



## ***Bloody Bongiorno***

It was about an hour before sunrise on earth, but perhaps only a few minutes before from my vantage point. Flying at 35,000 feet above Greenland, my brother, Phil, and I peered out the window of a 747. We were on our way to spend two weeks in Italy, France, and Spain with our parents and my wife, Heather. The northern lights were spectacular. Green and blue streaks of ghostly iridescence danced in the dawn sky, shimmering across a backdrop of stars and planets. It was a truly magical sight. We had been enroute for quite some time. We were landing in Amsterdam in a few hours then boarding another plane to Rome. It was the night before Christmas Eve, and we would spend it in Rome. As a family we had taken a Caribbean cruise together at Christmas time, but otherwise this was our first time spending the holidays away from home. We were all looking forward to it.

I normally experience some digestive trouble when I travel. There's nerves, there's getting up way too early in the morning to leave for the airport, and there's strange foods on an odd schedule. It all usually gives me a stomach ache and unpredictable bowels. I call it "travel tummy" as it's so common with air travel for me. But this time it was different. I had more than an unsettled stomach—it was more like an ache, like the kind you get before the flu. I wasn't nauseous at all, just troubled at the other end. I wrote it off as a worse-than-usual case of travel nerves.



We landed in Amsterdam where we had a significant layover. With access to the airline's upscale travel club, we spent the idle time in style. Free champagne and food, nice environs, Internet access—and thankfully, nice bathrooms, because that's where I spent most of my time. I was hitting the toilet every fifteen minutes at that point. It wasn't very productive, just small amounts of quasi-solid waste, but it came out rather strangely, with an unusual kind of discomfort. Not pain exactly, just a sort of general unpleasant sensation, like passing a pine cone with the grain.

For travel tummy I could hardly have asked for better accommodations. The bathroom was immaculately clean, covered floor to ceiling in small white square tiles with solid brass faucets on elegant sinks and ivory glass light fixtures giving it a warm glow. The stalls were actually separate rooms walled in the same shiny tile with real solid wood doors. It was a lovely way to spend seven hours on the can, if such a thing is possible.

I was hoping for some sleep on the next flight, assuming my tummy would settle down as the travel demands eased up. No such luck. We arrived in Rome and took a taxi to the apartment we had rented for the week. It was just around the corner and a block down from Piazza Navonna. On arrival, out of necessity, I immediately familiarized myself with the bathroom. Our lodging was a cozy little academic pad with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stocked with musty volumes, a small kitchen, and a couple of bedrooms. It was an old structure from a time before electricity so there was a vertical shaft through the middle of the building to which you could open windows in the kitchen and bathroom for light and ventilation.

We briefly explored the neighborhood, had a snack from the local deli, and went to bed. Finally I got some sleep. In the morning we went about exploring the area. It was Christmas eve, so by nightfall there were crowds of people out walking the narrow streets. Church bells were ringing everywhere, and it was generally festive.

My digestive system seemed to have gotten some relief from the night's rest, but it was still being rather unpredictable. The quasi-solids gave way to mostly-liquids. I was having a hard time finding menu items that seemed appealing—my system didn't want to ingest food that badly. I had no trouble salivating over the fresh chocolate crepes though; they were delicious. We also frequented



the deli nearby, enjoying fresh baked breads, unbelievably good pesto, and thinly-sliced salami.

As we spent our days seeing the sights and absorbing the history, my system became increasingly agitated. Bathroom visits were more frequent and urgent and hardly ever solid anymore. They say Rome is the city of fountains—well there was an extra one in town that week. I gave some thought to renaming my backside Trevi. It's not always easy to find a bathroom in big cities, especially when you're linguistically challenged. I had taken a lot of Spanish classes, so that helped a little, but Italian is really quite different.

At some point my bathroom visits started getting painful. Sometimes it felt like my rectum was on fire. Was Nero's ghost still roaming around Rome? Had he somehow taken up in my back door? The episodes came and went, so I was able to be out and about enough to enjoy the visit, but my nerves were growing ever less comfortable with what I was experiencing.

My mood changed significantly, however, when I started to see blood in the toilet. Shifting from discomfort to serious concern, I immediately started to wonder what sort of bug I might have picked up over there, but remembered that the problems really started on the airplane. Planes are easy places to pick up viruses and other germs, but I wondered if any transmittable illness could have taken hold that quickly.

I remembered a former co-worker who once had rectal bleeding. Another colleague whose wife was a nurse commented on the situation, "That can mean a lot of things, but nothing good." Which left me with the impression that rectal bleeding is definitely bad news. I remember hearing about his doctor visit where they wanted to do some sort of test and him saying something like,

"You want to stick a *what* in my *where*? No way I'm gonna let you do that. Good bye."

He walked out and never went back. That was very much like him. He worked hard and had obvious carpal tunnel in his wrists, which bothered him all the time, but he would always be tough and shake things off. So it didn't surprise me that he might try to shake off the bleeding too. I never did learn what it was all about; he is not at all the sort of guy to talk about that with anyone, so I was left to assume the worst.



And now that it was happening to me, it made me nervous. I kept it to myself, though it was hard for others not to pick up on the frequency of my porcelain visitations. Heather remembers noticing my distress but claims that I didn't say anything about blood until we got home. I don't remember it that way, but it certainly could have been possible—I didn't even want to admit it to myself. Discovering a mysterious medical problem while traveling overseas was highly disconcerting. It was truly a bloody unwelcome welcome to Rome.

So I went about the trip trying to enjoy it as much as possible. But the digestive issues continued to develop.