

# brufoli

## beauty is more than skin deep

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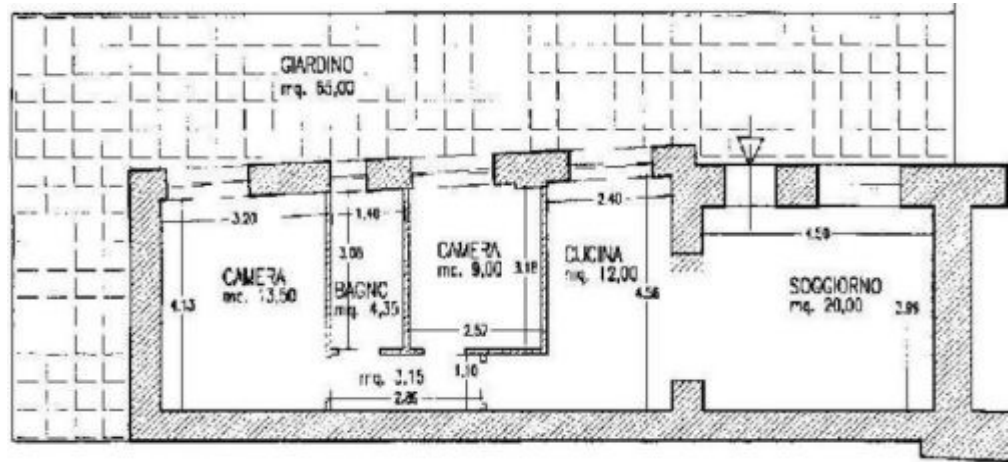
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"*Che cavolo stiamo facendo?*" I muttered leaning back in the chair wedged around the table of the architetto who had designed our house. "What the heck are we doing?" echoed my brother. I didn't notice if his question was addressed to me, to himself or to no one in particular. My arm shook, and as the light shimmered off my sweaty hand, I signed the first round of documents needed to proceed with the construction of our new *villetta* on the outskirts of Teramo in the Abruzzo region of Italy. My brother sighed and hesitated while he tried to decide whether to sign his name John or Giovanni. "John" he finally wrote decisively. Also there was the *geometra*, or surveyor, who filled in the date, 22 Agosto 2002.

Our journey began several years earlier when my brother and I came up with this naïve dream. A sliver of land in Italy with a house to be constructed overlooking the Grand Sasso, the highest peak in the Apennine mountain range. The house would be brand new and built where a chicken coop now stood. The land was ancient, the same soil from which 100 years ago our grandparents had fled in hunger and disappointment.



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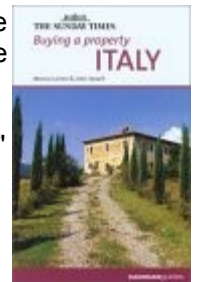
Stephen, now Stefano, a 52-year-old with rudimentary Italian picked up 15 years previously during a stint as a civilian with the US Army in Vicenza. His wife back home in the states had increasingly come to question his *intelligenza*. *Per fortuna*, she possessed a great deal of *buon senso e pazienza* (good sense and patience. Both traits were helpful in coping with the midlife crises of an aging husband. John, now Giovanni, a 56-year-old who often spoke to our relatives in phrases peppered with Spanish words vaguely recalled from an introductory language class he had taken 40 years ago. "*Mi casa esta bello*," I repeatedly heard him say with a broad smile. I would wince as Italian relatives patiently tolerated our garbled attempts to communicate. Adult thoughts and concepts which, due to our obvious limitations in Italian, were expressed in the words of three-year-old toddlers. In Italy, we found our poorly-spoken Italian is not really spoken at all. They say we *masticate*, that is chew, their language.

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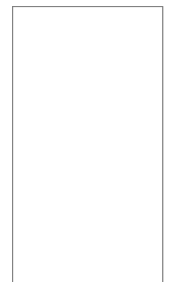
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The meeting to discuss the details of our house continued. Everyone at the table stared at me as I said, or tried to say, "We don't want to be discourteous, but.. there are a few things we want included in our house if possible." The words *nostra casa* felt good as they rolled off of my tongue. Not wanting the *architetto* to think we were crazy, and with our wives not present to deny it, I had concocted some reasons the night before to back up my request. "The villetta is for our wives, too. What man doesn't want his mate to be happy?" None of the males (for there were no women at this table) dared respond in the negative. I continued, "*La famiglia e' importante*." My brother looked at me in astonishment as he wondered what our wives and families had to do with home construction. The architect thought the whole business crazy but, at least for now, kept the word, *pazzo* to himself. My brother's impatience grew as he prodded, "Get to the point and just tell them what we want." So I began listing our desires.



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"A locked area, a 'box' in Italian, where we could leave our stuff while away. The villetta should be the color of straw (or did I say hay?) with some of those beautiful ancient stones exposed on the outside front wall." Everyone nodded their heads in agreement. But I knew I had gone too far when I announced our final request.

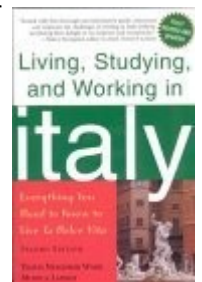


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"Oh yeah, and skip the bidet."

Silence.

Perhaps because he was not paying attention or because he was eager to break for an espresso and a smoke, the builder said nothing and the subject was, at least for now, dropped. Reams of paper, more layers than in an Italian *millefoglie*, flew across the table. We glanced at each document, pretended to understand, and scribbled our names again and again. *Ecco fatto!* The deal was done. All that remained was a toast from a bottle of Asti Spumante, hugs, kisses and a return flight home to the USA.



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As the months dragged on, our cousins in Italy monitored the work of the *grande progetto*. Meanwhile, in America John and I impatiently awaited word on the progress of our great project. We lied and told our wives and families the house would be finished soon. They did not believe us. Each time the tension became unbearable I called my cousins for an update on the progress that rarely was.

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Finally, my closest cousin, Aldo, broke the news, "You have built a house in only 18 months! That may be some kind of record."

"We built a house in Italy in only 15 months!" I told my wife and children.

They had long ago tired of hearing me babble on. "The roof is *autentico*, ... each tile, each *coppi*, authentically and painstakingly formed 100 years ago by the skilled hands of master artisans..."

"Yes, we have a roof worthy of distinction, with tiles that are at least 100-years-old," John often chimed in, winking at me subtly.

When I saw Aldo in the piazza, I asked him if everything had gone as planned. "No problema. But the builder never built a house before without a bidet. He thought it must be some kind of *americanata*, something so crazy that only Americans would do, so he put in the necessary plumbing for one just in case you want to sell the place someday. Oh, and they won't be painting the house for a while until the plaster dries."

"No problema," I answered back.

Turning the corner to see the house for the first time, I pictured the beautiful stones peeping through the soon-to-be straw-colored stucco walls. I just knew the front of the house would look similar to this:



After all, during that hot August meeting 18 months previously hadn't I taken the time to *carefully* describe to *everyone* exactly what we wanted the front of the house to look like?

The builder did make some of the stones stick out from the still-white front wall but chose to place them in neat rows that looked like this:



My brother and I were silent as our cousins excitedly pointed out each feature of our new *villetta*. Again and again, they scanned our faces for signs of approval. Later, we took each of our curious neighbors on the grand tour. "Everyone in the town likes it... Che bello!" rang in my ears. I asked myself, "Are they just saying that or do they really mean it?" Probably both were true. As the months have passed these questions have gradually lost their importance and I have stopped trying to read the faces of my Italian friends for the *true* meaning of their compliments.

On occasion when I rounded the corner and looked at the front of my house the stones sort of reminded me of pimples. Not a pleasant thought. I even looked up the Italian word for pimples and found out it is *brufoli*. I considered using this adjective while describing the house to others. Those days have are gone and I have gradually grown very attached to our dream *villetta*.

The rows of stones on the front of the house have become no less visible with time. My thoughts remain clearly focused on other things of even greater importance. I love my Italian cousins, the province and town of Teramo, the land of my grandmother and grandfather. As we settle in, I am coming to love our new house. My brother and I have never talked about the arrangement of the stones on the front wall. There is no need to do so. My wife and family still think I am *pazzo*. But they have kept their patience and good sense.

The front of our house is finally straw colored but is otherwise very different from every other house in the town. To my knowledge, no one uses the term *brufoli* when speaking of it. It wouldn't much matter to me if they did. I enjoy showing the house to my Italian neighbors. They often hesitate for a moment when my tour finally comes to the bathroom. I can see on their lips the question, "...but where are they hiding the bidet?" I take the offensive and mumble something about this being just another *americanata*. When they see I am joking they laugh sheepishly, guilty in the knowledge that I know their thoughts.

Outside the sunshine coming over the Gran Sasso warms our backs and highlights the *villetta's* exterior features. The symmetrically-placed stones speak out to me in a language that is a mixture of English and Italian. They try to tell me that I didn't get exactly what I asked for. Instead, I got everything that I wanted.

#### **about the author**

Stephen Mark Ulissi is a 54 year old psychologist living in Bethesda, Maryland. He built the house with his brother, John, a 58 year old professional photographer from Penns Grove, NJ. Both his grandmother and grandfather came from this small hamlet of Valle San Giovanni located on the outskirts of Teramo in Abruzzo - midway between the Adriatic Sea and the Gran Sasso. John obtained his dual citizenship this summer and Stephens application is pending. The return to Abruzzo approximately twice a year to sightsee and visit relatives. Many of the people from Valle San Giovanni emigrated to Montreal and Southern New Jersey. They call themselves "Vallaroli." The author is interested in hearing from anyone who has relatives or acquaintances in to this town. The author can be contacted at: [ulissi@hotmail.com](mailto:ulissi@hotmail.com)

They rent out their newly-built house on a weekly or monthly basis for additional pictures and information concerning the authors *villetta*, nicknamed Casale, is available at [this website](#).

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