

My Florentine Diary

(This is an edited account of my month in Florence, making a start on writing *Stravaganza: City of Flowers*, while doing an Italian language course at the Istituto Europeo.) Thursday, 25th September 2003

My month as a Florentine begins in Sweden. I am a guest of my Swedish publishers, Alfabeta, at the Gothenburg Book Fair, where I am to give a seminar and some press interviews.

Of the long journey from England, involving a car ride, two trains, two planes and a taxi, I will say only that the most stressful and difficult part was from Oxford to Reading.

Friday, 26th

The seminar goes very well. I am sharing it with Inger Edelfeldt, who has illustrated picture books for young children, written several highly-regarded psychological novels for adults and has now written a fantasy novel for teenagers, called *Shadows in the Mirror*.

I have read three chapters (1,3 and 6) of this novel, which are the only ones translated into English so far. A frustrating experience. (Her translator, a jolly, friendly Englishwoman, is called Sarah Death)

Inger is well-known in Sweden and I expect the audience to consist of her fans, because the Swedish translation of *Stravaganza: City of Masks* is only just out. She talks amusingly to our large audience about how she wanted to be a vampire when she was 14 and that is why she wrote this novel.

Back at the Alfabeta stand, Inger and I sign copies of our books and also give autographs. Alfabeta have printed wonderful bookmarks for both our books. Two sisters, Annie and Alice, speaking idiomatic English, buy both our books; "Two little vampires," whispers Inger. "How cute!" It's true; they have the long hair, floaty garments and silver jewellery of all right-minded fantasy-reading "vampires are sexy" teenage females.

The Alfabeta party, which I have already been told by Kevin Crossley-Holland will be a good one is in the Nefertiti jazz club, which feels like a basement, although it is on the ground floor. I sit down with my Swedish translator, Lena Karlin, and we are soon joined by three other translators, all men.

They are quite a coterie, united by poor fees and a certain lack of recognition. They get paid a flat sum and no royalties and all the gossip is about the writer making a new translation of Tolkien. He will get paid no more than any other translator – the rate is fixed by the number of words – but he is being feted and interviewed and perhaps will earn cachet and article-fees.

Lena turns out to be an old friend of Inger's and a "fellow-vampire" from their teenage years. She has to translate Kevin Crossley-Holland's third Arthur book before starting on my *City of Stars*. She translates about 4 or 5 long novels a year – an awe-inspiring number.

Lena has written a children's story called *Wedding in Marzipania* if I understood her correctly. It was illustrated by the versatile Inger and, in it, the princess marries the dragon and they have many children.

"In school," says Lena, "the children only want to know how the princess and the dragon made the babies." I feel they walked right into that one.

The translator Sven-Olof tells a funny story about Arnold Schwarzenegger. After 25 years in the USA, he is in danger of losing his Austrian accent, so he employs a dialect coach to make sure he keeps it. Can this be true?

At about 9.30 a cabaret begins. Alfabeta writers will perform. The first is Katti Hoflin, who has written 2 picturebooks. Earlier in the hotel she told me that she used to be a children's TV presenter. She is wearing a tiny red suede skirt with matching shoes and white tights on her long legs in between. Now she sings like a cross between Ute Lempe and Ella Fitzgerald, accompanied by a man on a tuba!

This is quite fun and is followed by a "slam poet" with the unfortunate surname of Krapu. She is a wonderful performer and clearly very funny; the audience is convulsed. Only trouble is, for me, that I can't understand a word. While Thomas, another translator, tries to explain the poetry, another author begins. This is interminable, obviously a story (a ghost story as I later learn) and the audience is silent throughout.

When it ends, I make my excuses before the fourth writer can begin and take a taxi back to the hotel. My driver apologises for his poor English; he is from Kosovo.

Saturday 27th

I have an interview at 11am with Agneta Edwards, who is the sort of children's book expert who is the equivalent of Wendy Cooling or Julia Eccleshare. She is very well prepared and has read about me on the Bloomsbury website and attended the seminar the day before.

At 1pm I am interviewed by Annika, whose magazine is also a book club. Both journalists ask what I think about Harry Potter and both say they interviewed Kevin Crossley-Holland two years ago. Wherever I go he is mentioned with appreciation by Swedish women, who unfailingly add that his wife Linda is very nice too!

2pm and I have to have photographs taken by Hans, who is tall and patient and kind. He shows me the results on his digital camera and a few are not too bad. They will be put on the Alfabeta website for the journalists to download.

In the evening I meet my editor Barbro Langergran and her boss Dag Heinreid in the lobby. They have with them the writer Olaf Olafson, who might have been the fourth performer last night. If so, a pity I missed him. He is an Icelander, now living in New York – everyone's idea of a typical Nordic male, tall, blond and blue-eyed with a ready smile and even white teeth.

Pernilla, who has been looking after me on this trip, is waiting to join us at the restaurant, which is called, unpromisingly, Popcorn. However it is the height of Euro-chic, with square white plates and a fashionably long wait between courses. The English menu offers “Fillet of Witch” and “Thick flank of Elk” but there are 2 vegetarian dishes. One can’t decide if it’s a “terrine” or a “tureen” of pumpkin so I choose the other, which is a kind of risotto. We have a good evening and walk back to the hotel along the Avenyn – a wide boulevard which is home to all the fashion shops.

Sunday 28th

I woke up to hear that all Italy (except Sardinia) suffered a major power cut last night. How is this going to affect my arrival? The two Lufthansa flights (I travel via Munich) are on tiny planes, taking about 52 passengers. The second plane is a bit late, because of the knock-on effect from the power cut. It is a miracle my luggage all arrives in Florence but it does, complete with its “HEAVY” tags.

As I queue for a taxi (though this suggests something rather more orderly than was the case), the rain begins and a steady downpour accompanies me to the Via Cavour. But my heart lifts as the cab passes Santa Maria Novella station and I realise where I am.

Signora Coronella awaits me at the apartment, which I am renting for the next month. It is on the 3rd floor – there is a lift, thank goodness. After she has gone, I unpack for two hours and rearrange the furniture. There is a good galley kitchen and a large bathroom, with a proper bath as well as a shower and there is a radio tuned to something very like Radio 3, but the bed-sitting room is rather a cell, with a single bed, not a sofa opening into a double, which I had imagined, and there is a distinct shortage of drawers.

Will I be depressed here, or is the lack of distraction a good thing? The rain pours down but has stopped by the time I go out on my own for dinner, taking my book as protection. There is what is technically known in my family as a “squawky moment” on my way back, when I can’t get the key to the outside door to work. I have been given 5 keys by the Signora – outer door, inner door, lift, and two to the flat. After a long struggle, I phone her and she refers me to the hotel next door, whose receptionist comes round and agrees I have been given the wrong key. She has the right one and lets me in. After a few more struggles, accompanied by vows that I shall never go out at night again, I get into my flat, which now seems like home.

I must now brush up my grammar – there is a test tomorrow morning and I don’t want to be put in any class but the advanced.

Monday 29th

It rained for a lot of the night and is still grey and rather chilly this morning. My be-sandalled feet pick their way carefully through the puddles as I circumnavigate the Duomo round to the Istituto. Isabella already has the new key for me and a note of apology from the Signora. After an hour’s written test and a horrible cup of (pre-sugared) black coffee from a machine, smiley Edy, one of the directors gives me an oral test and declares me to be fit for a “superiore” class but does this mean advanced or not? They have 8 levels and two are Advanced Intermediate, so we shall see tomorrow.

I am far and away the oldest student. After a hectic three quarters of an hour answering electronic fan mail and e-mails from home, I go to a presentation about the timetable. Tonight's welcome dinner is "tutto pesce", so I can't go. But there are opera and film and art sessions to look forward to. Mustn't fill up all my time though.

I grab a slice of pizza and an iced tea and go back to the flat. Later I head for Edison's bookshop in the Piazza Repubblica, where I buy a book of 10 stories hastily put together in the first days of the war in Iraq – sounds familiar? – a best-selling book on the streets of Florence and a battered last copy of a dictionary of Italian surnames.

Reading all these purchases means I haven't started City of Flowers, but I wouldn't have done if I'd gone to the "Cena di Benvenuto" anyway, so I don't feel guilty.

Tuesday 30th

I've found a shorter route to the Istituto, cutting between the baptistery and the duomo. I am sent to room M, where the teacher, Giovanna, hands out a grammar booklet and I see to my horror that I am only at "Quinto Livello" – that's three from the top. But I'm not word perfect on the exercises, so I suppose I deserve it.

My class mates are Nicola from Santo Domingo (S. America) who is half Italian and Marina and Petra who are both Croatian. We study the subjunctive for nearly two hours and then break for coffee. I make a run for the nearest bar, for an Americano to take away. After coffee, our teacher for Conversazione is Lucia and we combine with the sixth level, who are Brigitte, a Swiss-Frenchwoman, a brunette who is interested in music, Zeynep from Turkey, German Vanessa and Anna, who is from Colombia and, hooray, even older than me! She is a widow, whose late husband was Italian, with two sons and an adopted daughter, all grown up.

Brigitte is a tax lawyer, Vanessa a university student, like the two Croatian girls, although she specialises in language and literature and they read law and economics respectively. Zeynep used to work for Renault but now is unemployed and loving it.

Conversation is free and open and Lucia is a helpful teacher, one who corrects all mistakes, which we are encouraged to make. I must be a very good student, going by the number of mistakes I make.

I have rashly agreed to go back to the Istituto for a choir rehearsal at 5.45pm. Edy is pleased to see me, Anna and Brigitte, though I am sceptical. Will I be here for the concert, I ask but Edy isn't sure. She marches us off to a cultural centre just round the corner from my street and we sit in a room on the 4th floor with a dreadful piano. Edy, Anna and I are altos, Brigitte and two Japanese girls who have also come along, are sops.

It is the strangest feeling – I did this every week, give or take, for sixteen years in Crouch End Festival Chorus. This choir is mainly Italians and it emerges that it is a permanent thing. We sing the Kyrie from a Missa Minima by a Ferrarese composer and then Borodin's Polotsvian dances. The rehearsal lasts nearly two hours and there will be another one on Thursday.

So here I am in Florence, lustily singing in Russian and thoroughly enjoying myself. But at the end I hand back my music; I shan't be here for the concert in November and I can't afford to give up another 4 hours per week or the book definitely won't get written.

It has taught me an important lesson: I can still sing and I want desperately to be part of a choir again. Must stop now and try to write some Stravaganza; I even have a little homework to do.

Wednesday, 1st October

500 words of Prologue written last night, so we are launched.

Two hours of grammar (the subjunctive) is killingly dull this morning, not because of the subject but the method. The teacher, Giovanna, is sweet and conscientious but works solidly through the booklet, using the most banal and stodgy examples. And we don't get to do any exercises until the last quarter of an hour. By the end, we are all yawning and looking at our watches. We have been joined by Irene, from Korea, though this is merely the name she has adopted in Italy.

In the break I find an e-mail from a book dealer I've met before asking me to sign first editions of *City of Stars*; he's rather missed the boat until November. The conversazione class is much more lively, as before. This afternoon there is a "passeggiata" round the city, led by Matteo, the Professore from the History of Art department.

He is really excellent, very interesting and I am filled with ideas for the book. But as we are in the duomo the mobile rings. It is my husband, Stevie, telling me that a journalist from *The Times* is trying to contact me about some story of Laura Bush having chosen *Amazing Grace* as one of the best books for children.

Much later, as I walk back to the flat past the baptistery, there is another call, from my publishers, Frances Lincoln, to say that the journalist is having trouble getting hold of me. I explain that the city is so noisy that I can't always hear the phone ring.

Back at the flat the phone rings again and this time it really is the journalist from *The Times*. The story is that the First lady, on a trip to Russia, has told President Putin that *Amazing Grace* is one of the 4 best children's books of all time, alongside *Little Women*, *The Little House on the Prairie* and Dr Seuss's *Hop on Pop*!

How can I be polite about Laura Bush (and her mother-in-law, who also loved *Grace*) without appearing to endorse the opinions and actions of her husband?

I spend a wonderful evening with my dear friend Carla Poesio, who gives me a copy of *Liber* magazine with the article she wrote about *Lines in the Sand*; it looks wonderful, using the cover, the picture of Ali and Nick Sharratt's illustration for Marcus Sedgwick's article on pacifism. I'll have to translate it for them.

No time for homework before bed – I'll have to do it in the morning, like a naughty schoolgirl.

Thursday 2nd

Well, it all gets done, but I've had a bad night and face the prospect of 2 more hours with Giovanna on the subjunctive with little joy. In the event it isn't too bad, but as before the conversazione is more fun. I discover to my delight there is only one level above mine, after all, the sixth, so I am not as bad as I thought; we have our Conversazioni with them after all.

Petra and I have to write an advertisement together, including "lo slogan" so we choose a chocolate which we name Ecstasy ("estasi" in Italian because "Ecstasi" = the drug) We choose Brad and Jennifer as our models and Petra comes up with an excellent slogan – "Eat Ecstasy for a sweet life". It sounds a lot better in Italian: "Mangia Estasi per una Dolce Vita!" In the middle of the session, there is a noisy irruption from Rinaldo and a chef (complete with hat) who carries a basket full of freshly-baked cantucci biscuits. They are pretty hard without vin santo or coffee to dip them in ("inzuppare") as I did at Carla's last night, but we all tuck in.

Friday, 3rd

I definitely have a cold: sore throat, fever, sneezing so I decide to skip school altogether and opt for a hot bath and lots of hot drinks.

But I don't feel sleepy so go to the local Farmacia for a cold-cure and on to wonderful Mercato Centrale. Just like the covered market in Oxford, it produces dreadful smells of fish and dead animal, but the frutta and verdura are upstairs so the gauntlet must be run. I return to the smelly part with my bag full of basil and fruit and veg. in order to track down the flower stall. I return to the flat with armfuls of asters and red carnations and disperse them everywhere. It looks much more cheerful now.

I manage to finish the prologue to City of Flowers, after a small supper – I seem to have lost my appetite completely.

Saturday 4th

Well, quite a bit of chapter one has been written. I was interrupted this morning by a long phone call, first with Bexy (daughter number two) and then Jess (number three). I dread to think what the home phone bill will be like but it was good to catch up with them.

I took myself out after a lunch of soup and visited Santa Maria Novella, at least the Farmacia. The smell comes to greet you about a block before the entrance to the Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica, which is its real name.

I really don't feel at all well – think I'll spend tomorrow in bed, though I have no hotty and no cat. Perhaps I can prop myself up in bed tomorrow and write on the laptop? It's 8pm and I don't think I'll achieve much more today. Still, I have introduced Sky, his mother and his absent father and written something about Fabrizio di Chimici.

Sunday 5th

It began to pour with rain in the evening and kept it up well into the night, which I saw a bit of at midnight and 5am. True to my word I am not getting dressed or going out today; the weather is so bad that it's a good plan anyway. In spite of feeling really

quite ill, I finish chapter one and read part of a little history of Florence before settling for the night.

Monday 6th

What a night! The wind was terrific and I am really quite cold this morning. I think I have brought all the wrong clothes and should get Stevie to bring me more jumpers etc. But the newspaper I buy on the way to school tells me that all Italy has been struck by this terrible unseasonable weather and that it should be much warmer by Wednesday and then return to normal for this time of year.

I survive the grammar (passo remoto and trapassato remoto) better than expected and even the full two hours of conversazione, but am glad to come home. It is warm in the sun but still very chilly in the shade. I have signed up for a history of art course with Matteo and the first class is on Wednesday.

Have in mind to climb up inside the Dome but don't feel quite up to it – perhaps tomorrow? I visit the branch of Feltrinelli International on the way home and see about 3 copies of *City of Masks*, but not prominent. This is a bad game; one's amour propre is rarely stoked in such encounters. Back to the flat for a mug of tea and a warm jumper!

Must do some homework too before supper, so that I can write more COF afterwards.

Tuesday 7th

In fact I managed to write 1,300 words of chapter two so I feel well launched on book three. After 2 hours on the relative pronoun, much easier than the subjunctive, we have a conversazione based on an article I cut out of *Repubblica* earlier in the week, about the 12-year-old gypsy princess in Romania, forced to marry against her will a young man of 15. Zeynep says such things are not unknown in her country, especially in Anatolia. Also arranged or forced marriage at later ages, polygamy (which is strictly against the law) and the giving of a "prezzo della testa" – money given by a man to his fiancée's family and decided by the bride's father, depending on how beautiful or talented she is.

This is intriguing – the opposite of a dowry. We have a good discussion, ranging through the rights of women, gay marriages etc., but I am disgusted by the number of small mistakes I make all the time in writing and in speaking. How long will I have to speak this language before I am any good? Carla thinks my Italian is perfect because of my vocabulary and I do believe that a good accent and a large vocabulary will carry the day but it isn't as if I don't care about grammar.

I phone Angela Ragusa, my translator, before going out and we arrange to meet at dinner at Carla's on the 14th. We speak in Italian this time and she is very friendly but has not yet been sent *City of Stars* – bad news for my Italian fans like Arianna, Claudia etc.

I meet an Ecuadorian and a Mexican in the queue for the Cupola and we chat in Italian until they discover I am English. They thought they were queuing to get into the cathedral but I persuade them that the Dome is worth the climb. Then regret it because I have a bad attack of vertigo when we reach the open gallery round the

inside of the Dome, from which you can see the sheer drop to the floor and can't make it to the Cupola itself, which I know I can do.

I am so cross with myself because I had the same sensation in 1965 and conquered it, more than once. And it was worse then, because there was no reinforced glass above the stone rail. Perhaps it was silly to attempt it when already a bit out of breath with this stupid cold but I am mortified and have to climb down, literally. I visit the Baptistery instead and admire the truly wonderful 13th century mosaics, all intact, and the slightly worn zodiac pavement – very delicate.

I write more of chapter two; with luck I should finish it before Stevie comes for the weekend; he'll need to help me with the bits about religious orders. I read the text of a fabulous map Carla gave me earlier in the year of Florence in the sixteenth century. If I were to move here from England and spend the rest of my life in this city, I shouldn't know a fraction of what there is to know or see a fraction of what here is to see, even if I made my cut-off point 1600.

Wednesday 8th

Our Storia del'Arte will all be on the hoof, beginning with the Baptistery. No matter that I was there yesterday, it was quite different seeing it with Matteo and being able to ask questions. It took 75 years to complete the mosaics – can you imagine a project like that being undertaken today? They were restored at the beginning of last century. They were designed by Florentines, one of them possibly the young Cimabue, and executed by Venetians.

There are only three of us doing the course, Zeynep and a German girl called Lena who is the same apartment as Z. She is at the first level of Italian so it is rather brave of her, but obviously very interested. We stay in the Baptistery for over an hour and then walk to the little church of SS Apostoli in the Piazza del Limbo (!). This is exactly the sort of place I wouldn't have found on my own.

Matteo explains the Romanesque architecture to us and the 4 of us are alone most of the time. The next class will be Friday, which I shall miss, because of S. being here, but it is Santa Croce so I don't mind. It is my Florentine blind spot, I know, but I just can't bear the thought of those dreadful side altars being plonked on top of Giotto frescoes – Vasari's doing.

Thursday 9th

Still unwell so I've decided to take the rest of the week off from school and enjoy Stevie's visit. By the time I need to leave for the station I am feeling really fit for the first time for a week. Arrivals are confirmed on screens, with their platform, only minutes before they happen; it is as if the system doesn't accept the existence of any actual train until it can see the whites of its eyes.

Fortunately, as it happens, because this uncertainty leads me to poke my head round the door of the "Informazioni" office, where I read that there will be a national train strike from Saturday 9pm to Sunday 9pm – just the period when S. will need to travel back to Pisa for the plane home. This is the only information I ever see anywhere about this somewhat significant piece of news.

The train from Pisa comes in on platform 1 and almost last to the barrier is my lovely husband; I see him before he sees me and then we have the sort of reunion you might expect. I have cold Prosecco waiting, which I shouldn't really drink but do and S unpacks all the goodies I have asked him to bring, which include a hot water bottle, sweater and Beecham's powders! I could have been worse and asked for Marmite and Bitesize Shredded Wheat but have not gone that far.

Then we walk through the city and across the Arno by the Santa Trinita bridge, to find a restaurant recommended by Jess, our youngest daughter. We find it in the Borgo Santo Spirito, a most unusual and interesting eatery called Il Santo Bevitore, which means something like "The Holy Drinker". The pumpkin flower risotto is as good as I suggested it would be and S likes his fish soup. But we are both tired and it is a long way home, so we stick to 2 courses.

Friday 10th

I feel a bit guilty for missing school when I am so much better but we shan't be able to enjoy ourselves properly till we've sorted out S's journey back and it was nice not having to rush over getting up and breakfasting. The Tourist information office people are quite laid back. Yes, of course there is a bus to Pisa airport, run by a firm called Terravision; you can buy tickets at platform 5 on the railway station. Of course!

We decide to do that and be done with it. We reward ourselves with a visit to the Farmacia of Santa Maria Novella, which looms large in City of Flowers. I buy Devil's Claw remedy for my friend Carla's bad back – expensive and I have it gift wrapped - and S. buys himself one of those majolica pots he can't get enough of.

We both buy the suspicious looking liqueur, Alkermes, a sticky dark pink like cough mixture, based on an ancient recipe. It is now a ritual to gaze out of the barred door into the large cloisters owned by the Carabinieri and wonder how it was that the first time we came here we wandered in through that cloister and the open door into the heavenly smells of the Farmacia. A real fluke.

Over coffee in the Via della Scala we decide there's no time left for anything cultural this morning and head for the supermarket in the Via de' Ginori and the stalls of the Mercato Centrale. We are going to cook for ourselves the next two days.

This afternoon we go into the cathedral and the Baptistery and I am able to pass on what I've learned from Matteo. It is an impressive building and the more often I enter it, the more impressed I am. Then on to SS Apostoli in the Piazza del Limbo, which S likes as much as I do.

After dinner, I read him what there is so far of City of Flowers and he is the usual appreciative audience, with some useful suggestions too.

Saturday 11th

We nip out early to the panificio and the ortofrutta, buying our rolls and veg on the day of consumption, like proper Italians, then take the bus up to Fiesole. The Leonardo machines exhibition which I saw with Rhiannon in April is still on but we eschew it this time and toil on up to the Franciscan friary at the top of the hill. It's a strange mixture – a perfectly magical little cloister – though the aviary has been

removed some time in the last six months – and a church full of canned chant, electric candles and some really dreadful 19th century paintings.

We take an early bus back in the hope of getting into the Medici library in San Lorenzo but the DK Guide is wrong (shame!) and you can see only the vestibule on Saturdays.

We have decided on Orsanmichele this afternoon but it is shut and we can see only the outside. We have an ice cream in the Via Calzaiuoli – my first this trip - and head back to the flat. We rest up before supper and our long walk to the Teatro Comunale for Figaro. It is the Jonathan Miller production we saw in London years ago and as always we love it.

Sunday 12th

Up early to catch the Medici library off guard. And it works! Only there are no books, except those in an exhibition of the playwright Alfieri. So we don't stay long but instead go to 10.30 Mass in the Duomo, along with hundreds of other people, Italians and foreigners like ourselves. The mass is in Latin, so that's OK, but we are a bit lost in the sermon. We leave straight after communion, because it is 11.30 by then.

What a lot we have packed into this weekend! We can hardly believe how much we have seen, done, thought, bought and eaten in less than 72 hours. There is some anxious waiting time in Piazza Adua, waiting for the Terravison bus, which arrives late, but there are lots of other people waiting for it and it does at least come. Everyone piles on and our farewell is necessarily brief.

Monday 13th

Back to normal today: 2 hours grammar, coffee, two hours conversazione, lunch, then two hours History of Art. It's only when you feel better that you realise how ill you have been. Now Lucia the teacher is off sick and various students drop out during the morning, either from illness or because they've just had enough.

Lucia's substitute is Daniela, young and pretty, who comes from Sardinia, as does Lucia. I remember that my editor at Mondadori, alas now left, is half-Sardinian and she said they were a very special type of Italian. I must ask Angela Ragusa tomorrow, who has a house in Sardinia. Daniela is studying at the University of Siena part-time, so we have a lot in common. She saw the July Palio this year, when Selva won.

Matteo takes us to the Museo dell'Opere del Duomo this afternoon and more than 2 hours pass in a flash. Luca della Robbia thought that classical art was white, serene and beautiful, whereas Donatello knew it was full of movement, drama and colour. This is the sort of thing I can't see for myself and why I value his lessons.

Tuesday 14th

I managed to make the changes I needed to City of Flowers, of which the most important was to make the time Spring instead of October. It means that more time will have passed in both worlds than I intended – I wanted it to pick up where City of Stars left off. And I yield the advantage of writing in exactly the period about which I am writing – give or take 425 years or so – but I absolutely can't write a book called

City of Flowers at a time when there are no flowers except chrysanthemums and hothouse carnations! Particularly not with a spring promotion in 2005.

We finish school a little before 1pm, which gives me time to dash home before meeting Matteo at Santa Maria Novella. The others don't turn up (Zeynep is unwell now) so I have an hour and a half's personal tuition. Wonderful, because both the Masaccio Trinita and the Duccio Crucifix have been beautifully restored.

We then walk to San Lorenzo where Zeynep joins us, in spite of her feverish cold. I haven't really ever looked properly at the inside of the church before, apart from in the Medici chapels. There is a charming annunciation by Filippo Lippi, in which Gabriel has brought along a couple of angel-friends for company. They are quite uninterested in his mission and one wears red socks! We finish by looking at a horrible Bronzino fresco of the martyrdom of the Saint (Laurence), inspired by Michelangelo. This is pre-Mannerism and I'm afraid that the rest of the course may be too late for me.

We leave San Lorenzo at 5 and I have to be at Carla's at 7pm. I have done 7 hours Italian. Just time for a quick nap and a change of clothes. We have a lovely evening, including 4 more hours of Italian – surely I must be getting better? Angela Ragusa is very friendly and nice but says she won't translate the next two books of Stravaganza, because she is giving up long books! She has just finished her third of HP5 and we exchange opinions on it, which are much the same. The Italian for “flabby” is “flaccido”. She thinks Mondadori will bring out Citta delle Stelle next summer.

I get a cab home at 11pm and read in bed the article Carla wrote about Stravaganza in Pepe Verde (Green Pepper). There is also a review by someone else – my first Italian one! It starts badly by saying that the reviewer is suspicious of children's books that are longer than 150 pages, especially ones that are first in a trilogy if not by writers at the level of Calvino.

But then it becomes extremely positive, referring to me as “una vera professionalista” who knows all the arts of mastering events and handling suspense and lots of other compliments I shan't be able to understand until I am back with my big dictionary. That's a relief.

Wednesday 15th

Speaking of Calvino, it is his birthday today or would have been had he not died nearly twenty years ago; he would have been 80 today and the radio is suitably respectful. Only four hours Italian today! I didn't get any writing done yesterday so want to catch up tonight.

Thursday 16th

The two hours on participles, the gerund and the infinitive pass very slowly. Lucia is back but still not very well; she suggests a film for the Conversazione class, so I opt out of that and come home early.

This means I can catch the midday bus to Siena so that is what I do, reading my Repubblica on the way. There is an article about how the Uffizi and other major

Florentine museums are absolutely broke – can't pay their utility bills or even buy paper on which to type the duty rosters!

It is so extraordinary to arrive in the Piazzale Gramsci in Siena and to walk through the Piazza Matteotti, knowing that the post office will be on my left and the UPIM store on my right and that if I walk down the Banchi di Sopra I will come to a Bancomat on my left! Am less successful in tracking down Café Victoria (Il Magnifico) where I want to have lunch. I waste half an hour looking for it and then find it when I have given up.

Then off to Santa Maria della Scala for the first part of the Duccio exhibition. I'm not allowed to take even my handbag in, which is scary and liberating at the same time, and leaves my hands free to operate the audio guide which, very unusually for me I am glad to use (in Italian, of course).

It is mind-bogglingly glorious. I am eaten up with pleasure tinged with fury to see the perfect little portable triptych lent by the Queen. What is she doing with such a treasure and why isn't it permanently on show? There's a lot more Duccio than I had realised and they have a few Lorezettis (both brothers) and two Simone Martinis, one from private hands. The early stuff is interesting too – this is what I want, not Mannerism! Even 1333, the date of the disastrous flood in Florence, is now beginning to seem late to me.

I have to buy a separate, timed, ticket to see the newly-discovered frescoes in the crypt under the Duomo (only 25 people allowed in at a time) but I manage to book one for 5pm. They are very damaged and the connection with Duccio is tenuous, but there is still a lot of colour, a moving deposition and Pieta and separately a lovely little depiction of the (Apocryphal) date palm which bent down towards the Holy Family on the flight into Egypt, to offer them sustenance.

Then to the Museo to see the Maesta, which of course I have seen many times before, but now can compare with the early work. In the course of all this toing and froing, I have discovered that the Duomo floor is having its annual month's uncovering, so I decide I must see that too. The best are the Sienese wolf and the Wheel of Fortune – both 14th century of course. The catalogue of the Duccio exhibition weighs a ton; how am I going to get all these new books back to England?

Friday 17th

Only one week left! Well, more if you count Finland. Today we filled in gaps in a passage from a short story by Dino Buzzati, which was OK. Lots of "passo remoto". Then in *Conversazione* Lucia had lots of idiomatic phrases for us, of which the strangest was "to carry a plastic container to someone" meaning "to fail to keep an appointment." Someone who does this regularly is a "plastic-container-carrier" a "bidonaro"!

Back at the flat I wish I had made soup – it is freezing cold today, with a terribly sharp wind and I have worn my warmest outfit, brought for Sweden and Finland, and still not been warm enough.

It is so cold that Matteo, the History of Art teacher, curtails our Passeggiata to Gothic palaces by three quarters of an hour. Petra has dropped out along the way – she thinks she is going down with the local sickness, Marina too. It is lovely and warm in Internet Train, where I spend the extra time. There are e-mails from my publisher, showing me a photo of Karin Littlewood and Caroline Binch, with people from Frances Lincoln, at a party to celebrate the Colour of Home exhibition at Camden Library, part of Black History month. It feels strange not to have been there, since Karin's pictures for The Colour of Home and Caroline's Grace artwork formed a major part of the exhibition, but it fell right in the middle of this month and there was no way I could do it.

There is also a message from the British Council Literature Officer in Helsinki inviting me to an informal lunch next Saturday. How odd to think I will be there and not here in a week's time. I shall miss all the farewell parties here too. And then life in the Via Cavour will fade to a memory.

I haven't written much this week but am not going to get stressed about it since I am overflowing with ideas. In a way, quite apart from ecstatic family reunions, I shall be glad to be back in my study and writing away every morning.

Saturday 18th

Was so wiped out by Siena and the busy-ness of yesterday that I went to bed at 9.30pm. I wake early, then doze a bit more. Oh the luxury of Saturdays!

Today is equally cold, grey and windy; I might just as well be in England. There's a group outing to the Bargello this morning with Matteo, for which I have signed up, so I must go. There's been a lot of hoo-ha about restoring the Verrocchio David (done partly with American money and due to go on tour to Atlanta and Washington next month) but I'm hoping they will also have returned the little Apollo of Michelangelo, which was missing the last time I was here. It was always my favourite piece.

It's back! I was so pleased to see it again. There is quite a group of us – about 14 – and we trail round after Matteo listening to his explanations like tourists. But at least he is speaking in Italian and I bet he tells us more than the average tour guide.

I am always surprised by how good the Giambolognas are – particularly the birds. And today I looked more closely at the early Donatellos. Matteo says the famous bronze David is probably a Mercury after all, with the head of Argos. Must look that story up. He doesn't have winged boots – a fact which I am able to point out in Italian – but it would account for what has always seemed to me a certain carelessness of dress (having put on his hat and boots, he neglected to wear anything else).

Then we visit the Michelangelos and are told that the Bacchus was commissioned by a Cardinal who had caught M. out in a scam involving forging an "antique" cupid. (Enlightened response!). But it was too sensual for him (Bacchus is clearly a bit drunk and his body is a bit sexually ambiguous) so the cardinal sold it off in short order. Imagine having a Michelangelo and selling it. Brutus is handsome as ever in a Tommy Lee Jones sort of craggy way and I spend as long as I dare drooling over my little David-Apollo. If I could own one statue in the world it would be that one. (And of paintings it would be Simone Martini's incomparable Annunciation, in the Uffizi).

We finish with the Verrocchio, handsomely displayed in a small antechamber. It is much smaller than I remember it; unlike Michelangelo's David, it was designed for private ownership – a salon piece. We enter into a earnest discussion as to whether he is attractive and whether more so to women or men.

After supper I do some revision on the subjunctive. We have an exam on Thursday morning and I have 3 Art History lessons Monday to Wednesday afternoon and a theatre trip Tuesday night.

Sunday 19th

I walk, first to the Teatro Pergola and buy a ticket in the front row of the circle to hear Ashkenazy play the piano tomorrow. He doesn't perform often now except as a conductor, so that will be a treat. The Pergola lives up to its name and is covered in vines. To get there I passed the Accademia and the turning for S. Annunziata, so I know where to go for our next two History of Art lessons.

I like these back streets, which eventually take me back to the Piazza del Duomo and I walk along the Via del Proconsolo, past the Bargello and turn left into the Piazza della Signoria. You wouldn't believe how warm it is! I walk through Vasari's very successful Uffizi square, where the people queue in their hundreds, and across the Ponte Vecchio to the Pitti Palace.

My goal is the Silver museum and the exhibition of Medici jewellery but I discover that the whole place is open for free today because of what would appear to be National Eating Day. Still, there are no signs of food about the place. The exhibition is fabulous and I make lots of notes and have many new ideas, over ridiculously expensive coffee in the cafeteria.

I buy lots of postcards and a useful little book about Vasari's corridor from the bookshop and wrestle with myself awhile before leaving without any reproduction de' Medici jewellery, though am very tempted by a long gold necklace and some ruby and pearl earrings.

I had meant to catch a bus back but in fact end up walking the whole way, so am ready for a sit down and a sandwich when I get in. Only four days left and lots of little things to remember. I still haven't made it to the still life exhibition or the Brancacci chapel or San Marco.

In the evening I manage to finish reading the ninth story in my pro-Peace anthology, revise several sections of grammar and write more of chapter three. I have also started reading a very good book called City of Masks! This was partly to refresh my memory about certain incidents and characters and partly because I'll have to talk about it in Finland and there is a danger of becoming confused.

Monday 20th

On the way to school it rains and I get soaked. Fortunately the radiators are now on and I can dry my sodden cardigan on the one in our classroom. Honestly, indirect speech is about as interesting as all those examples of the subjunctive but we plough

through and now have only indirect imperatives left for tomorrow. After that, revision I suppose.

It is too wet to go out at break-time so I risk a hot chocolate from the machine – not bad. Everyone is there for *Conversazione*, all nine of us, and we read a very simple fairy story in Calvino's version. Then do a ridiculously easy comprehension. After that, Zeynep and I have to write something in the passive and we choose to give an account of the capture of Bin Laden. This confuses the others, who think we know something they don't!

There is just time to check my e-mails before meeting Matteo and Zeynep in the piazza della Santissima Annunziata. (Lena is revising). He is right: it is one of the most beautiful and least known of Florentine squares. I shall definitely make something happen here.

While we are inside, looking at del Sarto frescoes, the heavens open and I am very glad of the 18th century glass roof over the cloister! We then walk to San Michele Visdomini, which is not even listed in my guidebook, where there is a Madonna with saints and angels by Pontormo. No-one in the picture is looking at anyone else. While Matteo explains the painting to us, we are joined by an enthusiastic fast-talking Tuscan art-lover, who raves about the deposition in the church of Santa Felicita, which is where we are going next.

It is "Oltrarno", on the other side of the Arno, just over the Ponte Vecchio, and a small section of Vasari's corridor passes over it. The Medici were able to observe, if not receive, Mass from behind pierced screens. Fabulous!

The concert this evening is wonderful, even though I find I am sitting in the back, not the front, row of the circle! The acoustics are very good and I can hear and see Ashkenazy very well. He plays as if in his living-room, with an astonishing intimacy but also virtuoso skill. I get back about 11 and stay up, foolishly gripped by my own novel!

Tuesday 22nd

Up a bit late and a bit late to school, partly because I have no desire to go out in the storm. There is thunder and lightning throughout the morning, while we work on indirect imperatives and then turn a whole dialogue into indirect speech.

In *Conversazione* Anna tells us all about Columbia. She is a very kind and loving person, obviously, and has made two friendship bracelets to give as prizes, one in the colours of Italy and one in the colours of Columbia. He shows us a newspaper article about her "nipote", whom I take to be her grandson but later realise must be her nephew (Italian uses the same word for both relationships). He is 30, tall, dark and handsome, with green eyes, unmarried and an Italian film director – much appreciation shown by the class! After Anna's very interesting presentation, we get on to the subject of lies and I talk about the difference between lies and fiction.

Zeynep and I meet Matteo at the Accademia at 2.15pm and there is no sign of Lena. She seems to have dropped out of this course. He takes us into room after room of fantastic early Florentine painting, which are all empty, because everyone wants to

gawp at David. More than 2 hours later, we do the same, but we have to have our Mannerists as well. How I don't like them!

Back to the flat for a quick supper and change before the theatre. I am pleased to discover that I can understand most of the play, as far as the language is concerned. It is "Il Mondo di Mr Peters" or "Mr Peters' Connections", written by Arthur Miller in 1999. It plays in one continuous act for 90 minutes and I am very surprised when it stops!

I have enjoyed myself – and sat in the stalls of the Pergola – but Carla didn't like the play much. We say a rather rushed farewell outside; I must write to her.

Wednesday 22nd

My last full day as a Florentine.

We finish our indirect dialogue (I have not done my homework) and then do some exercises like the ones we will have in the exam tomorrow. I am going to fail because I don't achieve more than about 55-60% accuracy. I am so disappointed in myself. Why can't I get the finer points of grammar to stick

It's a good job I am leaving tomorrow as there is a general strike on Friday. Nikla, who is living with family in Empoli, won't be able to get in for the awards of certificates etc.

I walk to gli Uffizi to meet Matteo at 2.15pm. I have walked more in the last month than in the previous six, I should think. I wonder if I have forgotten how to drive?

Zeynep arrives soon afterwards and we manage also to find Lena, who is leaving at 8am tomorrow. I am tired before we start, particularly after climbing the stairs to the top floor, but that wonderful first room, with the Giotto Madonna di Ognissanti and the two Madonnas of Duccio (left) and Cimabue (right), is like a glass of cold water, a hot shower and a siesta all in one!

And then the second room, with my lovely Simone Martini Annunciation – I think for one moment I am going to cry. (Couldn't get in that room the last time we came). Yesterday Matteo asked if I was "emozionata" outside the Accademia and I said not at the thought of the David, since I much prefer the Prisoners and David's beauty leaves me cold. He was surprised then but I am "emozionata" now all right and have to drag myself away.

I have already warned him that I won't stay the course. After two hours and room 14 (Botticelli), I don't want to see anything later – I have had enough Mannerism to last me a very long time. So I say goodbye to the others and head back to Simone Martini, before leaving the Uffizi and heading home via Edison bookshop, where I find a useful little book of overlays that will show me what various sites in Florence looked like in past centuries.

I have to order a taxi, phone the Signora, go to the laundrette, check e-mails, make supper, pack and do at least 2 hours revision or I really will fail tomorrow. If I do, it

will be the first time since a school geography exam at about the age of 15 – unless you count the driving test, of course, which I passed at the 5th attempt.

2 e-mails from Finland tell me that it is very cold there – zero degrees during the day! What can I possibly do about this? I have boots, a scarf and gloves, but only a light summer jacket and no hat. I shall either have to borrow or freeze. I can't even buy more because of the problem of packing all the books I have bought.

I am so dog-tired that I don't think anything I study tonight will go in but I must try. In spite of my resolution at the end of the second week, I have not written much more of the book, less than a chapter. But I have seen and done some unforgettable things.

Thursday 23rd

I do more packing and realise I must buy another bag – too many new books and clothes. At the Institute I do the exam for 2 hours and think while it is in progress that I shall pass after all, even if not well. Giovanna marks it while I go to get coffee for the last time from the Cattedrale bar. I return to find she has just finished and I am appalled to see my script covered in red marks.

But she says I HAVE passed – more or less. I am not at all satisfied by my performance. In *Conversazione*, Lucia asks us to say what has been good and bad about our stay and poor Ana bursts into tears as she tries to explain what all the friendship has meant to her; she has been a widow for ten years. Zeynep and I both say how wonderful the History of Art course has been.

I show them my books and they get very excited and all want their photos taken with me. Ana gives me a luggage tag she has made in the colours of the Italian flag. Then there are lots of hugs and kisses as we separate for the last time. I want to take Nikla home with me – she has become like another daughter and she is vegetarian too! Zeynep (who has also become a good friend) and I search for Matteo to say goodbye but he has already left. This is very sad, as he has taught me so much; I leave messages for him with Isabella on the desk and Zeynep too.

Then hurry back to the flat, buying a cheap extra bag on the way. There is still a lot to do to finish packing. The taxi driver, who has a very strong Tuscan accent and an alarming tendency to take both hands off the wheel in order to gesture, finds me a trolley at Florence airport and from then on my adventures begin. The first unpleasant surprise is my excess baggage bill - €165 (about £120!). That's all those books!

While up in the bar, I notice that the screen tells me the flight to Munich (confusingly known as "Monaco" by the Italians) will be an hour and ten minutes late and I start to wonder if I will make the connection to Helsinki. So begins 4 hours of hell. The abbreviated version is that, after 3 queues and one visit to Lufthansa's office and many phone calls to Helsinki, I go on standby to re-route via Frankfurt and get the last available seat (business class).

The plane is late into Frankfurt too and my only chance of getting to Helsinki tonight is if the second plane is delayed. The girl on the Lufthansa desk is bewildered by my delight when she tells me that the Helsinki flight won't leave till 10pm. In fact it

doesn't leave till 11.30pm and I arrive, exhausted, in Helsinki just before 3am. Miraculously my bags also arrive – remember they had been checked to Munich?

I get a taxi to the hotel and eventually crawl into bed at ten to four, 12 hours after leaving the Via Cavour (Finland is one hour ahead of Italy).

Friday 24th

The alarm is set for 7.30 and it is really hard to force myself out of bed and into the shower. But I do it and am down in the lobby just after the appointed time. How pleased all the people from Tammi are to see me! Sari and Sanna and Terttu, whom I have now met a couple of times, and Louisa from the British Council, and my translator, Kaisa, are all there. This last is very pregnant, with the baby due in about five or six weeks, so it is very game of her to join us.

We get into a sort of minibus and go to the school. The first snow of the winter starts to fall. We meet the teachers and go into the staff room for coffee and snacks. Everyone is very tolerant about my descriptions of my terrible journey and very sympathetic about my lack of sleep. They agree to put me in the right place at the right time all day.

We go into the hall, where about 70 – 80 teenagers await us. They are from several schools, all part of a reading initiative known as Netlibris, which has just won a prize – a sort of Book Group. I talk for about half an hour and then 6 primed students (2 girls and 4 boys of about 16) ask their prepared questions.

These are very good! I hope I manage to be interesting; certainly questions like “which character do you identify with?” and “why didn't you invent your own fantasy world?” give me a wonderful opportunity. They all speak fluent English – what a splendid country Finland is!

When we come out of the school, the sun is shining on the newly fallen snow and everything is magical. The school bus takes us to near the British Embassy and, since we have some time, the Tammi group suggest we walk by the sea. This we do, most memorably, and then have hot chocolate in the Ursula café, with its glass walls and view over the Baltic.

It is a short walk to the Embassy, where HMA Matthew Kirk, his wife and their two little girls wait to greet us. They are all exceptionally pleasant and it is good of them to host this reception. Lots of the same students are there and some new ones. After Matthew Kirk's very nice welcome and introduction, I read an extract from *City of Masks* – the passage about the Maddalena Feast, with the fireworks, leading up to Lucien attacking Guido Parola on the mandola. The students sit on the fine Embassy carpet, apparently spellbound.

We have a few questions then break for a buffet lunch. But I am taken off to be photographed for Aamulehti newspaper, whose reporter Kanerva is going to interview me. When I do manage to sit down with a sandwich, children come up a bit shyly to talk, ask questions and get their books signed.

I get into a taxi with Kanerva and she turns on her tape recorder and interviews me on our way to the Book Fair. Am astonished when she says she thinks she can place me in the tradition of English fantasy writers and asks where I would put myself. I have never thought about it! We finish the interview over coffee at the Fair and Kanerva tells me her mother is a famous Finnish writer, who has won prizes. I ask what she thinks of having a writer for a mother and she says that writers make wonderful mothers but are “half-crazy!”

We go to the Tammi stand where Harri Istvan is waiting to interview me. He shows me his questions, which will make it easy for me, then we go to an area where an audience has already assembled. Then we do the interview, on mikes, for about half an hour. Somehow I find some new things to say. Then back to the stand, where I sign books and am simultaneously interviewed by two female school students.

At 4pm, Sanna and I take a taxi back to the hotel, dropping Kaisa on the way. So all my duties are over and I have 3 free hours before being picked up for dinner. I have done an 8 hour day on about 2 hours' sleep so now go to bed with a hot water bottle and sleep for about an hour. I'm so groggy when I wake up that I take a hot bath before getting changed for the evening.

We go to a restaurant called Sipuli = Onion – named not for its cuisine but its proximity to the Orthodox cathedral with its onion domes. The restaurant is extraordinary ; it was a warehouse, bought by a millionaire businessman and converted into a restaurant so expensively and to such a high level of finish that there was no way the money could ever be recovered. He went bankrupt and the restaurant was sold. It has a mysteriously nautical flavour, like the Titanic, an atmosphere heightened by the snow blizzard outside.

There are three kinds of wine after the champagne aperitif and I have a few sips of each but really can't drink. It's nice to have a proper meal, though – my first for two days.

Friday 25th

Oh, the excitement at breakfast of finding a toaster after a month without one! No sign of any jam or marmalade so I have it with an egg.

After a morning's shopping in the snow it is time to find the restaurant for lunch. This is hosted by the British Council, via Louisa, who is very lively and used to work in the Child Protection team in Oxford.

Two of the teachers from yesterday are there, as well as Terttu, Sanna and Kaisa. The décor is stunningly Scandinavian but with Papyrus plants. I decide to have vegetable Vindaloo, as a suitable contrast – there is no tradition of Finnish vegetarian cuisine so I might just as well have something spicy and warm myself up. The journalist Tarleena arrives who is going to interview me for a cultural radio programme. We have a wonderful lunch, lasting about four hours. Terttu gives me 4 CDs, all Finnish music, one by a female composer I have never heard of.

Tarleena and I go to another table to do the interview and she tells me her mother is a writer too! She, Tarleena, is interested in *Special Powers*, which Sanna has read and Tammi might want to publish!

These Finns are just so amazingly kind and friendly. After lunch, the Tammi people and Kaisa take me to the Academic Bookstore in Stockmanns – the biggest bookshop in Finland, possibly in Scandinavia – and show me the Finnish, Swedish and English editions of *City of Masks*. They have fun pointing out all the other Tammi titles – Philip Pullman, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Hilary McKay and, among the adult ones, *Life of Pi*.

It's time now to say goodbye to all these wonderful people so I go back to the hotel, stepping carefully through the snow. Tonight is definitely for vegging out – no need for more food or drink – just a film on pay TV (*The Quiet American*) and an early night.

Sunday 26th

So, my month as a Florentine ends in Finland in the snow. This is the day the clocks go back, so I have an extra hour. I feast on porage and scrambled egg on toast and for once have enough time to do my packing properly. Louisa is supposed to be taking me to the airport but when I phone her, she says it will be Sari after all. And as a nice surprise Terttu has also come to say goodbye. She shows me the edition of *Aamulethi*, with my photograph and clearly a long article, all in Finnish of course.

Sari translates it for me on the way to the airport. We check the bags in and there is no excess to pay – just an admonition to have only 20 kilos on my return flight. I don't mention that I am not coming back this time. Finland is a more civilised country than Italy, I am afraid. I take Sari for coffee and then say goodbye and head for the departure lounge.

I board the plane on time. It is pleasantly under-booked and there is a nice vegetarian meal for me. I greedily read both *The Times* I have bought (Friday's) and the free *Daily Telegraph* (Saturday's). My plane lands 40 minutes early, both my bags arrive and Stevie is waiting to meet me. Back to my life as a married woman, mother and householder.