

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Like a piece of cake

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This is the story of a dinner and a challenge. The protagonist is in Tbilisi, Georgia, and she has been invited to dinner. But she can't keep up with the insistent invitations of a fellow diner to drink the wine he has brought to grace the meal. He pretends to be offended, but says there is a way out: if she makes him a tiramisu for dinner the next day all will be forgiven. She agrees, prepares the Italian ('famous-the-world-over') cake meticulously, but when dinner time arrives she is horrified to find that her cake has been substituted by her landlady with a 'big brown cake in the centre of the table'. If you want to know why, you must read the story. For the protagonist, it is a learning experience: she would never prepare tiramisu abroad again, but at the same time 'I would always eat any cake with tolerance and understanding.

My appearance in the kitchen was accompanied by Ada's shouts of delight. I handed her the pack of cigarettes and the change and let myself drop on a chair in front of her. I watched her light a cigarette and burst out laughing with satisfaction. She was going to be my host for the next three months, but I already understood she was going to be to me something more similar to a second mother, as, the moment I entered her country and her house, I had lost most of my 20 years of age. I was not an independent grown-up student from a foreigner university who came in order to gain academic knowledge. I was a child, still learning the language, sometimes not even able to behave, a funny kid - in a 20-years-old body. I had already been sent on errands. I understood I had to do the growing-up thing all over again.

We were going to have two guests that night, so, while cooking dinner, Ada asked me to lay the table. After having set dishes, knives and forks, I asked her where the pitcher for water was. She burst out laughing and told me nobody drinks cold water, people drink wine at dinner or they simply wait for having tea or spirits when the dinner ends. I wondered what they do when a piece of something sticks into their throat and I immediately inferred they drink a lot of wine. The guests arrived, a local theatre director, an old friend of Ada, and the wife. I had mentally reviewed a hundred times how to say, 'Nice to meet you' and 'Enjoy your meal' and 'This is very interesting', with which I hoped to manage just fine.

The dinner was proceeding smoothly, I thought. The conversation was cheerful and sparkling, bouncing from one topic to another with apparently some very fitting correlation. A lot of wine had come through, and this

helped me to smile and nod whenever I didn't understand what someone was saying. I hadn't embarrassed myself too much so far, yet I could feel something was going not as it was supposed to be, and bit by bit a slight sensation of anguish got its claws into me. Finally, after the umpteenth toast he had given, the theatre director cast a sympathetic glance at me, put his hand on my hand and asked me if I didn't like the wine he brought over.

I opened my eyes wide with terror and assured him I just loved the wine. – So why are you so timid with it? –, he asked me, – Whenever I fill your glass and give a toast in my country, you are supposed to finish it all at once, otherwise I will feel offended and could challenge you to a duel –. At first, I took it seriously, then I doubted there could be some irony in there. And finally, I burst out laughing. Everybody laughed, and I thanked God my destiny wasn't to die alone and mistaken on foreign soil, for not having drunk a glass of wine. My grandmother, who used to correct her coffee with liquor, would have been very disappointed. Saying goodbyes, the theatre director said it had been a real entertainment to meet me and that he would have even forgiven my terrible offence if only I prepared him the notorious and famous-the-world-over Italian tiramisu. I told him nothing could be easier for me: just a piece of cake.

Next morning, I telephoned my mom to review the recipe. I remembered to have eaten the cake quite a lot of times, but I didn't remember me preparing it once. Mom said tiramisu is all about ingredients and precision. I was in a country where Savoyards were the great unknown and, of all the people I know, I do know I am the one who lacks in meticulousness the most. I kept a whole morning free for the operation. I went to the shop and spent a good two hours pondering ingredients. Then, to make sure I followed mom's exact instructions point by point, I commented everything I did out loud and asked myself questions, as if in a Tv show: 'Do you really want to break this egg?', 'Is that your final answer?'. At midday, I was bushed but confident: I was quite positive I just did an astounding tiramisu. Ada came home and asked me if I had problems with the oven, which was a pre-war dreadful specimen of oven. I smiled indulgently, and explained her tiramisu is not a cooked cake. Ada looked at me horrified, but I assured her everything was just fine and that I had done tiramisu millions of times.

Just before dinner time, I noticed something was wrong. Ada didn't look me in the eyes and was very laconic. I noticed a big brown cake in the centre of the table. I could not believe it: Ada had made another cake. She said she was sorry, but she couldn't let an uncooked cake be served to her guests. She then smiled indulgently and told me she had eaten tiramisu quite a lot of times and she knew what a tiramisu was like. In fact, she just prepared one. I looked again at the cake in the centre of the table, which appeared to be some kind of chocolate plum cake.

I decided to set aside my wounded pride. I learned something from this whole story, and it is I would always try to transcend any prejudice. Some

people may seem confident, but they might not know what a tiramisu is, but also, some cake may not be tiramisu, but it might be as good. I would never prepare tiramisu abroad again and I would always eat my cake with tolerance and understanding.

