

A New Friend

By Cecilia Cipullo

Perugia has the essence of a lost marble. It has the feeling that someone was collecting a bunch of marbles and at one point mistakenly dropped them all, and although they thought they had cleaned up every single one, one of the marbles had rolled too far out of reach to ever be found unless the person realized they had one lost and went to look for that special marble specifically.

That is Perugia. Among the many marbles of Italy - destinations like Roma, Venezia, Milano, Sorrento and Napoli - many have not heard of the hidden city of Perugia, tucked away in the hills of the Umbria region. I had not heard of it until I found out that there was an option to study here. Yet as soon as I set foot in this small city, a wave of relief washed over me, similar to the feeling one gets when they find the marble they lost the week before.

By sight, Perugia is a rainbow of dull colors. It is a mixture of greys, blues, washed-out greens and oranges, soft yellows and rusty reddish brown hues. Perugia takes the form of morning coffee drinkers, the cobblestone Piazza Quattro Novembre with the iconic fountain at the center, many dogs on walks with their owners and dark green surrounding mountains. This city looks like an old drawing that has faded over the years. The details are so present - every street, every building and every person appear to be meticulously designed, etched into the Earth as if to prove that Perugia is a real place and not just a quiet escape. Perugia looks like the wispy clouds above the city, moving so fast that it seems as if they have been unnaturally sped up.

Perugia sounds like the street performer who performs daily at the top of the steps by the Umbro organic supermarket. He sings along to the guitar accompaniment, which he plays himself, adding to the melody of the city. His playing is replied with the clinking of fifty cent,

one euro or two euro coins hitting the bottom of his guitar case as they are dropped by passersby who are thankful for the music. Perugia also sounds like wind - winds of all different power and temperature. Sometimes it sounds like the loud howling wind makes when it crashes down through a narrow stone alleyway, while sometimes it sounds like a light wisp of air breezing by and gently tousling the hair of a little Perugian girl in her small jeans, tiny sneakers and grey button up coat, laughing as she chases pigeons around the fountain.

While the sight of Perugia is stunning and the sounds of the city are melodious, I can sense Perugia with more than just my eyes and ears. When I close my eyes and breath deeply, I can smell the city around me. It is a mix of second-hand smoke, the heavy scent that damp air has just after it rains, fresh bakery items being prepared in early morning and cheap, ready to eat one euro pizza slices and my host Nonna's coffee and biscuits. In certain places, Perugia also smells of car gas and rotten food, like all cities reek of when someone turns around the wrong corner and ends up somewhere they never meant to be.

Along with smelling like freshly baked goods leaking out from cafes and fried oil coming out of pizzerias, Perugia also tastes delicious. Perugia tastes like coffee in the morning and crisp red, white and pink *vino* with lunch and dinner. It tastes like soft pecorino cheese made from sheep's milk and prosciutto which melts in the mouth. It tastes like the classic Perugian dish *torta al testo*, with two thin pieces of flatbread sandwiching meat and cheese, usually the aforementioned pecorino and prosciutto. I often think of *torta al testo* specifically when I think of what Perugia tastes like, as it was the first food my host Nonna served me when I moved into their spare room - and that *torta al testo* had been prepared specially by my Nonna. Perhaps the most iconic food Perugia tastes like is *cioccolata*, as the city specializes in this dessert. From the

Baci Perugina chocolate company to flavored gelatos to the many *cioccolaterie* one can find lining the main street of Corso Vannucci, sugary sweetness is a taste that lingers on my tongue when I think of Perugia.

And finally, Perugia has a very memorable physical feel. Underneath my feet, Perugia feels rocky. The roads are paved with uneven cobblestones which can make it difficult for someone to walk around in more than just sneakers. Perugia also feels like the tightness in my chest that I get from panting too hard after walking up eighty stairs and continuous hills just to make it to school. Dragging one's hand along the strong and sturdy stone walls of Perugian building feels rough, like the sensitive skin on one's palm is slowly weathering away from the power of these buildings' old age.

Most of all, Perugia is soft. It feels like the gentle kisses on the cheek I exchange with my host Nonna and Nonno when I return home from school every day. It feels like my four year old host sister's small and warm body hugging mine when she hurt her lip the other day. Perugia feels like a comfy bed in the guest room of a home belonging to strangers turned family.

Perugia is a new friend of mine, who has decided to let me stick around and play with her for a while. It is now my job to be kind in return.