nearly all my trains to Brescia, but I didn't really need them, as the trains were pretty deserted on a Wednesday night and Thursday morning in March. (In fact, due to a mix-up, I had two seat reservations for some of the legs of the journey. Fortunately, these reservations cost me nothing.) Since the direct trains are so low-priority, they often run behind schedule, and my itinerary gave me plenty of leeway for delays — I was supposed to spend about one hour in Karlsruhe and Milan Lambrate (the outlying Milan station) waiting for the next train. In contrast, at Mannheim I had only 15 minutes to switch trains. I jumped on the Intercity, and reached Karlsruhe exactly on time, giving me over an hour to kill in the Karlsruhe train station at approximately 11pm. The newsstand was still open, but that was about it. I checked out the public transit map. Not much of interest. I then looked over the train arrival/departure schedule, and noticed, to my annoyance, that the train I was to take made a stop one hour earlier in Mannheim. So, I could have saved the six Marks and gotten an extra hour of sleep by catching the same train in Mannheim. I wonder about the Deutsche Bundesbahn booking computer, which apparently thinks it's better to rush to your next destination and wait an hour than to wait 15 minutes and get a slower train that ends up

at the same place at the same time. I suppose this way they get the extra IC supplements.

At Karlsruhe, an Italian couple who was taking the same train tried speaking to me in Italian. Other Italians later showed up at the platform, and they carried on a conversation. I spent some few minutes being amused by a late night mail train. The Deutsches Bundespost is widely known (and boasted of by Germans) as providing one-day delivery between addresses in Germany. Of course, they charge double the U.S. rates, or, at least, they did before the April 1st price increase. Now it's about triple the U.S. rates. Anyway, this service seems heavily dependent on the train system. I can't say the packages were handled with care, but the workers were efficient.

About 20 minutes before midnight, my train rolled into the station. I searched out my compartment, handed my ticket and passport over to the attendant, and was escorted to my bed. A bed is about 3 feet wide, slightly under six feet long, and features a mattress that is about 3 inches thick. Since I'm about six feet tall, I found the length particularly annoying. A couchette is about 2 feet wide, 6 feet long, and 2 inches thick. Also, with a bed you get actual sheets and a blanket, while with a couchette you get a "sleep sack" (a thin sheet and a somewhat thick sheet sewn together). I really don't think the difference is worth 50 DM. My compartment was empty, but the attendant (who spoke a smattering of English), informed me that the other two places would be taken when we reached Basel (a town on the Swiss border, about 20 minutes away). I went to sleep, and was, of course, awakened when my two roommates for the night entered the compartment. About six hours later I returned the favor, waking them up making my preparations to get out at Milan (their stop was a little later on, probably in Rome). About 20 minutes before we were scheduled to reach Milan, the attendant knocked on our door, which we had locked from inside. — Another difference between couchette and bed compartments and regular compartments is that you can lock the doors of sleeping compartments, as another way to deter thieves. As long as your compartmentmates are honest, you are okay. — The attendant kept knocking while I, in a groggy state, figured out how to unlock the door. When I was ready to leave, I took my bag out to the train door, and spent the next 20 minutes watching industrial Milan roll by the window in the predawn darkness. As usual, the train was late, but the attendant woke me up as if it were on time.

Milano Lambrate is rather a dull place. My next train was a commuter train, one of many locals that run from Milan to nearby towns and back, stopping at every stop. The train was on time, and the trip to the next stop, Milano Centrale, was to take only ten minutes, but the train still arrived late. We stopped just outside the station for about five minutes, undoubtedly yielding to some other train with much higher priority. Still, I had plenty of time to find my IC to Brescia and my reserved seat. The IC's ultimate destination was listed as "Monaco". How interesting, I thought, until I read the German card on the train door, and discovered that Monaco is the Italian word for Munich. Apparently trains from Italy to the western half of Germany travel from Milan through Switzerland, while trains to the eastern half of Germany (including trains to Munich) travel east towards Venice and then north through Austria.

Brescia

I was hoping that I would have time in the Milan train station to find a cash machine, as I had not brought any Lire along. Instead, I found myself in Brescia with none of the local currency. Lavinia had recommended I take a cab to the apartment rather than the bus, but either way I needed some money, so I set out to find a *bancomat* (as ATMs are called in Italy). There was one at the station, but it wasn't working. After wandering a bit in the streets near the station, I found one that worked. One advantage to working in Germany is that you can easily get a German bank account. With a little bit of teeth-pulling, you can also get a Eurocheque card, good at ATMs across Europe, or, at least, good in most of the places I've been in Europe. Actually, of the places I've been, I've had the most trouble trying to use the card in Germany, a country whose banking system seems somewhat suspicious of all things automated, in contrast to countries like France, where ATMs are everywhere. I took out a few hundred thousand Lire from my German account. One other coincidentally nice thing about living in Germany is that the Deutschmark is approximately equal to 1000 Lire (L1000), so I only had to lop off 3 zeroes to get a feel for the true price of things in Italy (which, as a rule, was too much). Much easier than dividing by 1600. I learned later that each of these ATM withdrawals cost me 5 DM in service charges (about \$3). I had figured they would cost about this much, since German banks love to tack on these extra costs, but I still took out somewhat small amounts anyway, since I wasn't sure how quickly I would be spending money, and I was concerned that I might be robbed.

With my L200,000 (whoa) I now set out on priority task #2: breakfast. Near the station was a place selling coffee and pastry, so I pointed at a croissant and gave the guy behind the counter my money. In return, I got my first pieces of Italian change. With an exchange rate of L1600 to the dollar, you can bet there aren't many 1 Lira coins floating around. All prices seemed to be rounded off to the nearest multiple of 10 or 50 Lire, but the smallest coin I ever got was L50. L10 coins exist, but are apparently being phased out, and shopowners generally round to the nearest multiple of L50 if you don't have any L10 pieces.

After examining bus maps, I decided that taking a bus to the apartment would be too complex, and got in a cab. The driver knew the street and went there directly. There was a slight problem when he asked for the money, since I didn't know any Italian, but I gave him around L13,000, he gave me some change, and I was reasonably satisfied that he didn't rip me off.

Two of Giovanni's sisters live in apartments next to his, and one (Chiara) met me, showed me the place, and gave me the keys. Their apartments were in a group of about ten arranged around a private courtyard, which seemed to me to provide an atmosphere that was quite Italian. It didn't hurt that the sun was shining and the weather was warm, but it wasn't just the weather. Italian neighborhoods seem quite different from American or even German ones — all the buildings look at least fifty years old (but not completely rundown), and all the streets are narrow and winding. Perhaps most of Europe that was not heavily bombed in World War II looks like this, but when you add the courtyards, the warm weather, and

the occasional Roman ruins, it seems distinctly Italian.

Chiara fed me some breakfast, mostly some not very sweet breakfast biscuits (cookies) and fruit. Very few European countries eat as heavy a breakfast as Americans, but Italians take this to extremes. Most Italians seem to have just a shot of coffee, perhaps with a pastry. I usually have something more substantial. In Italy I invariably had one of three breakfasts: In Brescia, I ate a bowl or two of Corn Flakes (Giovanni had a box in his apartment that was approaching stale, so I figured I would do him a favor). In other cities, I had some breakfast biscuits, which I bought at the supermarket, or, if I was out, went to a bar and had two pastries and some tea. Eating at a bar is very common in Italy. Many Italians seem to eat both breakfast and lunch at bars, along with a snack or two during the day. Most Italian bars are just a counter in a small shop, sometimes with two small tables crammed inside or outside on the sidewalk. One thing lacking in most European countries are “eat-in” restaurants, where you order and pick up your food, and then sit down at a table and eat it. Except for some Americanized places like McDonalds, most European restaurants seem to operate at one of two extremes. Either you sit down and they serve you, or you order the food and take it with you or eat it immediately. In Italy, the difference is even more marked, since if you take a seat in most places, you are immediately charged a *coperto*¹, or cover charge of from L1000-3000. In some of the more relaxed establishments, such as nearly deserted cafes, you can usually order at the bar and take your food to a table, but since most bars are so small, this often isn’t possible. Anyway, I generally just stood at the bar with the locals and wolfed down my food. Even when I ate fast, though, I was quite slow compared to the locals, who would usually come in, order an espresso, throw it off, pay, and leave while my tea was still steeping.

Chiara listened to my travel plans, and immediately made two suggestions: take a daytrip to Venice instead of staying the night, and be sure to see Perugia, a hill town north of Rome. After consulting her train schedule, I noticed that Venice was only 2 to 2 1/2 hours from Brescia by train, much nearer than I had thought, although still quite far for a daytrip. However, Venice is expensive, so (I reasoned) it may be worth it to avoid paying for a room. I’m not sure this is true, since a round-trip ticket between Brescia and Venice was about L20,000 (more with a *supplemento rapido*, the Italian term for the IC supplement, but the IC train was about 30 minutes faster). A much wiser choice (if you don’t have an apartment in Brescia) might be to stay in a closer city, such as Padua, which is an interesting University town about 1/2 an hour from Venice by train. As we shall see, though, I found my time in Italian trains was not entirely wasted.

Chiara also gave me a tourist guide to Brescia, written in four languages, explained the bus system and where one could get tickets for the bus, and urged me to buy an Italian train schedule. She coached me on the words for bus ticket (*biglietto di autobus*), and train schedule (*orario di traini*). I decided to take a bus downtown (the apartment is quite far from the train station and the city center) and see the sights. Chiara also gave me a flyer for a pizzeria which was near the city center and which she said was not too expensive. The

¹All Italian words in this document are spelled correctly with a low degree of confidence.

place sold pizzas and pasta for about L10,000, which is actually reasonable in Italy. An Italian visitor to MPI had warned me that Italian restaurants would be expensive — more expensive than Paris, he said, and he was generally correct. A good pizza generally cost at least L8000-10,000, while you would be lucky to get a sit-down meal for less than L15,000. Note, however, that a sit-down meal in Italy is usually quite huge, probably to make up for the light breakfasts and (often) light lunches. A full Italian meal includes a *primi* (first course, usually pasta), a *secondi* (main course, usually meat), some vegetables, some form of dessert, wine to drink and coffee afterward. A good way to cut corners and still eat well is to just order pasta and some vegetables. You can usually then escape with a bill of between L10,000 and L15,000. In Brescia, I cut corners by fixing my own meals or eating with Chiara and Lucia (they were very hospitable, and much better cooks besides). On my trip south, I generally ate dinner out, and assembled lunch from food bought at grocery stores.

Italy's bus systems seem to work like most in Europe. You generally have to buy bus tickets before you board. Once on board, you get your ticket stamped in a machine. Everything is on the honor system, so you aren't checked as you board, but occasionally bus system employees will board the bus and ask everyone for their ticket. If you don't have a ticket, or you have a ticket but didn't stamp it, you get to pay a big fine. The best place to buy bus tickets in Italy is a tobacconist (obvious, isn't it?). All tobacconists have a black sign with a big T outside. Inside, you generally find people buying lottery tickets, bus tickets, assorted sundries, and sometimes even tobacco. Lottery seems to be a national craze in Italy, on a par with soccer. There's a good reason: one of the most popular lottery games in Italy is basically a pool where you pick the winners of next week's soccer games. All you need to do is get 12 of 13 right and you're guaranteed a payoff. The big prize comes when you get all 13 right. I have no idea how often this occurs, but with the number of people playing the game, and since it's not a random guessing game but based on a bit of knowledge, I would guess at least one person manages to get it right most every week.

I ignored the lottery counter in the shop, and managed to ask for two bus tickets in my fractured Italian. By this point, I had managed to pick up a few numbers (*uno, due, tre...*), but still not enough to figure out how much the man behind the counter wanted for the tickets. He took the proper number of bills from me and gave me change. One advantage to spending your first days in a foreign country in a smaller town is that you can pull stunts like giving a merchant some number of bills and be reasonably sure he won't rip you off. Don't try this at Rome!² Another nice thing about smaller towns is that tourists are quite rare, and the residents are quite willing to put up with our ignorance. As a contrast, larger towns aren't so tolerant, but since they get more tourists, there's usually someone around who speaks English, anyway. As a rule, I have not found language to be a problem wherever I travel, even though my knowledge of foreign languages is rudimentary at best. If you are going abroad, though, I would recommend learning some basic terms, and picking up others as you go along. The most helpful words, I've found, are the local equivalents of *please, thank you, excuse me, hello, goodbye, yes, no, Is this seat taken?*, the numbers up to ten, the time,

²Apologies to all but Donald Chinn.

various train terms such as *track*, *depart*, *arrive*, and *train* (with these terms, the numbers, and the time, you can decipher most of the important train announcements), the terms for monetary units (along with the numbers, helps you figure out how much the shopkeeper wants you to pay), and finally, the local term for *one hundred grams* (in Italian, *un etto*). The last term is vital when shopping: go to the cheese and meat counter, and say “one hundred grams bel paese” and “one hundred grams milano salami”, and you’re basically set for lunch (assuming you eat meat and cheese). Learning the local alphabet and pronunciation system allows you to vary your selections, and is generally useful, but even without this knowledge, you can always just point. Note that in Italy, as in Germany, most places don’t let you touch the produce. There is someone whose job it is to hang around the produce section. You approach him or her, and ask for 5 oranges, or 2 pounds of beets, or whatever, and they gather the stuff and put it in a bag. Some of the larger supermarkets have a different system which features a scale with a series of buttons. You get the stuff yourself, and, assuming it is sold by weight, you put it on the scale and press the button corresponding to your item. Out pops a little tag with the price, which you affix to a convenient place. I have *never* seen a place that works as it does in the U.S.: you throw the produce in a bag and the cashier weighs and prices it at the cash register.

The bus tickets were quite cheap at L1100. The buses in Saarbrücken cost 2.50 DM per trip, about L2500. In general, public transportation in Italy is cheap, but somewhat inefficient, while German public transportation is expensive and reasonably efficient. Italian trains, for example, have much lower fares than Germany; a full-cost ticket from Saarbrücken to Munich would cost more than 175 DM, but I’m reasonably sure a ticket for the same distance in Italy would cost less than 100 DM. I got off the bus downtown, and walked toward the castle on the hill (note: every European city worth its salt has a castle on the hill). It was past noon, and the pizzeria was supposed to be near the castle. After wandering about on the street where the pizzeria was supposed to be (note: every European city worth its salt has a confusing address system), I decided I needed to ask a local. While investigating one of the alleys abutting the street in question, I came across a newsstand. By this time I had almost, but not completely, forgotten the Italian phrase for “train schedule”, so I asked him for an *oratorio di traini*. He figured it out, anyway. I pressed my luck, and asked him for directions, showing him the flyer for the restaurant. He seemed to know where it was, and gave me some directions (it helped to know that the Latin word for “left” is “sinister”). After following his directions, I came across the pizzeria. The door was open, but it looked deserted, and it was past 2pm, an inauspicious time to look for Italian businesses to be open, since many close in the afternoon. My hunger overpowered my hesistance, and after some questioning, I discovered that the restaurant was indeed open, but I had to go downstairs (upstairs was more of a nightclub).

After lunch, I headed up to the castle. The castle contained a few museums, but most were closed in the afternoon, which saved me having to decide whether I should blow some money on what were probably substandard museums. I enjoyed the view, then went down to a grassy knoll and dozed for some time in the shade. After my nap, I followed what looked to be the most interesting walking tour in the book, “Roman Brescia” (there were also tours

of “Medieval Brescia”, “Renaissance Brescia”, and so on). There was a small open area at the bottom of the castle hill where they were excavating around what used to be a temple at the edge of the Brescia Forum. The porch of the temple had been reconstructed from the marble remnants, and looked quite impressive. Unfortunately, that was about it for Roman Brescia. I spent some more time looking at various buildings that were in the book, but they all seemed to be closed. I ran across some sort of auto show (every year, Brescia hosts a somewhat famous auto race to Rome and back called the “1000 miles”, so the town is quite interested in auto racing). I also stumbled on some sort of parade of children dressed in costume, but by 4 o’clock I was getting bored, and took the bus back to Sant’Eufemia, the section of town where Chiara and Lucia live.

Venice

The next day, I set off early for my first visit to Venice. When I arrived at the Brescia train station, the next train was an IC, so I paid for a *supplemento rapido* and waited for the 7:30 train. There were a lot of people waiting for the train, but it’s usually quite easy to get a free seat if you follow the following simple rule: walk along the track away from the train station as far as you can. This usually means you enter one of the first or last cars of the train, which are often nearly deserted. It’s amazing how many people just hang around near the station entrance. When the train comes, they all try to get on the same cars, and end up walking through the train toward the front or back. By the time they get there, you will, of course, already be comfortably sitting in your seat.

My car was a compartment car, a car divided up into six-seat compartments, with a long aisle running down one side to provide access. I was comfortably sitting in my seat when my compartment was invaded by some schoolgirls, part of a large class who, along with its harried teachers, was taking a trip to Padua (as I discovered). About 7 girls between the ages of 6 and 12 piled in the compartment, some sitting two to a seat. The teachers all took fold-out seats in the aisle outside the compartments. At first, the girls spent their time talking amongst themselves, throwing their coats on the luggage rack above, taking their coats down from the luggage rack above, and so on. Finally, about one hour into the trip, one of them got up the nerve to ask me a question to which, of course, I had to answer, “I don’t speak Italian”. Being so young, they, of course, did not speak English, although I did hear one of the older ones counting up to twenty in English earlier in the trip, probably to demonstrate what she had learned in her introductory class.

At first, they seemed shocked that I didn’t answer in Italian, but then one of them figured out what I must have meant. The rest of the trip turned into an exchange of basic information, as they plied me with questions, most of which I didn’t understand. The first question was what language I did speak, to which I replied by counting up to five, figuring they would recognize the numbers the older girl had recited. They then asked my name, and then started throwing in questions I did not understand and making requests I did understand, but didn’t wish to comply with, such as “tell us a story” or “sing us a song”.

I did submit to reciting the English alphabet. I got them to write some of their questions down, which helped a bit, but I was completely stumped by one, so one of them went out to grab one of the teachers, who knew some English. It turned out they wanted to know where I was from, so I drew them a map of the U.S. and pointed out Seattle. With the teacher there, I had the opportunity to turn the tables on them, so I got her to ask them to recite the Italian alphabet, which is about the same as the English alphabet, as you might expect, but missing a few letters (as I recall, J, W, X, and Y). I asked them what they were going to see in Padua, and they pulled out a Xeroxed map — every one of them had a small map of Padua showing their itinerary. After the teacher went to sit back down, two of the older girls, who were sisters, took over the questioning, and I managed to tell them that I was living in Germany for one year, what the names of my parents were, and where they lived. At about this time, we were getting near Padua, and the teachers, who wanted to make sure everyone was ready to leave well before they hit the station, gathered their charges together. We said *ciao*, and I was left alone for the rest of the trip.

You know you're near Venice when you reach the causeway, a long, narrow strip of land that is the only way to access the city without a boat. Venice is really a collection of islands in an open lagoon, once a collection of muddy islands in a swampy lagoon, until a group of Roman refugees in the seventh century decided the islands would be a reasonable place to get away from all those low-class barbarians. Back then, of course, there was no causeway, but nowadays there are a couple of train tracks and a small road. The causeway is one of the last places where you will see a train or a car until you leave the city — the cars and buses all head for Piazzalle Roma and the nearby parking garages at the west end of the city, while the trains stop in Santa Lucia station nearby. After you get out of the train, you either walk or take a boat. This is one of my favorite things about the city — everyone is a pedestrian. Even bicycles are nowhere to be seen (except for a few kids' bikes in the larger plazas), because to get anywhere you eventually have to cross a bridge, and nearly every bridge has a set of steps on both sides. While you do have to walk everywhere, it isn't a major problem, because land space is so precious, and therefore everything is compacted into as small a space as possible. At its widest, the main island (or group of islands, depending on how you look at it) is probably no more than 2 miles wide, and most of the tourist attractions are in a 1/2 mile square area around the Grand Canal. The Grand Canal cuts an inverted-S through the city, travelling (very indirectly) from the train station to Piazza San Marco, the site of Venice's most famous sights, where the Canal opens up into the lagoon. Of course, walking in Venice is not as straightforward as walking anywhere else. Apart from the normal pitfalls of a European city, which include winding streets laid out in no rational pattern, there are the canals, many of which are unbridged just where you want to cross. The Grand Canal has only three bridges over its entire course, but this is somewhat offset by the numerous *traghetto* crossings. For L500 at selected dead-end alleys, you can pay a gondolier to ferry you across the canal to another dead-end alley. Undoubtedly, these are the cheapest (and shortest) gondola rides in Venice.

The other navigational problem in Venice is the addresses. Most European cities number up the side of the street, assigning odd (or even) numbers consecutively to the buildings.

Blocks play no role, as they do in Seattle, so if you want to go to *Banhofstraße 27*, you know the place is between *Banhofstraße 25* and *Banhofstraße 29*, but that's about all. 27 could be anywhere on the street, within a block of the beginning of the street or miles away. The other side of the street is no help, either, since they make no effort to insure that the even numbers on one side progress at the same rate as the odd numbers on the other side. As annoying as this all can be, usually things are not so difficult, since streets in European cities tend to be quite short. Your main difficulty is finding the street (not always an easy task, either, since street signs are usually intermittent at best). Once that is accomplished, you can usually find the address you want using a quick brute force search.

In Venice, things are not so simple. Here they number by *sestiere*, or neighborhood. This means they start at some landmark, like Piazza San Marco, and start winding their way up and down the alleys of the neighborhood, assigning numbers as they go. By the time they are finished, they are usually back where they started, having assigned numbers up to about 6000. This, of course, is no help to you when you have an address like *San Polo 2730*, but it may be some consolation to know that there is some sort of rationality behind it all. Most of the time, you aren't concerned with addresses anyway. Venice is a nice city for a random walk, and I usually didn't mind if I was slightly lost. If you're looking for one of the major attractions, you can always find yellow signs that point the way to Piazza San Marco, the *Ferrovia* (train station), or the Rialto (one of the three bridges across the Grand Canal), but otherwise its best to just shrug off the disoriented feeling and enjoy the atmosphere.

My first stop in Venice was the Tourist Information office, where, after a fifteen minute wait, I picked up a reasonably helpful map and a list of museum opening hours and exhibits. The Venice map, like the other tourist information maps I eventually picked up, had a detailed layout of the streets, but was lacking in such things as the names of most streets or a key to the streets it did name. I found this type of map most annoying when I was looking for restaurants in my guidebook — they would list the name of a street which more often than not just wasn't on the map. These maps are great, however, for curing that disoriented feeling and for finding the major sights. And they are free, so one can't complain too much.

From the station, I went to the Grand Canal to take a ride on the *vaporettos*, the motorboats that are the only form of public transportation in downtown Venice (some of the more backward outlying islands actually have roads and buses). As I mentioned above, the Grand Canal is an indirect route through the city, but a boat ride on the slow-moving *vaporetto* line (unintuitively called the *accelerato*) is a good way to soak in the atmosphere. The seats on my *accelerato* were all full, but I went to the back of the boat where I could get a good view of both sides of the canal, and stood for a few stops until one of the other passengers left. About 45 minutes later we reached the end of the canal, and I got off at the Piazza San Marco stop.

The first thing you notice in Piazza San Marco are the pigeons. Man, they're everywhere. The second thing you notice is *Chiesa di San Marco* (The Church of Saint Mark), Venice's pride and joy. Ever since some clever Venetians stole Saint Mark's body from Alexandria in the eighth century, the Venetians have been building, renovating and expanding this church.

Like the body of the saint, a lot of the decorations were simply stolen from other places, most notably Constantinople, with which Venice used to have a love/hate relationship. When the Eastern empire was strong, they sucked up to it. When it started to crumble, they were more than happy to help loot the place. Next to San Marco is the Doge's palace. Doge was the title of the ruler of Venice when it was an independent state (roughly from its founding until the time of Napoleon). After visiting San Marco and the palace, I was quite hungry, so I turned to my travel guide, *Let's Go*. They recommended a bar that served good wine and cheap sandwiches on the other side of the canal, so I headed for the Rialto bridge.

At this point, the shortcomings of the map began to get annoying. *Let's Go* gave the name of a square that was near the bar, but I couldn't find the square on my map. I was reduced to searching for the bar based on its address, an exercise not unlike the 'hot-cold' games I played to find a hidden object when I was younger. You note the address at some location, and walk in one direction. If the address gets closer to the address you want, you know you're getting warmer. Once I found an address within a few hundred of the bar's address, I knew I was getting hot, so I explored neighboring alleys until I found the right place. Inside, I had the standard Italian stand-up bar lunch. I got a glass of wine, and pointed out sandwiches and ate them one at a time until I was full. The sandwiches were all somewhat small, all on white bread, and all featured seafood (probably because there is a seafood market near the bar). While eating my last sandwich, a local barfly tried to talk to me in Italian. When he found out I spoke English, he attempted to converse with me in that language. Unfortunately, his English was practically nonexistent. After a few minutes of his yelling some incomprehensible sentiments about Frank Sinatra and George Bush, I was finished with my meal, and went to settle my bill. This guy, meanwhile, apparently wanted me to buy him a drink. I did not share his desires. The woman behind the bar eventually told him to be quiet, as she couldn't concentrate on adding up my bill.

By this time, it was well past two, and most of the museums had closed. I spent more than an hour at a *palazzo*, a building that was once the city house of one of the upper crust Venetian families. Besides the usual assortment of furniture and art, this particular *palazzo* put on temporary exhibitions. At the time, they were showing an exhibition on the comic strip *Peanuts*, and since I'm a fan of the strip and there really wasn't a whole lot else to do, I spent more than an hour looking at the exhibits. Besides the large blowups of strips, they had a Bumbershoot-style exhibit of whimsical Snoopy art that had been commissioned for the exhibit. Downstairs they were showing videos of *Peanuts* television specials in Italian.

After the *palazzo*, I found a large square with a cafe, ordered an expensive Coke, and enjoyed the sun for awhile. My next stop was the Peggy Guggenheim collection of modern art. Peggy lived in Venice for some time before she died, collecting art all the while. Her collection is reasonably impressive, and quite a change of pace from the rest of Venice. Actually, being the art Philistine I am, I enjoyed this stuff much more than most of the older art I saw in Venice and elsewhere in Italy. Perhaps I understand it more. One thing that certainly does not help my appreciation of older art is the lighting situation. Most great paintings and sculpture in Venice are displayed either in churches or *scuola* (a *scuola* being the Venetian equivalent of the Rotary Club), in buildings hundreds of years old, with the art

frequently painted on the ceiling or high on the walls. The lighting in these places is often quite dim, you are far away, and many of the older paintings that haven't been restored are much darker than when they were originally painted. So it's tough to make out the details that the writers of the guidebooks seem to know about. I should mention that exposure to most types of light tends to damage art, especially paintings, which is generally why most museums prohibit the use of flashes. In the Louvre, they take it one step farther, and ask you not to take any pictures of their most famous works, including the Mona Lisa. But I doubt that these places are dimly lit because the owners are concerned about the effects of the light. A more likely explanation is that they don't have the money available to set up a good lighting system. Bring binoculars.

Even if you love art, it's easy to get jaded about it if you spend too much time touring churches and museums. One thing that is helpful is to buy guidebooks or take guided tours, but you don't want to blow all your money buying guidebooks for every little place you visit. My rule of thumb is to buy guidebooks for large places like the Louvre or the Vatican museums, since I know they'll be interesting, and to look other places over to decide whether I like them before I buy a guide. Knowledge about a work of art makes it more interesting, but some places just aren't worth the effort. Another good cheap trick, especially in the heavily touristed places, is to look around for tour guides talking in English, and follow them around.

From the Peggy Guggenheim collection, I walked back toward Piazza San Marco. Along the way, I noticed a campanile that was leaning alarmingly away from the perpendicular. I tried to get near the tower, but after making as tight a circle as I could, I concluded that it must be attached to a monastery that didn't seem to be open to the public. I resumed my walk to the Piazza San Marco.

The third thing I noticed about the Piazza was the large number of wooden platforms and risers that were about the plaza, some assembled, some unassembled. At the time, I thought this had something to do with construction, but I found out later that these are actually used in case of flooding. Flooding did not used to happen with any great regularity, but as the years go by, Venice is slowly sinking into the lagoon (hence the tilting campanile). Nowadays, the Piazza and several other parts of the city get flooded many times throughout the winter and spring when certain fairly common weather events coincide with a high tide. At times like these, they put the platforms together and you walk two or three feet above the pavement. This is one of the hazards of visiting Venice in the off-season. Fortunately, we were in the middle of a late winter heat wave, and there was no flooding.

In the Piazza, I looked over my *Let's Go*, and decided the best thing to do would be to take a long stroll through Dorsoduro, a not very heavily touristed area in the southwest part of town. I walked across the Academia bridge, the southernmost of the three bridges across the Grand Canal, named for the art gallery nearby, and followed the Canal east to the tip of Dorsoduro, where the Grand Canal opens up into the lagoon, across from the Piazza San Marco. I then followed the shore along the lagoon west, taking care to stop at a place that was supposed to sell superior gelato (Italian ice cream — not to be missed), and ducking

into a supermarket. This area of town was quite a contrast to the rest; it almost seemed that real people were living real lives here, whereas the rest of the town resembles a huge tourist zone. One of the things that I found least enjoyable about Venice was the fact that it did not, in fact, seem like a real city. Earlier in the century, all the industry moved from Venice to the ugly mainland town of Mestre, and Venice now seems to subsist almost solely on the tourist trade. While it is undoubtedly a nice place, the lack of a nontourist economy gives the whole town an unreal aura that I dislike.

Heading back north, I found an English language bookstore and picked up a guidebook to Venice. Like Venice itself, the guidebook was both nice and annoying — nice in that the author clearly loved the city, had some useful information to impart, and told some amusing stories. Annoying in that the author came off as an upper class, public school British twit at times. With my new purchase in hand, I set off for the restaurant I had picked for dinner, which turned out to be closed. I selected another restaurant for dinner, once again had a difficult time in finding it, and had to resort again to searching for the proper number. I finished dinner near 8pm, planning on taking the 8:55 train back. The restaurant was near Piazza San Marco, and I decided to return to the station on the slow *vaporetto* up the Grand Canal. Unfortunately, I made two mistakes. First, I boarded a *vaporetto* heading the wrong way. After two stops, I decided I should get off and catch one going the other way. Luckily, there was frequent service on this line, and I only had to wait a few minutes for the next boat. While cruising back to Piazza San Marco, I noticed my second mistake: the train was actually leaving at 8:35. My only hope was to get off the boat as soon as possible and walk to the station on foot (as I said before, the boats are slow and the Grand Canal is not the most direct route). I managed to follow the yellow signs pretty well to the Rialto bridge, but shortly after I crossed the bridge I got slightly lost in the maze of Venetian alleys. About five minutes before the train was due to leave, and just when I was about to give up, I picked up the trail to the station again, and soon found the bridge to the station. The conductor shooed me onto the train, and we left.

Lavinia had warned me that you are supposed to stamp your round-trip ticket at the train station before you take the return trip, presumably to prevent people from reusing the ticket if the conductor never finds them. I didn't have time to do this before I boarded, so I wrote the date on the back of the ticket where it looked like you were supposed to write the date, and the conductor seemed satisfied. Unfortunately, my transportation adventures were not over, as when I returned to Brescia I found that the buses had nearly stopped running. The next bus was due in about an hour, and I had to transfer, so I walked to the transfer point. The next bus from there was due in about forty minutes, so in a burst of optimism, I decided to walk to Sant'Eufemia. It turns out I had greatly underestimated the distance, as the walk took about 45 minutes. The only interesting point about the walk was watching the Italian drivers violate all speed limits on the stretch of road between Brescia and Sant'Eufemia. As *Let's Go* puts it, Italians are "crazed speed demons".

Stayed tuned

Coming up next time: Verona, a return to Venice, and a trip to Florence. An American fashion magnate discussing Italian women, and students from an Italian military school performing vaguely illegal activities. Rainy hill towns. Striped cathedrals. Italians playing Tetris. Drunk American students speaking German. Secret underground passages. Don't miss it.

Florida Haikus

David Hubbell

Gainesville

Live oak domes repose
Like old men on the porch with
Beards of Spanish moss.

A State Park Near Deland

An ibis stands in
Tea-brown water listening
Through loud cicadas.

The Road to Miami

Tall sawgrass hides the
Rhythmic rows of orange trees
From passing drivers.

Miami

A mangrove with a
Flat-top sends new shoots up to
A welcoming sky.

Miami Beach

Smooth, crossing, curving
Palm trees missing eastern fronds
Relax on beach sand.

A handful of lights
On the ocean coalesce
into an island.

“There is no island,”
Lydia says, mystified.
The buoys have tricked me.

Games! Games! Games!

Donald Tsang

Ever wondered what those strange people were playing, either on the fourth floor of Sieg, or on those xterms you needed to get your Compilers assignment done? Well, look no further. Salvation (or that other thing) is at hand.

This first article features the non-computer games.

Bughouse

Bughouse (a.k.a. Siamese Chess, Team Chess, or Madhouse) is a four-player game that superficially resembles two chess games where all the players cheat. Instead of a cerebral ten minutes of contemplative warfare, the action is fast and furious. “No flux! I said NO FLUX!”, “My kingdom for a pawn!” and “Crush!” are common battle cries amongst the players.

The basic setup is like two games of chess: 16 pieces per color per side, two boards, and two chess-clocks to keep time. The players are separated into two teams of two, and each team plays white on one board and black on the other.

When a piece is captured, it is handed to the capturing player’s partner. That partner can, in lieu of moving one of the pieces on his board, place one of the pieces in his “cache” onto the board. Two restrictions are observed: a pawn may not be placed on the first or last ranks, and a piece may only be placed in an empty square (no flying captures...) If a player runs out of time (we play 5 minutes per player per game), his team loses; similarly, if he gets checkmated, he and his partner are “out.”

Beginning players are at a distinct disadvantage in bughouse, because they haven’t seen all the “cheap tricks” that can be pulled, and usually aren’t fully aware of the dynamics of the game. To bring new players up to speed, we are attempting to start a “farm league.” If you are interested, send mail to me or Ruben Ortega (tsang@june or ruben@june), or come watch. We usually play late afternoons (5 pm or so) on the fourth floor of Sieg.

Bridge

Bridge is a four-person game, played in partnerships of two. Partners sit across the table from each other. Deal passes to the left every hand.

The dealer deals thirteen cards to each player. An “auction” follows, determining the “declarer” (the winner of the auction), the trump suit, and the number of tricks the declarer

must win. Declarer's LHO (left-hand opponent) then starts play by placing a card on the table. Declarer's partner ("Dummy") then lays his cards out on the table, face up; declarer now controls these cards, in addition to his own.

Each player must follow the led suit if possible. If a player cannot follow suit, he may "sluff" (throw away) a card, or "ruff" (play a trump card). If one or more trump cards are played, the four-card "trick" goes to the highest trump card in the trick; otherwise, the highest card in the led suit wins. Winner of the trick then leads for the next trick. When all thirteen tricks have been played, declarer counts his tricks. If he has enough, he scores points; otherwise, the opponents score.

Bidding has not been described here; consult Hoyle or ask a bridge player. Similarly, scoring is a little more complex and varied than is appropriate in this article.

For information about learning to play, playing in Sieg at lunchtime, or playing at the UW Bridge Club, contact Kingsum Chow (kingsum@june).

Euchre

A simplified variant of bridge. In the version we play here, only the nines, tens, jacks, queens, kings, and aces of each suit are used in play. The fives are used to keep score.

Like bridge, Euchre is played in partnerships of two. First partnership to reach ten points wins, and deal passes to the left each hand.

Dealer deals five cards to each player (usually in sets of two and three cards), and turns one of the last four cards over. This is the "proposed trump suit." Starting from the left-hand opponent of the dealer, each player in turn may either choose to accept that suit as trump, or "pass." If the suit is accepted, the dealer has the option (almost always taken) of picking up the up-card, and discarding one card face-down from his own hand, and then play begins.

If all four players pass, the dealer turns the up-card down, and each player may name a suit to be trump. If there are three more passes, dealer is forced to name a suit ("Screw the Dealer").

Play starts with player to the left of the *dealer* (not declarer), and follows Bridge rules, with the following exceptions:

- the Jack of the trump suit ("Right Bower") is the highest trump, followed by the other Jack of the same color ("Left Bower"), followed by the Ace, King, Queen, Ten, and Nine. The "Left" is treated as a card in the trump suit, and not as a card of its original suit.
- there is no "Dummy"; declarer may opt to "Go Alone" at the point of declaration. If he does so, his partner discards his entire hand.

If declarer's team garners three or four tricks, they score a point. If they "sweep" all five, they score two points. If dealer goes alone and sweeps, his team scores four points. If they fail to get three or more tricks (are Euchred), the opponents score two points.

There are additional rules for "Defending alone", etc., but they vary from locale to locale. If you are interested in playing Euchre regularly, contact Lauren Bricker (bricker@june) or Donald Tsang (tsang@june).