

How We Say Howdy
BY JESSICA DEAN

"Well, flying is cancelled today, so looks like I'm all yours this morning. I'll have to go in this afternoon, though."

My brand new husband was smiling at me as he clicked his phone off.

Everything was new back then - husband, house, country, purpose... Just a few weeks ago I'd eloped with a fighter pilot I'd met at a bar, quit my job at the think tank in Washington, DC where I'd worked for many years, packed all my belongings and shipped them to our new home, and flown with my dog halfway across the globe to become a military wife in a remote village in Northern Italy where I knew no one other than the man to whom I'd just committed the rest of my life. I wasn't regretting my decisions, but I also wasn't feeling particularly in control of my situation either. "Carpe Diem" is a great saying, but as it turns out, it's slightly more complicated in practice.

"Oh wonderful! You can join Howdy and I on our walk - maybe The Gentleman will join us."

Howdy was my golden retriever. He was my only connection to my past life, my only friend, and for the moment taking care of him was my only responsibility. My husband had to go into the squadron before dawn every morning and was gone until late at night, so I was alone with Howdy and not much to do other than take him for walks.

Those walks were the highlight of my day - particularly the morning walk. I'd prepare for the event - unlike in America where pajamas were becoming perfectly acceptable attire in public, in Italy one DRESSED every time one left the house. I'd put on clothes that I'd worn for work in Washington and even put on makeup, leash Howdy up, and go for a stroll into the tiny village and get a cappuccino.

My walks had recently coincided with an elderly Italian man's walks with his dog. The man was every inch a gentleman: he was well-dressed and had a little frou-frou dog at the end of his leash, and smiled kindly and said "buongiorno" to Howdy and me when our paths crossed, always at 9:15 as we walked past the bank. I didn't know his name yet, but I'd nicknamed him "The Gentleman."

Each day I worked up the courage to say something in return - my Italian was nonexistent, but I had taken Spanish in high school and felt confident enough - they were both Romance languages, after all. I'd settled on telling the nice man hello and complimenting his dog. Not exactly a full conversation, but it was a start, and seemed easy and polite. The Gentleman consistently returned my efforts with a big smile and would walk with me until we arrived at the cafe, at which point he'd tip his hat and walk back and I'd stay and get my morning coffee.

As my husband and I walked Howdy out of the house that morning and headed for the village, I felt a shimmer of pride - I was going to show him my routine impress him with my effortless ability to fit in with the locals.

Sure enough, as we walked towards the bank, I spotted The Gentleman and his little dog.

"See? There he is! Watch this," I said proudly to my husband as we strolled towards The Gentleman. He had his usual big smile and eager look as we neared the bank.

I said good morning, and told him his dog was pretty, and he responded with an even bigger smile. Clearly, my words made him happy, and I felt so accomplished and kind. I was really getting the hang of this whole carpe diem thing!

My husband, observing the exchange, cocked his head and looked at me.

“What did you just say?”

“I told him he had a pretty dog. ‘*Bello carne.*’ ”

My husband gave me a pained look.

“No wonder he waits for you every morning,” he said flatly.

The man, still grinning from ear-to-ear, winked at my husband. The dogs said hello with nose sniffs and tail wags. The five of us started towards the cafe.

As we arrived at the cafe, The Gentleman bid us farewell. “Ciao bella!” he said with a wave as he and his dog turned to go back. Howdy sat next to our table as we took our seats and ordered cappuccinos from our server.

My husband, who had been restraining himself, burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

“ ‘*Car-nay*’ means ‘meat.’ You just told him he has beautiful meat. ‘*Cah-nay*’ is dog.”

At once, my jaw fell, my face was on fire, and my heart stopped.

“Oh my God. I’ve been telling that man he has beautiful meat for WEEKS.”

My husband was now laughing so hard he had tears rolling down his cheeks. Even Howdy seemed to be sharing the humor as he contentedly panted with a grin on his face. I couldn’t seem to close my mouth - the same mouth that, as it turns out, didn’t speak Italian after all.

As our cappuccinos arrived, my husband wiped his tears away and caught his breath, but was still clearly amused. I struggled to regain my own composure, caught between being mortified and laughing at what had transpired.

I sipped my drink and said, “You know those Italian classes on base you mentioned? I think I might look into signing up for one.”

He grinned back at me and said, “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

We finished our coffees and headed back to our house hand in hand, Howdy’s leash between us.

The next morning, as I greeted The Gentleman and told him he had a pretty dog, he smiled and chuckled knowingly. For the rest of my time in Italy he was at the bank every morning waiting for me and Howdy. Our conversations eventually evolved into more than just “hello” and we became friends, but we never mentioned “carne” again.