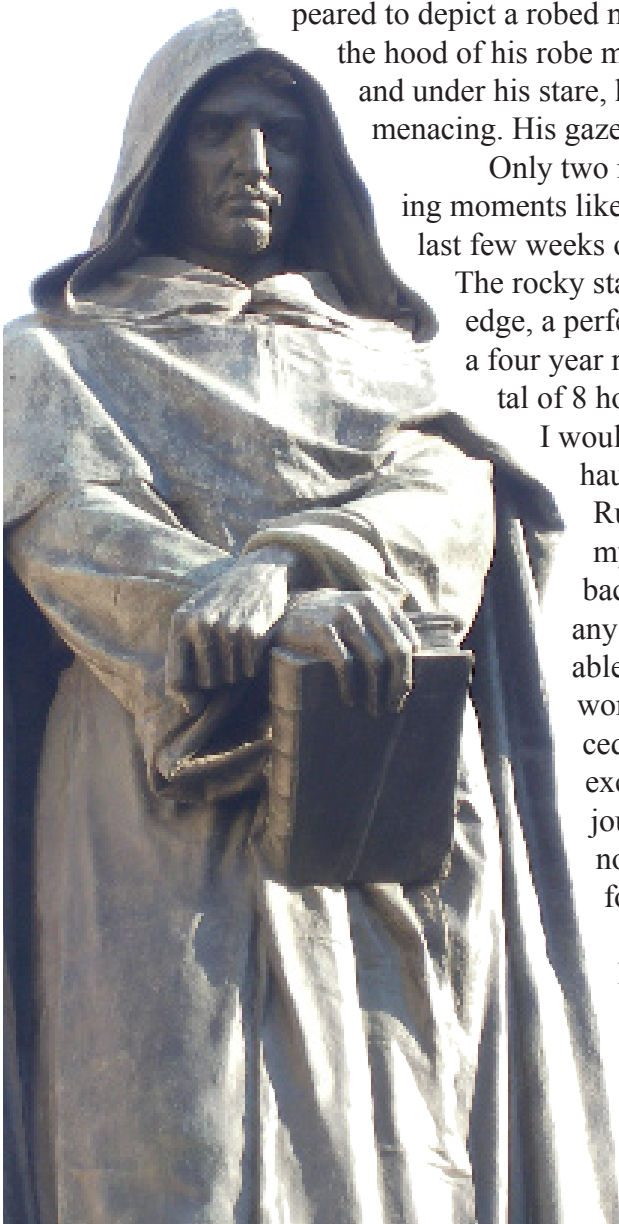




# My Escape

by Lisa Shaw

The day that I arrived in Rome, the weather matched my overcast past. Flat gray clouds that drizzled a steady rain welcomed me to the eternal city. A heavy fog blanketed the city, burying building tops and church spires. But I shrugged off the weather and dropped off all my baggage, emotional and otherwise, at *Albergo della Lunetta* — literally, The Moon Hotel. I was set to explore. Joined by a frat boy that I had met up with somewhere over the Atlantic when I noticed his MSU hoodie and baseball hat, we set off wandering, without umbrella, map, or any practical equipment that people with good sense would think to bring along. Among the countless ornate churches, ancient edifices and busy sidewalk cafes, we stumbled into a fairly deserted *piazza*. The wide open square was dotted with die-hard tourists and shop owners preparing for dinner, but the defining characteristic of this cobblestone landscape was the massive statue that stood directly in the middle of the square. Enticed by curiosity, we both were inexplicably drawn to it and headed toward it for closer inspection. At first glance, the statue appeared to depict a robed man with his head downcast, staring forlornly at his feet, the hood of his robe masking any facial features. But standing directly in front and under his stare, his face was all you noticed — cold, hard, and slightly menacing. His gaze left me paralyzed.



Only two months previous, I was in East Lansing, dreaming of having moments like these. The infamous April showers poured down over my last few weeks of spring semester, and May flowers were late to bloom.

The rocky start to my precious few months of freedom had me on edge, a perfect set up for my impending emotional breakdown. Ending a four year relationship, pushing through an entire finals week on a total of 8 hours sleep, starting three enormous freelance projects that

I would never finish, and my milestone 21st birthday left me exhausted, and counting down the days until I could run away.

Run away to Italy. I remember waiting in airport terminal, my overflowing carry-on bag at my feet, head resting on the back of my chair, sunglasses on as a means of discouraging any — from my fellow well-meaning travelers. The fashionable square frames did well to hide my tired eyes, shading the world from the weariness of sleepless nights that had preceded my escape. But they couldn't overshadow the spark of excitement that reflected off of my pupils, excitement for the journey that I had been planning for five straight years and now clung to so desperately, the best distraction I could ask for from the mess that had turned into my life.

And now here I was, staring up at this larger than life statue, feet planted firmly on the cobblestone streets of Rome. We would come to find out later that this statue immortalized the early philosopher Giordano Bruno, an alleged heretic who was burned alive at that very spot during the Roman Inquisition. Almost 300 years after his death, his philosophies were celebrated and the memorial was constructed, standing with his back to the

Vatican, a martyr to freedom of speech. And since his permanent location was only a few hundred steps from our hotel doorstep, it meant seeing Bruno's somber stance on a daily basis.

It didn't take long to notice that this foreboding statue also served as a popular meeting place for Romans and foreigners alike, and distinguished *Campo de' Fiori* from the surrounding piazzas. As the central landmark, he had the best view of the bustling activity and constant changes that define Roman life. In the mornings, for example, Bruno would oversee the construction of the large, white tents that temporarily surrounded him and housed pushy vendors pedaling fresh fruit, vegetables, baked goods and meats from their makeshift stands. At noon, however, the marketplace was packed up and taken away, only to be replaced with strutting pigeons and gawking tourists milling about aimlessly while Bruno stood, a silent observer. But after dusk and on through the night activity resumed, as young twenty-somethings gathered around to make plans for the night, drinks and cell phones in hand or on the way. In the heart of the city, liveliness pulsed around us, reliving the same scene every night but with a different cast and new scripts. People fell in love, friends were reunited, language barriers were broken, chipped away at or reinforced, and this little square of the city was alive with heat, wine and laughter. And for five weeks, that little square of the city felt like home, and that forlorn statue became a new member of the household.

No matter what adventure the day brought on, a group of us would always try to meet up for a late dinner, trying new and occasionally exotic restaurants each night. Usually we'd consult one of the ten different travel guides that we all owned, and select our dining option at random. Then we would set out for the day, with a quick "Let's meet at Bruno, say, 8 o'clock?" followed by nods of agreement. A symbol of martyrdom, Bruno was also our sanctuary. Because there were eight bars and 800 guys within the piazza, our statue was the destination chosen to return to if we ever got separated from one another. And considering the number of bottles of wine that was consumed on average per night, it wasn't uncommon for a member of the group to straggle behind, usually a semi-intoxicated female looking for a personal tour of the city, moped style, or innocently asking to "practice their Italian" on someone. Was it stupid? Yes. Was it safe? No. But did that stop anyone? Not on your life. Luckily, everyone was recovered at some point during the night, and it became common to find our fellow study abroad mates either passed out or making out on the steps of big Bruno, who had become our resident guardian angel.

Eventually, my diversion from Real Life came to an end, and I flew home with an ache in my heart for that timeless city. Coming home was more of a shock than leaving was, as I faced all of the skeletons that came tumbling out of the closet that I never officially shut, just ran away from. But time took care of everything, and before I knew it Welcome Week was upon me. Back at school, the study abroad groupies that I became such fast friends with were now seeing each other in the familiar backdrop of East Lansing, and realizing that some of our summer along with some of our connection had been left back in Italy. But we had taken Bruno with us, and he reappeared in everyday discussions, even becoming an adjective to replace "emo" at one point ("oh no, he's way too Bruno for me"). Thousands of pictures were developed, and hundreds featured our stony new friend. Facebook posts and text messages were sent with the cryptic but simple note: "I miss Bruno." Kelly, my most frequent traveling companion, bought a coloring book of famous monuments before leaving the city, and invited me over one day to take part in some crafty coloring fun. And of course, after flipping through the book, we both immediately settled on the outlined sketch of Campo, complete with a glowering Bruno statue in the center. When I got home that evening, I hung the picture up on my bedroom wall, right next to my monthly calendar. And every now and then, I catch a glance of my elementary-style artwork while sitting at my desk, and I allow myself to just look up at that picture and mentally escape, reliving the five weeks that seemed completely separate from the rest of my life, when time stood still, problems ceased to exist, and I was living and doing, quote unquote, as the Romans do. I think back and I sigh. And a small part of me, no matter how corny it sounds, feels like old Bruno is still looking out for me, in some way or another, and represents a standing invitation back to the city that I escaped to, the city that I fell in love with, the one and only constant in the whirlwind of my summer.