

TWO NUTS
in
ITALY

The image shows two feet from a person, one on the left and one on the right. The left foot is wearing a brown leather boot with a green sock. The right foot is wearing a red fur boot with a black sole. The text 'TWO NUTS' is at the top, 'in' is in the middle, and 'ITALY' is at the bottom, all in a decorative red font.

A MOTHER-DAUGHTER ODYSSEY

by
SUE ELLEN HANING

Copyright 2009 Sue Ellen Haning. All Rights Reserved.

Chapter One You're Nuts

“You want to do what? Are you nuts? Don't the Europeans hate us? What about terrorists? Oh, no, I'll be worried sick about you,” exclaimed an incredulous friend. I felt the need to discuss this with my peers, but maybe I could just send them all an email after the fact. I hung up the phone, took a deep breath, and called another friend and another and another to be met with, “Remember it is Jenny who is twenty-one, not you!” Then came howls of laughter followed by, “You're going to carry a pack on your back all summer? A reality check is in order here.” Then I heard.....“Why not?” reassured my friend Robin when I asked her about the invitation extended me by my daughter Jenny to join her backpacking through Italy for the three summer months. “Really?” I asked her.

“Why not? I'd do it.” Then Lydia and Janie concerned about my eighty-eight-year-old mother I had been caring for the past two years sent me soaring back to reality with, “But who will care for your mother?” Others were not so encouraging, and the word “nuts” kept coming up in conversations in reference to the idea or to me. The idea thrilled me, and that thrill surprised me since foolishness and frivolity are not normally a part of my nature as evidenced by the term of endearment Jenny bestowed on me when she was fifteen. During her farewell speech the night she relinquished her crown at the local beauty pageant, she fondly referred to me as “my mother the terminator.” I looked around to see confused faces both male and female. After all what loving daughter labels her mother “The Terminator”? Thank God she gave a brief explanation to the perplexed crowd. “My mother is an expert at removing all “social” blocks to my accomplishing the goals set for me during my reign,” she said, then continuing with her beauty queen smile, “She is unequalled in making sure all daily tasks are completed and in general taking care of business and forging ahead conquering all that needs vanquishing.” I was sure that every person in the room who looked at me saw Arnold Schwarzenegger! Suddenly my 5'4" formerly solid frame spilled into a puddle beneath my chair. While today we laugh at this, Jenny still introduces me occasionally as “my mom the terminator.” It works well with any guys she's not too interested in.

My twenty-one-year-old daughter wants me to spend the summer with her. The thought still thrills me, and I take it as a great compliment. Each time I thought about the possibilities of such a trip, I smiled. I've been a teacher for thirty-five years and always sought knowledge. Now I could lose myself across the ocean. I could learn things by accident. I want adventure to find me, and maybe even experience hardship. I want to be surrounded with things I don't understand. I want to relinquish control and surrender serendipitously. I want to live for three months with only what I can carry on my back????! AAAHHH, the pleasures of midlife! Usually with midlife comes “empty nest” syndrome. I have it. “Empty nest” is a phenomenon. It's scary, sad, and shocking while also enlightening and challenging. It forces stay-at-home moms to re-invent themselves. For me it was hard to shake the feelings of loneliness and uselessness I experienced with children no longer needing me on a daily basis. At times I felt obsolete like my worth was challenged. My children had all moved away, and it's painful to love someone who is away, and with whom you can no longer share in their daily lives. With no children in the house, my thoughts turned inward, and realities I never before considered emerged like... I'm free; I'm going to die; what do I do with my hands; break this painful silence; and then....no, I like the silence, no one notices me, and other irrational imaginings. I have a chance to have another career. The challenge is going from full-time mom/teacher to whatever I want to become.... artist, politician, bartender, landscaper, travel guru, writer, or welder. I had thoughts I didn't know I was capable of having because of this

new position, but the mom mode hung on me. I couldn't shake it because I didn't want to. If Jenny asked me to go with her, maybe she still needed me. Mom is the career that won. I remember in my youth the clock's hands seemed to drag along or not move at all, but once I hit my 50s, those same hands spin recklessly out of control counting down the minutes until it is "my time". Would a three-month devil-may-care trip abroad slow the hands?

In 1998 Jenny, her voice teacher, and I spent four days in Italy as part of a two-week, whirlwind trip through four European countries. Before this trip, we joined a world-wide organization for travelers called Servas. A list of available members, their phone numbers, and personal information was sent to us from the countries we planned to visit. Servas's members offered their homes to travelers who made prior arrangements with them. The stays were limited to one night unless the host extended it. We stayed in homes in Germany and Austria, and Jenny realized how much more she enjoyed these two countries because of the up close and personal time we had with our host families. Jenny was fourteen and fell in love with romantic, slower-paced Italy. Curiosity had pinched her, and she wanted to experience Italy on a deeper level...to learn its culture. She vowed she would return to Italy some day and spend several months. Now at twenty-one, nothing could hold her back. Her plan was for us to take a backpack, little cash, no credit cards, stay in homes of Italians we did not know (or sleep on park benches if necessary), have no itinerary, keep to the small towns and countryside for the full cultural experience, take the opportunities given us to make things happen, experience a summer of learning, adventures, and wonderful memories just drifting with the wind. This was the idea that created disbelief in the minds of my friends because once you reach the age of fifty-six, the world expects you to demonstrate reason not reckless insanity, and staying with strangers in a country whose language we did not speak in the year 2005 screamed...."nuts-o."

I was going to be a hippie, a gypsy.... or a nut. I passed up my first opportunity in the 1960s. I was too "good" or maybe too "scared" to spread my wings too far. I never smoked weed, dropped acid, or took part in the mind-altering excursions. I guess the issue was "control". I could stop drinking, but I didn't know how far the "trip" might take me which made "tripping" prospects scary. Now at my age, tapes ran through my mind daily. I was hearing "life is short, enjoy the moment," and it kept squeezing through every crack in my "Terminator" guard. My clock continued ticking, and my daughter was giving me the opportunity to test the limits of my comfort zone. Suddenly I couldn't get enough of the idea. The old songs ran continuously through my head. "It's been a long time since I rock and rolled...where have all the flowers gone...there is a house in New Orleans...come on baby light my fire." My thoughts were in a never before visited realm. The thought of wreck-less adventures was lighting my fire. I must admit that traipsing through a foreign country with nothing but my faith, a backpack, and an overly confident twenty-one-year-old had never been a dream of mine, but just thinking about the possibilities made it a dream! People do this all the time, right? "Go for it," I screamed. One last adventure before the "ole bod" wears out. My knees, that had given me trouble for fifteen years, had been behaving lately. My thoughts scared me. I even dreamed of swimming nude in the Mediterranean Sea! I'm the person who was always afraid to put the kids in the car and go without another adult on board. As a child, my father took us on well-planned two-week sightseeing vacations, but this time there would be no plan. Nothing was out of the question. I embraced the thought that I could see everything with different eyes and leave all my beliefs and securities at home. I want to risk! I want to be a young... or old fool. Of course every time I saw my friends, the "reasonable" thoughts returned. "What if this and what if that," they quizzed. "What if you get hit by a car? What if they treat you badly because you're an American? What if you get sick? What

if the two of you get separated and can't find each other? What if your passport is stolen?" What ifs can warp you face! I couldn't deal with the word "if" any longer, so I beat "if" mercilessly until it pummeled into oblivion. No more "ifs" in my vocabulary. Now I could get on with my plans. In my imagination I could see the emerald, silver, and forest greens I remembered from our brief trip to Italy in '98. The fields of sunflowers waltzing in the Tuscan breeze tickled my thoughts. The juicy, red explosion of the world's finest tomatoes filled my mouth as did the tough bread and tempting wines I remembered as part of my brief Tuscan experience long ago. "Yeah, why not," I told myself. So one day during a daydream, I grabbed a date out of the air, May 25, chose Venice as our entry and departure city, August 31 as our return flight, went online and bought the plane tickets for \$835.98 each. We'd be sleeping three months and six days with no reservations. Next I created an email address to communicate our adventures and to send evidence of our continuing life to the worriers back home. twonutsinitaly@yahoo.com.

Beginning in February, Jenny spent day and night on the computer learning what she could about Italy, our summer home, where we hoped to be temporary locals. She found websites for travelers and created profiles for us. "We'll find places to stay with the members of these groups," she assured me. One was www.hospitalityclub.org, and the other was www.couchsurfing.com. These are worldwide organizations of travel lovers and people wanting to make friends around the globe, and cultural understanding is a major incentive. Jenny was more computer savvy than I and wasn't frustrated by the glitches that plagued me whenever I was in cyberspace, so I kept telling that monster in the back of my mind to shut up and trust Jenny to find beds to sleep in. Of course when you're twenty-one, everything is easy including sleeping on park benches! "Are you nuts?" rang intermittently in my ears. I was trusting in something that isn't logical...a three month trip with no plan. One day Jenny announced she had found us a place to stay in Cecina, a coastal town in Tuscany on the Tyrrhenian Sea. She had met a guy in an Italian chat room. He told her if we got to Cecina, he'd give us a place to stay. Something gripped the pit of my stomach. It is only March, and our tickets are for May 25. Anything can happen in two months, right? I could break my toe and not be able to walk, the world could end, I could come to my senses, or any number of other possibilities. While Jenny spent hours and hours on the computer, I busied myself with making lists of necessities to take, shopping for backpacks, and reading about "how to fly by the seat of my pants." My knowledge of this type of living was akin to my acquaintance to life on Pluto.

A greeting from God jumped off the page of a book I was reading by Wayne Dyer. I hand wrote it on bright yellow paper and made one for each of us to carry. It said:

Good morning!
This is God.
I will be handling all of your problems today.
I will not need your help, so
Have a miraculous day!

I had the 3"x 3" pieces laminated and told Jenny we would read these every morning and be relieved of any worry. She replied, "Okay, Mom, whatever you say." She evidently already had this faith. I was doing this for myself, and we both knew it.

Every day I felt younger and younger. I got the "twenty-one-year-old" spring back in my step. I laughed more. Every time someone said, "You're nuts!" I responded amidst my own laughter, "You're right!" I dreamed in Technicolor. I listened to tapes on learning Italian. I checked the days off the calendar, but the most difficult task was to find the perfect assisted living facility for my mother. Her funds were limited, and she's always promised she would live to be a

hundred and ten. I've tried to help stretch her money by caring for her in my home as often as possible. Having dementia meant she experienced daily confusion and insecurity. A smaller, homey place would be better for her rather than one of the grand, fancy, Taj Mahalish facilities that house hundreds, display fresh cut flowers daily, offer choice menus, have gold plated door handles, chandeliers, lush carpets, high ceilings, entertainment/activities managers, in-house nurses, and a never ending list of amenities attempting to assure the residents they are "going out in style." I began looking and visiting places, and the more I visited, the more impossible became the task of finding someone to replace me in my mother's life. Being an only child continues presenting challenges I despise. I visited facility after facility, but they were too big, too expensive, too dark and dreary, contained someone who screamed mindlessly all day, or something equally disheartening. This is my mother, and I can't ask her stay anywhere I wouldn't want to be, so the search continued, and continued, and continued. Finally I found the perfect place. It was small, clean, homey, room for only five, and supplied the perfect new friend, a cheery Alice, to room with and remind Mother all is well. There is nothing easy about dropping your mother off for someone else to care for no matter how crazy you think she is driving you. My mother is sweet not demanding or crabby as so many become in later years. I guess you could say she has "happy dementia". But I thought I was losing my mind after listening to her repeat the same questions I answered for what seemed like hundreds of times a day. Once I kept a tally on her favorite question, "When can I go home?" seventy-five times in one day! Yes, she varied it, and sometimes the question became, "Don't I have a home? Who's paying my rent? How did I get here? Can you take me home tomorrow? Take me home." How could she still be asking these questions after living here for five years? I was about to tear my hair out, but why did I feel like I was disposing of her? She cried when I took her to her new home on May 15th because she had no idea what was in store for her or why I didn't want to take her to Italy with me. "I can walk as far as you any day," she reminded me, and while this was not true, in her feeble mind it was very true, and she was more aware than anyone that I am all she has in this world. I thought if I didn't get away soon, I would be committed to an institution for the criminally insane. At the time it all sounded like excuses. Oh, the guilt we inflict on ourselves!

Back in January when Jenny's plan to traipse across Italy itinerary-less was in the embryonic stage, we invited both of my sons to go with us. Jarrod, thirty-one, a blossoming real estate mogul in South Carolina, didn't have time. Jake, twenty-four, a ballroom dance teacher in Austin, also declined. I must admit I was relieved since three (or four) can be awkward, demanding, or at least drastically change the dynamics. By May 1, after intellectualizing and analyzing the idea for a few months, Jake wanted to go with us! My imagination went wild, and I envisioned the same people that might have offered hospitality to two females just scoffing at us and thinking, "They've got a man with them. He can provide a place for them." (Is this one of those southern ideals?) My mind was drowning in negative thoughts about Jake's going. Sure I wanted him to go for his own experience. He was the perfect age to take one last fling before he settled into the realities of life for sixty or seventy more years, but his interests were different. Jenny and I were good travel partners and had taken spring break and weekend trips many times in the past few years. Jake's ideas about a good time were different. His sister on the other hand thought his decision to go was great. She handed me the yellow 3 x 3 and said, "Here, Mom, read this."

Shopping for backpacks took five full days. After visiting four stores trying on at least fifty packs of varying sizes, shapes, and features, we settled on a simple school-sized pack with waist belt and padded shoulder strap. I refused the helpful suggestions of the store clerk concerning

loops for my sleeping bag, blanket, and pillow. Had I overlooked something? Sleeping bag, blanket, and pillow were not on my necessity list. Maybe I should reconsider since I had no hotel reservations! Hmmmm. After mulling this thought over and visualizing me loaded down with sleeping gear, I decided I could take a small pillow...the kind filled with thousands of tiny pellets that won't fold or change shape. We bought two of these that were round, eight inch diameter... perfect fit for our "little" heads. Our choice of backpacks hung on the wall before us. I chose the red one (my favorite color) with black zippers on all the hidden pouches and compartments. My thoughts were light as air as I visualized us packing through Italy with ease. "Mom, let's go," jerked me back to reality. Suddenly in that split second of daydreaming, I was renewed. Now I understand why children engage in it regularly! I'll try it more often. Jenny took the solid black pack just like mine. Now we were ready to attempt stuffing the seemingly endless list of necessities into our new three cu. ft. packs that would become extensions of our backs and possibly our summer homes.

We chatted incessantly on the drive home from Academy Sports comparing lists of necessities. As Jenny read her list, I gave thanks that I wouldn't be burdened with eye shadow of every shade, ten lip liners, and twenty lipsticks. "Do you think you need to take that much makeup?" I asked.

"Mom, we'll be gone for three months, and I don't know what kind of makeup they sell in Italy," came the reply. I reminded myself that Jenny would have to negotiate with the backpack for space, not me. She continued reading her list...six pair undies (that's where she'll negotiate the room I thought). What she calls underwear is a contradiction of the term. I was only taking three pair. Mine weren't thongs! I couldn't afford the space for more. As Jenny continued reading her list, my mind wandered. Visions of my children in awe of my strength and endurance flashed before me.

"Three pair high heels!" she continued.

"What?" I asked. "High heels? Are you nuts? What could you possibly need high heels for? We will be walking with packs on our backs for three months!" I took a deep breath, calmed myself, and remembered I would not be carrying the high heels. Why was I surprised? Why would these three months be any different to Jenny than any other day in her life? This is the girl who began dressing "to the nines" when she was three years old and acquired her first pair of high heels, red ones, size 8, from a garage sale. Over the top is as much a part of Jenny as her red hair, brown eyes, and 5'9" frame. "Mom, we might have the opportunity to go somewhere nice," she answered just as sure of herself as ever." I'm thinking, *What difference does wearing high heels make if you are covered in dirt and sweat with rips in your clothes? Lighten up. What was I concerned about?* I constantly fought the controlling "Terminator" thoughts. Knowing that my thinking had to change if I were to enjoy this summer, at this moment I began thinking of everything as a possible adventure. I imagined the heels poking holes in her backpack and spilling the lip liners. I had never experienced standing in the middle of a busy street in a foreign country retrieving the contents of a backpack, nor had I reached under a train to reclaim underwear, lip liners, tampons, or high heels!! I had worked myself into shallow breathing much like I remembered doing while giving birth! Okay, I assured myself, "you can do this."

The last few days I spent negotiating with my back's new extension...the red and black pack. I sacrificed makeup space and smell-good personal hygiene products to carry security.... my personal version of a medicine cabinet which included vitamins, supplements, herbs, and my inhaler, which I seem to need when I'm under more stress than usual. Hmmmm, maybe you should take an extra one, or two, or three inhalers. "No," I reminded myself. "This is going to be fun, an

adventure, no stress. You are going to be impulsive. Remember you want to risk and experience not being in control.” This is ideal thinking, but is it in the realm of possibility for me, a mother of three, who has always been organized, goal oriented, in control, and security based to just let it all go? YES, YES, YES! IT IS POSSIBLE. I had to pat myself on the back, for a few months ago, my perception of reality would have prevailed... I wouldn't have been able to bring myself back to the positive thoughts.

Surprised at my own thinking, I knew I was ready to go with this young, naïve, carefree thought. The daydreams were changing my thinking. This was a good sign, for to preserve my sanity, it was absolutely necessary I know how to break from reality! I had never experienced the type of education that was facing me for the next three months. The hardest thought for me was in letting go of my own cultural assumptions about how people would respond. I know how people in my hometown would react to seeing a fifty-six-year-old woman with a loaded backpack looking to go home with someone on the street. It isn't a pretty thought! Would the Italians respond the same way? Jenny kept assuring me we would be safe. I'm not sure we both understand the definition of the word safe. Webster's definition is: secure from danger, harm, or evil; free from danger or injury, unhurt; free from risk; affording protection. The word "safe" was taking on a new meaning for me. During the months prior to leaving, I constantly battled thoughts of safety, security, protection. The "mother" in me is not something that turns off, but I can muffle it at times sort of like stuffing the Jack-In-The-Box down under the lid knowing it will pop up again. Deep down in the core of my being a fire was burning. I wanted to have this experience and stretch myself far beyond my comfort zone. It was three days from take-off, and I had a zillion things to do.

Have you ever known a totally selfless person? You know the one who somehow always has time to help even though she has twenty-four hours in her day, too. My friend, Rachel, who is barely five feet tall but can work like a horse all the while maintaining the cheeriest attitude, is one such person. Rachel has a special gift for loving people. I think she gains physical pleasure from others' good fortune. In spite of having a full time job, she has often helped me with my mother when I leave town for a few days at a time. She would also look in on Tobey, my feline companion, and take care of weeding and watering my flowerbeds. I knew I risked putting a strain on our relationship if I asked her to help me for three months. Weeding in the west Texas sun is a challenge, and daily watering is often necessary. Luckily Rachel lives only five blocks from me which makes stopping by convenient. I offered her what I considered a generous payment for three months of weeding, watering, and checking on Tobey. "Don't you worry about a thing," she said waving her hand in a downward stroke, "just go have fun. I'll take care of everything." Once Rachel said she would take care of things, I knew it would be taken care of and better than I could do it myself.

Okay, it was time to get serious with what I could and couldn't live without for the next three months. No amount of negotiating with my backpack allowed the hundred and two items in. I thought about the only other backpacking trip I had made. Years ago while living in Pocatello, Idaho, I took a three-day hike with ten other people. The hike was sponsored by the park and recreation department. I was twenty-eight-years-old at the time, and we were given a list of exactly what we would need for the three-day hike. It was easy. I wish someone would give me a list now. What personal items could I purchase in small town Italy? I began marking items off my list and soon returned them after I realized most of them came from Well Body, my favorite health food store. Yes, I would take the "Stone Free" for kidney stones, cranberry pills for bladder health, oils, herbs, and supplements that could all be life preserving. Maybe I could trade clothes for space. I

began bargaining with my clothes. I ended up settling for one long skirt, one pair of black capris with matching zippered jacket, a black t-shirt, a white t-shirt (a dumb choice), a capri set that was black with a pink stripe down the side, my summer pajamas, three pair underwear, my navy Birkenstock sandals, red Keen sandals, my favorite Sketcher slip-ons, and one pair thongs. Yes, thongs. When I was Jenny's age, we called them thongs since the rubber piece went between our toes. Even today Webster's definition for thong is "a sandal held on the foot by a thong between the toes." I still call them thongs much to Jenny's embarrassment, but heck someone stole this "shoe" term and applied it to underwear forty years after I had been using it in reference to shoes.

Jenny became a bit edgy when she had to face the fact she could not have a hair dryer or curling iron for three months. There are certain things twenty-one-year-old females cannot sacrifice, so we bought a small (5"), foldable, butane curling iron that fit perfectly in her pack. Backpack wrestling continued. I couldn't get my pillow in, and Jenny hadn't negotiated a spot for her high heels. One day from take-off, and Jake had just driven in from Austin with an oversized pack he had borrowed. Jenny tried to talk him into carrying her heels. Anyone with a brother can just imagine what he said, sooo.we made a midnight trip to Wal-mart for some bungee cords to strap the heels on the outside of Jenny's pack. I ended up bungee cording my pillow to the top of my pack. The innocent, red and black pack that hung limply on the wall at Academy Sports now bulged at the seams....so pregnant it kept falling over. There would be no way I could quickly reach anything inside the mathematically stuffed pack. Oops.

Jake was already asleep, so I called good night to Jenny who was introducing the bungee cords to her high heels. Six hours until we had to be at the airport. My body was tired, but my mind was squirming. It appeared I was going along with this hare-brained idea to walk around Italy with a pack so heavy I could not hoist it onto my back by myself. "Mom, you need to be able to handle your own pack," Jenny said. I reminded her she had promised to help me if I needed help. Jenny reminded me of years ago when we'd make our weekly trek to the library, and both she and Jake wanted to bring home fifty or so books. I told them they could each take a backpack and bring home only the books they could carry. Now I was on the receiving end of those words.

