



In Umbria with the Belgian Ladies

“Dad! Dad! Look dad, there’s the Belgian Ladies.” My younger daughter yelled excitedly from the back seat, pointing ahead to two silhouettes on the side of the road. *“You’d better stop to pick them up. It’s a long walk to Spoleto.”* *“Yeah, please dad,”* the older one chimed in. *“we love the Belgian Ladies.”*

We were on a steep downhill section of the dirt road leading to the main highway on the valley

floor. I changed down through the gears – the little black Uno had no brakes – but we were still moving at quite a pace, both girls waving animatedly from the rear window, as we passed our quarry. A few minutes later they had run to catch up and were now crammed in the back; the girls on their knees.

As well as the absence of brakes, our tiny two-door runaround also had no registration or insurance. The brakes were an issue on the run down from our hilltop village, but once we hit the tarmac, the lack of stopping power paled into insignificance, compared to the





lack of legal certification - the *carabiniere* possibly waiting around any corner - as we barreled along towards the morning market, and our favourite porchetta roll, in Spoleto.

I remember the last few pieces of advice from my friend in the UK, who owned the villa:

“Don’t drive the car, it has no brakes or insurance; don’t use the toilet for anything serious, it doesn’t flush; and whatever else, don’t befriend the Belgian Ladies, they’ll run you out of provisions!” A negative compendium you might say. Well, at least we heeded his advice regarding the toilet.



That first holiday in Cerqueto, the tiny hamlet on top of the hill, turned into an indelible, if rather mixed memory. Our villa, a random sprawl of rough-hewn stone, and a delight to behold from afar – one of 8 or 10 others in similar states of ruin or renovation - presented a range of challenges in close-up, including the non-functioning loo. It was also Italy’s hottest summer, with serious water problems for everyone on the peak.

Soon after arrival there I found the little black car in the garage, and alongside it a couple of packs and rolled-up sleeping bags. Obviously, someone was in residence. That evening, answering a knock on the door, I found two ladies dressed as if relics from flower-

power days – one much younger than the other – both smiling sweetly and asking for sugar. *“I was expecting you,”* I said. *“Would you like some coffee too?”*

We were soon good friends. They were mother and daughter, free spirits, who travelled on foot from Belgium, to spend their summers in Umbria. After that first pick-up we were together more often than not, for musical events in sun-filled Spoleto piazzas, and one glorious night-time concert, hosted by the castle that looked down from the hill. The girls often went rambling with them around our villa, and they would join us for barbeques in the cool of evening. We became a six-some rather than a four-some.

On returning to Britain my friend remarked: *“And I hope the Belgian Ladies didn’t give you too much trouble.”*

“No,” I replied. *“Not too much trouble really.”*

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