



*Dedicated to the Divine Mother everywhere,  
in all her magical forms*



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# MAMMA MILANO

## LESSONS FROM THE MOTHERLAND

How Italy taught me  
to bask in her beauty,  
slow down, glow up,  
create consciously, flirt  
shamelessly, live joyfully,  
laugh my palazzo pants  
off, and birth a company  
out of her marvelous,  
maximalist, chaotic,  
Big Mamma energy.

J.J. Martin



# THIS IS A DIFFERENT STORY ABOUT ITALY

**Y**ou’ve undoubtedly seen the sensational palazzi and gilded churches, the glittering gowns and piles of pasta with oozing *burrata* produced in this sun-splashed corner of the world (and don’t worry—you’ll find those here, too). But this is really a tale about the spirit of a nation that became my first Spiritual Teacher. You could say it’s about births and rebirths: the transformation of an uptight, compulsive, complaining American (me) into a buoyant, joy-seeking, cheerleader for my adopted homeland. A chiaroscuro of chaos and confusion into sparkling inspiration. A seed of an idea into a flourishing company, La DoubleJ, that wears feathers in her hair and does high kicks for fun.

It’s also a love story—my reluctant seduction by, and surrender to, this beautiful boot of a country and its people. Italy gradually and gently took me in with her Big Mamma energy: fed me, spoiled me, taught me, tickled me, and cracked my armored heart wide open. Like any good teacher, Italy’s boot also kicked me in the ass more times than I care to count, because I was going about things all wrong, like approaching a wolf—Italy’s national spirit animal—with a harness and leash, rather than a glistening piece of tenderloin and a blood-pumping call of the wild.

Along the way, I’ll share the trials and takeaways from this bumpy relationship—reinventing a home, a career (twice!) and a marriage; building a network of friends and family and creating a company from nothing; easing my iron grip and giving myself over to Italy’s comical levels of illogic, fogginess, and disorder; opening my heart, re-wiring my head, and activating my senses until out swirled an irrepressible creative force. Plus, there’ll be lessons I’ve absorbed over twenty years of living among the tenderhearted, carefree, beauty- and quality-obsessed Italians—

about the vibration-raising daily practice of joy and generosity, patience and playfulness, creativity and serendipity. And, above all, about trusting that some unseen universal force always puts you *exactly* in the place that you need to be.

The name of this cosmic force, this divine teacher? I call her Mamma Milano.

## MY LIFE IN ITALY DID NOT START SMOOTHLY OR GRACEFULLY.

When I landed in Milan in August 2001—having dropped my entire life in New York to follow my Italian boyfriend, Andrea, to his motherland—I stepped out into a pizza oven. The heat was causing the street signs to wobble and shimmer. My heels sank into the pavement with every step I took; yes, the Milanese sidewalks were literally melting. Not a single restaurant was open. The fruit vendors had shuttered their *tapparelle* and hightailed it to the beach. Every Italian, from the freshly pressed little old ladies at the bus stops to the tuxedo-suited waiters at the cafés, was doing what they do best: vacationing.

When the Milanese locals finally returned from their nationally sanctioned month of snoozing and sunbathing, they waltzed back into town rested, refreshed, and carefree. I, meanwhile, was having my own kind of meltdown. Besides Andrea, I didn’t know a soul. I didn’t speak the language, couldn’t get a job, and was unable even to feed myself (I didn’t cook, and delivery service was non-existent at the time). There was no AC in our house, or anywhere for that matter, as the Italians feared it would make them sick within seconds of it being turned on. WiFi? Not really.

You could find an ATM, but it was never working, so I’d wind up standing in line at the bank for hours. There was no coffee to-go. No salad bars. I couldn’t jog without tripping on a wayward cobblestone or getting stared down for exercising in public. When I finally found a gym, it was basically a tiny, down-at-the-heels disco with ’80s music and equally dated fitness trends.

So, I did what we Americans do best: I got busy. I pushed my misery down into my belly and slogged through six hours of Italian lessons a day, until I could sputter out cogent-enough phrases to keep me from getting drunk and face-planting into my plate of *penne* during four-hour, all-in-Italian dinners with Andrea’s friends and family.

I felt like I’d tumbled down a steep flight of stairs from my old life in New York. I’d just left high-stakes, high-shakes, high-heeled Manhattan where I was marketing director at

boutique ad agencies in San Francisco and New York, then two years inside Calvin, toiling for a conglomerate that was the pinnacle of cool, but which felt like a cavernously empty hall of justice for fashion. Everyone and everything was done up in minimalist black and white, down to the Post-its, while I would show up in a car crash of bright vintage prints victoriously plundered from the Chelsea Flea Market. (It wasn’t just that I loved color—the flea market had the best prices in town.) But I was burned out and sucked dry, living in my bite-sized New York apartment and getting up at 6:00 a.m. to jog an hour on the icy streets next to a frozen river just to empty my emotional garbage bag. I was caught in a storm of pure doing, in a city that prizes those who do the most.

I met my Italian guy, a management consultant in black leather pants (I kid you not), at a party downtown. Andrea and I began a long-distance relationship—helped by my

# “OH MY GOD, YOU’RE LIVING MY DREAM!”

Calvin Klein. (It was A.C.B.—After Carolyn Bessette—but Calvin Klein still showed up from time to time for the five or so people he would deign to see. Which was not me.) It was the kind of job I’d been clamoring my way towards my whole life, having grown up wearing the hand-me-down denim (and the alarmingly similar bowl cuts) of my two older brothers in an athletic, outdoorsy family from LA’s Pacific Palisades—with parents for whom vacation was never about visiting European art museums, but driving across the border to Mexicali to hunt and camp in an ammo-filled Chevy Suburban. My childhood trained me to keep up: to be just as strong, just as fast, just as loud, and just as unflappable as anyone. We were a family of exceptional doers in a country that excels in doing.

I graduated from UC Berkeley and spent four years karate-chopping through the creative wonder-hubs of start-up

frequent work trips to Europe. After ten months of this, I decided to quit my job, offload my apartment, and follow him to Milan—a city that, in the years since its dominance in the 1980s, was now sneered at by fashion editors for its not-hotness. I had nothing lined up. But my body was eerily relaxed, and in that peaceful silence, my gut said yes. So I jumped.

“Oh my god, you’re living my dream!” shrieked every American woman I knew.

## BUT WHAT KIND OF DREAM WAS THIS?

Andrea was acting more American than I was, working maniacally at his consulting firm, pleased enough with a giant wedge of *parmigiano* in the fridge for our 10:00 p.m.



dinner. The Italians had never even *heard* of marketing, so my job leads went nowhere... and besides, Italians only like to hire people they already know. To get me out of the house, Andrea helped find a part-time job working for his friends, Carlo and Ennio Capasa, at the fashion house Costume National. I am sure they hired me out of pity. Each morning I watched everyone saunter into the office, usually after 10:00 a.m., dressed like gothic pirates in a miasma of cigarette smoke—the men sporting full medieval beards a decade before it was a thing in Brooklyn, the women in black capes with asymmetrical hems. I'd never seen a workplace like it.

One day, I got a foot in another door—more like jammed it in, American-style. I was invited to designer Stephen Fairchild's fashion presentation at Milan's Hotel Diana. At the bar I met Godfrey Deeny, the salty Irish editor of *Fashion Wire Daily*. He was the former bureau chief of *WWD* Paris and was now helming the world's first online fashion news service. But the Italians could not have cared less—most barely even had the internet. He hired me with zero journalism experience and threw me into the Neil Barrett show, after which I spent six hours anxiously wringing out my first five-hundred-word review. I passed the test.

It then became my daily job to write about everything under the Milanese sun: Moschino's show, Gucci's new store opening, Prada's financial results, and who got fired from Bally. I was delivering seven pieces of five-hundred-word news every day during Milan's four annual fashion weeks, and yet I existed at the bottom of the slimy barrel, standing in the twenty-fifth row behind someone's grandmother at the Dolce & Gabbana show. Over two years, I cranked out four hundred reviews and articles, shamelessly asking Posh Spice about what she ate for breakfast or interviewing Alberta Ferretti backstage about her show inspiration, typing it all out on my Sony Vaio from the backseat of a taxi before running into a hotel to hook up to their dial-up modem. My office was a table at Pasticceria Cucchi on Corso Genova. The genteel owner behind the cash register eyed me and my computer with deep suspicion and considerable pity.

PR agents never rolled out the red carpet for me in those early years in Milan. And no one, as far as I could tell, read a word I wrote. I felt invisible, lame, thoroughly irritated. But, as fashion fate would have it, there was one person who was watching and reading. And that was *International Herald Tribune* fashion editor Suzy Menkes, who liked my scoops and asked me to write for her.

It was a miraculous golden lifeline.

Suddenly, I was yanked up from the bottom to one of the industry's most esteemed positions. The Italians worshipped Suzy and adored the *Tribune*. My byline there led to Kristina O'Neill and Amanda Ross from *Harper's Bazaar* USA discovering me one day during fashion week in the corner of the Four Seasons Hotel, hooked up to an outlet and furiously filing copy. The next month, they hired me to join their team, led by Glenda Bailey, as *Bazaar's* editor in Italy.

During my first years clawing at the well-shod feet of the Italian fashion scene, I still found myself scoffing at the old-fashioned ways of my adopted country. I wanted to boss the Italians around, improve them, modernize them, speed them up, and tone their soft, ab-less stomachs. I was determined to wake them up, make them more efficient. Make them *better*. When I would bump up against the oddball hours of small shops that were never open at the moment I wanted to go, I stomped my feet and snorted.

Back then, I was always at the bank. Italians were forever patiently spending an hour in line to do very simple things, like deposit a check, that Americans did in fifteen seconds at their outdoor ATMs that always worked. No one seemed to have a problem with this epic waste of time, except me. One day, just as I got up to the friendly faced yet totally time-challenged bank teller who I'd been mentally mind-bombing, I was ready to shoot off some American-style self-righteousness about his poor line management. The sweet man saw me and my scarlet face about to burst... and handed me a crumpled brown paper bag of ripe *fagiolini*. Green beans. "They're fresh from my garden this morning!" he declared proudly.

The twinkle in his eye shot through my skin and penetrated the shellacked shell armoring my heart. Those home-grown green beans planted a powerful seed, the first of many that Italy would bury in me. In that very moment, I did something Americans hardly ever do: *I surrendered*.

# ITALY, YOU WIN!





MY SURRENDER wasn't just a thought.

It was a deeper knowing, a flash of insight that I felt inside my millions of tiny molecules. This country—its customs, its backwards everything, its long lines, its slow rhythms, and its constantly-on-a-lunch-break store owners—was all just exactly as it should be. I couldn't change it. In that moment of understanding that everything was very right that I had thought was so wrong, I caved to the power of this great country.

I finally began to see her for the queen she actually is and the wise mother who was giving me exactly what I needed.

The student was ready. Mamma Milano—muse and messenger from the motherland—had arrived.



MAMMA MILANO SOFTENED ME AND SOFTENED MY HEART.

Her lessons came gently, without the drill-sergeanting or rah-rah majorette-ing we Americans expect, or even crave, from a spiritual makeover. I began to see things I'd never noticed. I fell in love deep and hard with Italy's beauty and serendipity, her magnificent traditions of artisanal creativity, her cool, dark churches with candlelit Tintoretto's, and her sun-drenched pebbly beaches where the roly-poly *nonne* and tanned children spend all day picnicking under candy-striped umbrellas. She trained me to slow down and admire the *fruttivendolo's* glistening produce, to flirt back with policemen in their cornflower-blue uniforms

and auto-mechanics wielding their wrenches like Michelangelo with his chisel, and to be dazzled by the kaleidoscopic mosaic floors and soaring ceilings of the city's entryways.

Mamma Milano showed me how to stop fighting with the general order of things, and instead tap into the ambient joy, ease, and creative spirit that she doles out in gorgeous golden waves.

It was this nurturing environment that provided the safe, warm womb for my own creativity to take root and grow—birthing a vibrant journalism career, and then a bouncing, beautiful baby called La DoubleJ.

La DoubleJ was conceived not from any left-brained logic or business plan, but out of pure joy. She started in 2015 as an online magazine selling vintage fashion and jewelry, and she beguiled from the start. She has blossomed into an amazing team of seventy full-timers and twenty freelancers, creating maximalist fashion and homeware collections inspired by Italy's vibrant colors and artisanal traditions. Everything we do is 100 percent made in Italy. We've achieved this by creating a wide collaborative universe, shining a light on the work of decades-old fabric producers and heritage artisans, from the Mantero silk archives founded in Lake Como in 1829 to Salviati, our glassware manufacturer that has been blowing glass in Murano since 1859.

My creative muses for this project have been the Italians themselves: from the architects, interior designers, stylists, and photographers I was lucky enough to meet, to Milan's *sciure* (stylish "housewives"), and everyone who took me by the arm and showed me how it's done. I have been a grateful guest, a lucky visitor, and a faithful student in Italy's majestic homes, artistic ateliers, sacred spaces, and light-filled landscapes, drinking in its slow rhythms and time-honored customs—not to mention its epic food secrets.

La DoubleJ became the canvas for all of this learning. She was, and still is, my energy baby. She is so sensitive that whenever I misbehave and act too American—too bossy, too controlling, or too judgmental of people or situations—she swirls back and slaps me in the face: someone will quit, a project will fall apart, a gray cloud will turn into a supersize, gravity-sucking black hole. The truth is, I lose control when I try to control. I swear that my company is a sentient being, not a business enterprise. She has feelings. She loves creativity. She loves laughter.

She loves collaboration. She loves the unexpected. She performs only when the conditions are right. In that way, she's just like Italy and Mamma Milano. Later in my spiritual practice (honed by a small army of healers, teachers, shamans, and psychics), I learned that not only do people, spaces, words, and actions carry energies, but countries do, too.

Italy is a very feminine-energy country, while America's can-do spirit is resoundingly masculine. Italians are beautifully and naturally attuned to the state of just *being*; their homeland is very maternal. You might even say that Italy is the Divine Mother—she is receptive and accepting, soft and lovely. What Italy first taught me was then mirrored back and confirmed by my energy practice: you have to respect the Mother. You have to go with the flow and accept the dark chaos that may come with her, as I did in trying to establish a life, and a business, in Italy. But feminine energy is also the deepest dark, the most fertile ground for sowing the fecund jungle of your life, your soul, your dreams.

When I stopped blaming and fighting with Italy, Italy stopped fighting with me. When I did less, I got more.

Now, of course, Italy has take-out food, high-speed internet, ATMs, decent yoga studios, and a city full of young creative people in Milan. You might think I just got lucky in terms of timing. But I know I got everything I ever wanted merely by stopping my insistence on having it.

How does that work? You let go. You stop trying to control. You listen. You wait. You let Mamma Milano—or your own Divine Mother with her unique, wild wisdom—slowly take you by the hand and lead you. *Dai, andiamo!*

With love,  
J.J.

A BILLION REASONS TO LOVE THIS BRILLIANT COUNTRY:

VINTAGE FIAT CINQUECENTOS  
TINY ARTISANS WITH MASSIVE TALENT  
**THE MEN**  
THE APERITIVO SNACKS  
THE CREATIVE CRAFTMANSHIP  
THE APEROL SPRITZES  
EVERYONE THRIVES ON CHAOS  
THE HAND GESTURES  
MONEY COUNTS LESS THAN RELATIONSHIPS  
THE MOTTO: PIANO, PIANO  
GRANDPAS WHO STILL FLIRT  
LE NONNE WHO ALWAYS SAY EAT, EAT, EAT!  
MORE IS ALWAYS MERRIER  
CHILDREN ARE THE BOSS  
RELAXING IS A NATIONAL BIRTHRIGHT  
NO ONE WEARS SWEATPANTS OUT OF THE HOUSE  
THE MOZZARELLA  
THE WAITERS ACTUALLY CARE IF YOU ENJOY YOUR MEAL  
ROOFLESS CAPRI TAXIS  
EMERGENCIES BRING OUT THE CREATIVE BEST IN EVERYONE  
EVEN STRAIGHT MEN KNOW ABOUT GOOD FASHION  
IT'S ALWAYS IL COLPO D'ARIA'S FAULT  
TOMATOES THAT TASTE LIKE SUGAR  
MEN WHO RIDE BICYCLES IN BRIONI SUITS  
**LE SCIURE**  
THE SEA COLOR IN PANTELLERIA  
THE SALONE DEL MOBILE TURNS MILAN INTO AN EPIC PARTY  
HOTEL IL PELLICANO  
BAROQUE SICILIAN CHURCHES  
EVERYONE MAKES OLIVE OIL OR KNOWS SOMEONE WHO DOES  
NO ONE IS PISSED OFF FOREVER  
THE MONTH OF AUGUST IT ALL TURNS OFF

ITALY, TI AMIAMO TANTO & SEMPRE!



LESSON



# CHE CASINO!

You'll need a huge, tender heart to laugh at life and thrive amidst the chaos

Have you ever driven on an Italian autostrada? Apart from the Autogrill—the freeway fast-food chain that sells finely aged *parmigiano*, glistening legs of salt-cured *prosciutto*, and bottles of red wine—there is absolutely nothing functional about it. It's a miracle if you can even get on the right one; the signs give you towns accompanied by two arrows pointing in completely opposite directions. Bologna to the right. Or to the left. The choice is yours. Once you're on the roaring road where speeding cars come up behind you like schoolyard bullies, just try to get off it again. The exit sign flashes a totem pole of fourteen different towns whose names are impossible to read at 120 km per hour.

It is no better when an Italian gives you verbal directions on how to get to their home. "Go towards the water and after a few hundred meters, turn right at the big tree," is as precise a route as you can hope to receive. Everything in Italy is approximate, indefinite, subjective. Consequently, Italians allow for error—within themselves and others. They won't blast you on the facts, act as sticklers for rules, nor insist that their way is the right way.

Efficiency—more action, bigger and better results in less time—may be paramount in America, but it is not so

prized in Italy. The journey—no matter where it goes and how long it takes you—is much more important than the arrival. Italians, therefore, are both zealously impassioned and rigorously laid-back. They are creatively heroic yet organizationally doomed.

When I arrived in 2001, I was bound by an alternative universe known as LET'S GET IT DONE. Mamma Milano's ancient buildings, ornate interiors, and soaring churches may have tried to bewitch me, but I spent my first years in Milan ruminating on why the bank lines were endless, train schedules ignored, and stores closed. Why couldn't I find good avocados, a great mani-pedi, cilantro, or a single coffee in a large to-go cup? Where the fuck to buy a hairdryer? A warrior at heart, I was first in line to combat all of Italy's inefficiencies, galloping ahead and swinging a two-ton sword. This made me even angrier, not to mention anxious, scared, and emotionally lost, while I circled around myself as if on an endless autostrada, never reaching my destination.

It soon became blindingly clear that Italy and its people possessed everything that I did not: incredible patience, boundless forgiveness, and supreme flexibility. Once I stopped criticizing the Italians, I started marveling at them.

◊◊ PHRASEBOOK ◊◊

## CASINO: A GAMING HOUSE, BORDELLO

*Slang for: a big, fat mess*

*Thriving in Italy requires a certain amount of surrender to the madness, letting go and trusting that all will be well, with lots of laughter, a loosened belly, and the willingness to play with life like the unpredictable, crazy, wonderful woman that she is. I was to learn that this buoyancy and heart-flexibility are attributes of the Divine Feminine. They are ways to survive and manage instability.*

*The Buddhists have a saying, "the obstacle is the path." It means that the problems you face are the solution you're looking for. The hardship is heaven-sent to teach you exactly what you need to know. Every single obstacle in your life, every pain-in-the-neck person, challenging moment, failure, disconnection, miscommunication, or stumbling block is just where you need to be. The casino is not to be avoided or mocked—it's what you need to learn. Once you accept that this huge boulder or twisted mess can be of help to you, everything changes.*





## LESSON



## KEEPING MY COOL ON TRENITALIA

One day many summers ago, I boarded a train in sweltering mid-July heat to go to Portofino on the Ligurian coast, only to discover that, for the fifth weekend in a row, the air conditioning was broken onboard.

I exploded with a sense of civic duty. “This is NOT a third-world country!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, hoping to start a mini-revolution, or at least snap my Italian seatmates out of their sweaty complacency. “We paid 200 euro in first class for this miserable trip! I will not be treated like cattle! This is unacceptable. Let’s go find the captain and demand our money back!” The Italians looked at me, the unhinged American, with a mixture of bemusement and pity. There was no judgment at all.

Of course, my hollering got me nowhere. Not on that day when I could not galvanize a revolt onboard Trenitalia, nor any day thereafter. My complaining only served to alienate me from my host country, from its sweet-tempered citizens, and most of all from myself. It had wrapped me in a hot, scratchy, wool blanket of negativity, where I twitched and itched for years.

I watched my fellow passengers accept the unfortunate situation with grace. They embraced it as they would a wailing child: “There’s nothing to be done,” whispered the spirit of Mamma Milano in my ear. So, I focused on the one single mantra that truly mattered at that moment: “Thank God for Portofino.” Beauty and tranquility are never far off.

*“There’s nothing to be done,”  
whispered the spirit of  
Mamma Milano in my ear*



WHAT TRAIN SCHEDULE? IT'S ITALY!  
THERE'S ALWAYS TIME FOR A COFFEE



NO WORRY IF YOU'RE RUNNING LATE FOR YOUR  
TRAIN—A FRISKY ITALIAN WILL HELP YOU OUT!





# YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE HEARTLAND

**As a newcomer in Milan, I needed to learn how to relax. I also needed to learn flexibility, patience, and presence, and the ability to laugh off frustration and shake off anger. These are Italian superpowers that come from inflating the heart and using it as a life raft to bounce along life's chaotic waters. Here are the lessons that helped me...**

## LESSON 14 GO WITH THE (ILLOGICAL) FLOW

Transportation of every kind truly is a metaphor for Italy's disorder and illogic. In Milan's city center, cars swim like fish across the roads. During fashion week, our *Bazaar* fashion team had a driver from Naples who we nicknamed "Foxy." He wore a winter overcoat with a huge fox collar. If we were late to an Armani or Ferragamo show, he would ignore the rules and confidently drive down the streets backwards.

In Milan, you will often find cars double-parked, with their hazard lights flashing, as if to say, *Hey, I'll be back in five minutes—I'm just getting a gelato with my kid.*

The Italians ski in the same way that they drive or park. There are no organized lines in front of the lifts; everyone just packs into the funnel like happy cattle. That's what happens in disorder: a lot of socializing and kindness. Smiles not shouts. If I walk inadvertently in a bike lane, I hear someone's charming, twinkly bike bell behind me rather than an avalanche of cursing, as in America.

There are many routes to get to where you want to go, but some are slower than others. Eventually, you will get there. This looseness permeates all aspects of Italian life, not just their freeways and their sense of direction. An inner softening makes the journey much easier.



## LESSON 15 SPONTANEITY IS THE SPECIAL SAUCE OF LIFE

Italians hate planning. If you invite them to a dinner three weeks ahead, they'll look puzzled and say, "I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'll be in three weeks."

What they don't say is that they have no idea how they will *feel* in three weeks. They love an unexpected invitation a couple of days prior to any event. They know how they're feeling and if they're up for it. This doesn't stress them out; it excites them. *Look what life has magically delivered!* Even exotic vacations are planned within days or hours of departure. (I was still getting RSVPs to my wedding a week before—which was fine, since the Italian wedding planner understood that no one could possibly know how they would be feeling before that.)

I've now sided with the Italians. Too much planning can stifle the magic of a moment; you miss the mysterious sauce of life that wants to swirl around you and carry you off to unexpected happiness—if you are open to it.



## LESSON 16 RELAX—IT'S NO BIG DEAL!

When I first arrived and was mangling the language at every turn, I was never met with the judgment I got in France during my university study year abroad. Instead, I was offered enthusiasm for even trying to speak the language: "*Piano, piano,*" they would tell me whenever I slapped my own wrist for not being better. Slowly, slowly. Take it easy. There's no rush.

Italian tenderness is so beautiful it breaks my heart. (This patience is also the underlying principle for any deep, mysterious spiritual practice to flow forth. The Italians just happen to do it naturally.) Just like a blindly loving mother, Italians are tolerant of children running wild at dinner parties, restaurants, and hotel lobbies, causing a *casino*

wherever they go. They are truly loved, indulged, and given free rein to play.

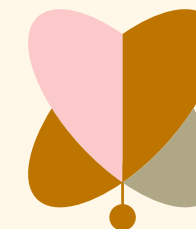
Italians are also very indulgent of animals. Your dog can go anywhere with you, except for a museum or a large supermarket. My dog Pepper is welcome at the dentist and the accountant, virtually every restaurant, and even at the Prada boutique, where she is fed a bone and given her own bowl of water. Animals make Italians happy, and whatever makes this nation happy becomes a prize to covet and coddle.

For such a Catholic country—more than three quarters of citizens identify that way—the majority of Italians don't moralize or get on their high horse about right and wrong. They never verbally massacre each other over politics, abortion, or vaccines. America had some pretty charged political moments after 9/11 and through the Trump presidency, and I never once heard an Italian berate me about it. They looked genuinely perplexed and then wanted to have a friendly debate.

This mood of tolerance is everywhere. After all, half of Italy's couples pop out kids without being married, grandmas sit back on Sundays taking in the view of the topless women on the beach, and children and pregnant women are regularly offered wine with dinner.

I once admitted to an Italian doctor that I smoked. "How much per day?" he asked. "Three a day," I replied, embarrassed and ready for a big fat moralistic slap on the face. "Packs?" he asked, not lifting his eyes from his paper. "Uh, no. Individual cigarettes." "Oh, come on," he said, putting the cap back on his pen and waving his arm in the air. "That's no big deal. Don't worry about it."

Italians are big on personal freedom. What you do (within reasonable limits) is your choice. They don't have a sense of retribution and punishment or try to put you in your place. Italians are easy on others, and most of all, they are easy on themselves. This allows the heart to stay open so that everyone can sit down to properly enjoy a plate of pasta together.





◊◊◊ PHRASEBOOK ◊◊◊

**PIANO, PIANO: SLOWLY, GENTLY, CAREFULLY, GRADUALLY, LEISURELY**

*In other words: chill the \*F\* out*

*Italians are not critical of slow-moving enterprises or efforts. This means they are often late for appointments or dinner—it's all good. Also, it's no big deal if you're an occasional slacker, if you don't exercise, or if you stop working because it interferes with your well-being. They are preternaturally at peace with themselves and others.*

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**NON SI PUÒ: IT IS NOT DONE**

*Accompanied with wagging index finger and a tongue cluck from a pouty mouth*

*Although extraordinarily liberal most of the time, Italians are ridiculously rigid when it comes to form and style. There are some no-nos that I tripped over. When swimming: never sit around in a wet swimsuit, or you'll get stomach pain. And don't swim after lunch. When eating: never sprinkle parmesan on a seafood pasta or put different foods on the same plate. And never, ever walk around barefoot (never, ever). Of course, I still do most of these.*

LESSON 17

**EMOTE ENDLESSLY**

The Italian talent for argument is a built-in trait, a national source of pride. If the conversation doesn't get heated over dinner, it's the fallen soufflé of all evenings: a total downer. Mad hysteria and red-faced screaming are effortlessly followed by a calm double-kiss and a civilized sit-down lunch, where talk turns to the vintage of the wine, the

richness of the broth, the vision of this weekend's sapphire water bath in Capri. Everything is fine.

The first time I witnessed this, I was working at Costume National. The CEO, Carlo Capasa, started shouting at the sky, unleashing a torrent of feelings about a business deal all over the conference room table. I was shaking in my shoes. I thought we were going to get fired. I was also a bit offended. But as soon as his eruption ended, he shook off the lava rocks, smiled, and said, "Let's go get lunch,

guys!" in a genuinely friendly tone. We all walked out of the office and sat down to a two-course meal without a trace of negativity soiling the starched white tablecloths.

The fire of the Italian heart is strong and free, bubbling up in equal measures from excitement, sadness, joy, or rage, and everything is allowed. They wear their big noisy emotions on their beautiful silk sleeves. Grown, heterosexual men hug closely and kiss each other warmly on the cheeks. They cry during soccer matches. Romantic love is screamed from the roofs and written in graffiti. Couples of all ages unself-consciously make out in public. Grandmothers nod in approval when they see love in action, and open their soft arms when anyone is upset or in pain.

I've seen people scream on the street, in restaurants, and in offices. It's totally normal. What's not normal is holding a grudge about it.

Italians are fantastic at this heart elasticity. I began to wonder why I couldn't express the same degree of feeling—or come down from it quickly. I was judging myself for even *having* the emotion. If you do it like an Italian, you just let the feeling spew forth like a geyser, without any judgment or self-awareness. This was a huge lesson in letting emotions burst and glide, rather than clamp or cling. Imagine if the whole world recuperated and reconciled this fast, too?

LESSON 18

**...AND LAUGH ABOUT IT**

Laughter is the sound of the heart. The Italians, you won't be surprised to learn, laugh frequently. When the metro breaks down, when they get utterly lost, when their kid knocks over the waiter's tray, they don't turn to stone or lash out. They let laughter pour out of their bellies, turning life's tragedies into comedies.

LESSON 19

**PLAY YOUR PANTS OFF**

For many years, I spent the weekends in my husband's hometown of Pesaro. Here, the Italians spend their summer in the knee-deep, bathtub-warm sea, chat under the sun, and watch their nutmeg-skinned babies splashing around. Teenagers, meanwhile, spend three months as a pile of writhing limbs under striped umbrellas.

"Why don't Italian teenagers have summer jobs?!" I asked my friend Massimo Giorgetti, founder of the MSGM fashion label. He laughed. "While you Americans were out running after your first internship at age sixteen, we just played all day." I pondered this. Massimo did not wind up a slacker. He is one of the hardest-working people I know.

The benefits of play are foreign to Americans, who firmly believe in "no pain no gain." The Italians place much more importance on enjoying life than on parlaying it into a fortune or a corner-office career. Play is a relaxant, a lubricant, and puts you in a receptive state that says to the universe, "I want to flow with life and enjoy it."

Once you splash in those juicy waters long enough, it will flood out and begin to soften your interactions, your work, and virtually every aspect of your life.





INTERMEZZO

## MY FIRST SPIRIT ANIMAL, LA FIAT 500

The first time I laid eyes on a vintage Fiat 500 in 2001, I was visiting Milan and I started laughing. Out loud. By myself. It is a clown car—about the size of an American family pet—and yet, its perfect miniature proportions deeply and perfectly groove into my own DNA strands.

I talked about this car so much that Andrea finally gifted me a 1972 model from Torino for my thirtieth birthday. The mechanic drove it at 45 mph (its maximum speed) on the autostrada, and we did an exchange of keys for money on the side of the highway.

Fiat introduced the Cinquecento in 1957. It immediately became a commercial hit and national source of pride. It was small, simple, speedy, and affordable—a symbol of Italy's new obsession with efficient, post-war modernity. It was perfect if you were 5' 3" and lived in the 1950s. I was 5' 10" and could barely fold my legs into the front seat when wearing high heels. On the other hand, it was only nine feet long and could be parked almost anywhere in Milan, including sidewalks or spaces designated for mopeds.

My car has three buttons (two of which are the headlights), no heater, no AC, no defroster, no radio and is always breaking down. But it is also a joy jumpstart for anyone

who inhabits her energy field. Five-year-old children on the streets stop, point, and squeal in delight when they see me in it. Old men wave in happy recognition. Middle-aged Italians stop me and regale me with their first memories of driving in a Cinquecento and how many of their siblings used to get stuffed into the backseat, as if we are long-lost friends. Even policemen and traffic officers are bewitched by the car and let my frequent traffic violations slide.

It's funny that something so bumpy—it has zero shocks to absorb Milan's cobblestone streets, so my daily ride feels like a horse's early morning trot—has smoothed my way so significantly throughout Italy. I make friends wherever I go when I drive her. She screams, *I'm here to deal out happiness, ragazzi!* And she breaks down exactly when I do.

I have gotten countless energetic and spiritual downloads while bouncing slowly on her tiny wheels, which I transcribe into my iPhone while I'm driving.

This car was the first non-human object I ever had a psychic experience with. She is a vehicle of higher intelligence and a vessel for joy and ease. I realized later that Mamma Milano gifted me my very first spirit animal in the form of a vintage Italian automobile.





LESSON



# THE DOLCE ART OF DOING ABSOLUTELY *NIENTE*

Slow down and open your pleasure pores

*D*olce far niente—the sweetness of doing nothing—should be Italy’s national motto. When an Italian goes on vacation, whether it’s a weekend trip or a four-week sponsored August break, they almost never go with a list of goals or a schedule. They arrive with the desire to melt into their sunbeds, entirely surrendering to their surroundings.

I’ve noticed that Americans are not nearly as good at vacations as the Italians. This is because they very seldom do what an Italian does... which is absolutely nothing. Rest is hard for us go-getters. We feel guilty, weak, lazy, or lost when we allow ourselves to chill.

But in Italy, I grasped that stillness is not the same as nothingness—it is rich with potential. Pausing from the busyness allows your being to process, recharge, and prepare for its magnificent future creations. To rest is to exist in the present, and it prepares a refreshed, fertile space in which more magic can unfold.

Americans now practice stillness on a meditation pillow, something the Italians do naturally without any guru, app, or yoga mat. They are unaware that in doing so, they are receiving the divine feminine—embracing the slowness, the stillness, and the wonderful powerful human energetic state of simply being.







## LESSON

21

# SINKING INTO THE PLEASURES OF PESARO

**M**y first teacher in the art of not doing much was Pesaro, a small town on the Adriatic coast where my husband's family lived. Like all good teachers, she showed me exactly what I needed to learn.

The first lesson was on looks. While almost everything in Italy is knee-crumplingly gorgeous, Pesaro is an ugly duckling. The sea is flat, low, and murky instead of clear emerald; the coastline was built up quickly and cheaply in the 1960s with a lot of badly designed hotels. Snobby Italians from more sophisticated areas look down their noses at the *popolo della provincia*—the masses of regular people (babies in diapers, women with huge bellies in giant bikinis, families unwrapping their homemade *panini*) who colonize a maze of sunbeds. The brightly striped beach umbrellas are charming, but Pesaro is definitely not posh Portofino or glittering Forte dei Marmi.

Pesaro is, nonetheless, packed in peak season. Everyone cycles—from the old ladies in their square cotton house-dresses to lanky five-year-olds in their bathing suits and plastic shoes. They are not on bicycles to exercise; they go about three miles per hour max, and no one wears a helmet.

I used to mock them; then I got myself a bicycle and began my own leisurely bike wanderings. I discovered scores of elegant, pastel-painted seaside villas built in the 1910s, tucked away on leafy streets or next to a bad disco-blaring bar, including

Villa Ruggeri, a Liberty-era jewel covered in delicious lacy meringue plasterwork.

It was as if the town was purposefully hiding its magnetic treasures. The food was like that, too. There were very few attractive restaurants, but the meals were sensational. Families would come up from the shore with sandy legs and sit at plastic seaside tables to be served massive *risotto di mare* platters for 9 euro, or heaping plates of homemade tomato-sauced meat *tortellini*, or huge bowls of steaming mussels. Emerald-green mint ices sat next to watermelon slices the size of handbags. These little pop-up restaurants were more like shacks. At the back they would pitch a homemade tent where tubs of food were laid out.

The pace in Pesaro is honey-drip. No one is in a hurry, even during the work week: the cruising is leisurely, the roads are 100 percent flat. The biggest weekly drama in Pesaro is when a toddler loses their parent at the beach. A message is broadcast over a loudspeaker: "We've found a little boy in a red swimsuit in Bagni Wanda! Come over and get him!"

Deeper lessons in Pesaro occurred back in the household. For over fifteen years, my in-laws waited on my husband and me like indentured servants. His father would huff and puff his way up the stairs with our bags, while his mother would lock herself in the kitchen at 7:00 a.m. to handmade the *tagliatelle*, the *piadine*, and the rest of the day's provisions. We were not allowed to help. We were not supposed to clean up. We couldn't even make the beds. I grew up with lists of chores left in my bathroom every Saturday morning that had to be completely done before leaving the house: I sometimes felt like a ward in my parents' home, but I definitely had a role. I was doing rather than receiving.

I really had no idea how to connect with pure Italian givers. What to do when your only role is to watch other people do very simple things, such as a whole morning spent rolling out the pasta or an hour walking to the market?

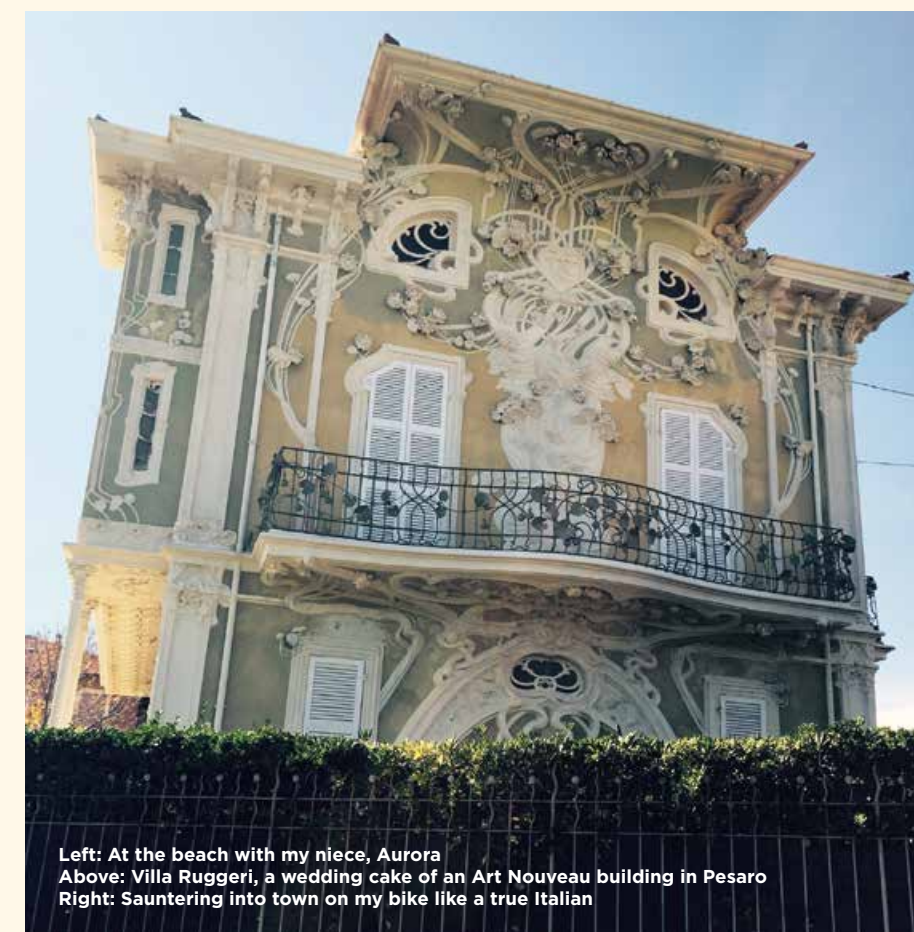
Then, one day, I decided to just submit completely to the pampering. On arrival, I assumed a horizontal position on my in-laws' fifty-year-old leather couch, burying myself in a magazine until lunch was on the table and I could begin my single required duty as a daughter-in-law: joyfully eating. This, at last, gave my mother-in-law the acknowledgement and receipt of her gifts that she wanted.

Around the time I finally began to relax in and surrender to Pesaro, the town's first chic seaside hotel, the Excelsior, suddenly opened, changing my entire experience there. I also discovered the town's only (and fabulous) vintage

furniture store, Zucca, befriending the owners and spending every weekend visiting them as I did most of my vintage contacts. And I got to know the owners of Ratti, a hundred-year-old boutique and one of Italy's best multi brands. (Yes, in the middle of nowhere in Italy, you will find a four-story emporium of chic that has one of the best selections of luxury designers in the world!)

Several years later, Silvana Ratti and her daughter Mathilde came to Milan to buy La DoubleJ for their shop, and a few years after that, DoubleJ had its own pop-up under the frescoed ceilings of their *piano-nobile* top floor.

I went from knowing no one in Pesaro to being featured in, and friends with, the best shop in the Le Marche region. I went from disliking Pesaro to craving the sweet, soft normalcy and gentle arms it held me in.



Left: At the beach with my niece, Aurora  
Above: Villa Ruggeri, a wedding cake of an Art Nouveau building in Pesaro  
Right: Sauntering into town on my bike like a true Italian







MAMMA MILANO

# SLOWING IT WAY DOWN

Learn the Italian art of doing a whole lot of absolutely nothing



LESSON 22

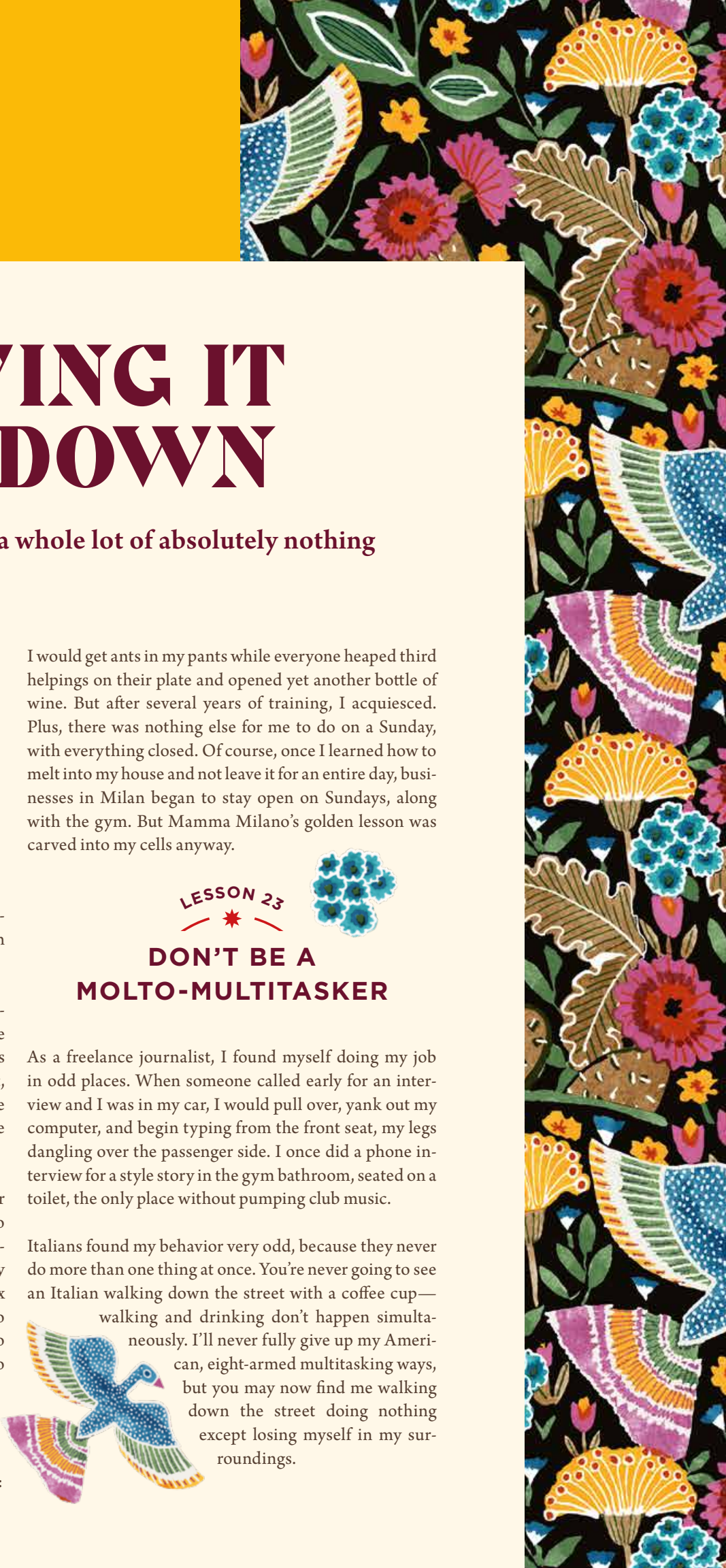
## SEE WHERE STILLNESS LEADS

Italy taught me the flip side of my nostril-flaring Californian impatience: how to slow down and enjoy—even *melt into*—the moment, the splendor of experience.

If a waiter is slow, you have time to look around the restaurant and notice its beautiful woodwork and vintage glass chandeliers. When you discover a certain shop is closed again and you can't chop through your to-do list, you may find you're standing next to a church you've never seen before, that's hiding astonishing Renaissance masterpieces flickering in honeyed candlelight.

Or you can just take a nap—like my dog does. Pepper is thoroughly Italian. Food and play are fundamental to her. When either of these are unavailable, she just collapses on the ground with a giant sigh and falls deeply asleep. As an American, I hadn't napped since I was six years old. Then somewhere along the line, I learned to relish a long, delicious afternoon snooze and began to hear my body speaking to me in the silence. I just had to slow down enough to listen to it.

Part of learning to slow down was being able to sit for three hours at a lunch table on a Sunday, when I was invited to a family meal. At first, I found this torturous:



I would get ants in my pants while everyone heaped third helpings on their plate and opened yet another bottle of wine. But after several years of training, I acquiesced. Plus, there was nothing else for me to do on a Sunday, with everything closed. Of course, once I learned how to melt into my house and not leave it for an entire day, businesses in Milan began to stay open on Sundays, along with the gym. But Mamma Milano's golden lesson was carved into my cells anyway.

LESSON 23

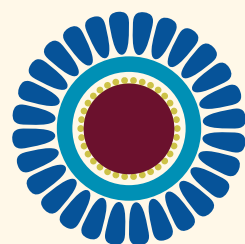
## DON'T BE A MOLTO-MULTITASKER

As a freelance journalist, I found myself doing my job in odd places. When someone called early for an interview and I was in my car, I would pull over, yank out my computer, and begin typing from the front seat, my legs dangling over the passenger side. I once did a phone interview for a style story in the gym bathroom, seated on a toilet, the only place without pumping club music.

Italians found my behavior very odd, because they never do more than one thing at once. You're never going to see an Italian walking down the street with a coffee cup—walking and drinking don't happen simultaneously. I'll never fully give up my American, eight-armed multitasking ways, but you may now find me walking down the street doing nothing except losing myself in my surroundings.







LESSON 24

## WALK WITHOUT A DESTINATION

Around 7:00 p.m. most evenings, everyone in Italy's small towns streams out of their homes and strolls around tiny city centers for the *passeggiata*. They're not there to run errands, pick up milk, or get a prescription filled. They're simply there to walk around and bump into whoever the cosmos has sent their way.

This is the art of aimless strolling, as well as a community greeting its own members. You'll find parents pushing strollers, adults and kids walking and eating *gelato* together, and old people being wheeled out of their homes to catch a breeze and a view of the town.

The chatter buzzes through the *piazze* and everyone shows up wearing their new jacket or scarf, or a new pair of shoes. The *passeggiata* is a local runway show and everyone descends at once, creating a mass socializing moment without ever having an appointment.





## A repeating pattern of stylized, symmetrical floral or star-like motifs. The design features a central four-lobed star shape with intricate internal patterns, surrounded by smaller, similar motifs. The color palette consists of pink, black, and cream.

Milan is not a brazen, bare-chested beauty. She doesn't stun you with her flashy facades, like Rome or Venice can. She is a quieter, more mysterious muse that reveals herself slowly, peeling away the layers as she sees fit. This is so very Divine Mother of her—enigmatic, unpredictable, and Sphinx-like. Her luscious gardens, stunning courtyards, gilded and mosaiced doorways, marbled lobbies, and high-ceilinged homes are stashed away behind a door, a gate, or a wall. They require patience to find, slowing down to see, and friends to unlock them with keys.

On my fiftieth trip to Milan's train station, I finally stopped rushing and looked up at the most spectacular, 200-foot-high ceiling and almost fell over in awe. All of that hulking gray architecture I'd determinedly driven past in my Cinquecento were Fascist-era masterpieces. Where I used to dismiss the plainness of 1960s-era buildings, I suddenly became aware of every brass, marble, and wood inlaid detail in meticulous doorways and curved-desk lobbies lit by original 1970s Azucena fixtures. Beneath my feet, floors in apartments and shops suddenly appeared as jigsaw marble intarsias or wood herringbones. I spotted the magnificence of intricately hand-wrought doorknobs, the wedding-cake moldings atop soaring walls. Had they always been there? Yes, they had. I just hadn't taken the time to truly see.

At this point in my journey, doors flung themselves open to me with the easy energetic force of being in harmony rather than in opposition. There was beauty everywhere—once my heart softened enough to let my eyes open and receive the training that this design capital was willing to offer. I saw deeply, I appreciated fully, I revered humbly... and then my heart officially opened for business.



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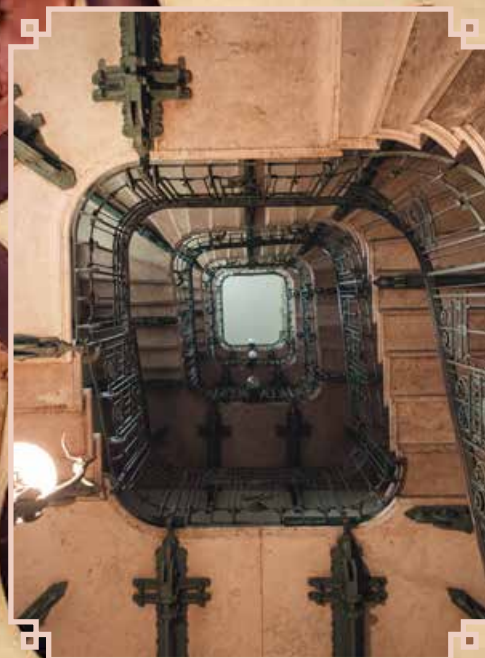


## My Heart Map of Milan

Here are a few of the places—private *palazzi* and house museums, courtyards, and domed ceilings—whose beauty Mamma Milano sings to me like a siren any time I wander the city.

**CASA GALIMBERTI** I discovered this building after my first Gucci fashion show in 2002, and its painted Liberty façade is sensational. **BAR BASSO** Powerfully evocative of the 1970s Milan design scene, this bar is a zoo during Salone del Mobile. I only ever meet creative people here. **MUSEO BAGATTI VALSECCHI** This is a replica of a Milanese Renaissance home, complete with tapestried walls and rows of armor. I did several shoots here, including portraits of jeweler Giampiero Bodino. **LA CASA DEGLI ATELLANI AND MUSEO VIGNA DI LEONARDO** Not only is this where Leonardo da Vinci slept while painting *The Last Supper*, there's a gorgeous hidden garden, too. La DoubleJ curated a space here for a *Cabana* event. **CASA MUSEO BOSCHI DI STEFANO** This is one of my favorite mid-century home museums, with a great art and furniture collection. **PALAZZO CLERICI** I nearly fainted the first time I saw a fashion show here: every wall and ceiling is covered in a bonkers amount of gold. **VILLA NECCHI** This is the most exquisite 1930s home museum in all of Milan. We hosted Andrea's birthday party here one year. **TORRE VELASCA** I had a view of this 1950s skyscraper—a radical early example of Italian modern architecture, by BBPR—from our Via San Barnaba home. I once got to visit the top-floor apartment with a wrap-around balcony. **THE DUOMO** I love walking to the roof for the views, but it's actually the marble and mosaic floor that makes me vibrate. **PALAZZO CRESPI** This private giant *palazzo*, with a private park in the backyard, suddenly became the venue for fashion brands and magazines to host dinner parties, and I ended up being a repeated guest. It never gets old. **PASTICCERIA CUCCHI** This is my Happiness Headquarters, as you know. **CIVICO PLANETARIA** Tucked unassumingly inside the Giardini Pubblici, this planetarium was designed by Piero Portaluppi, Milan's coolest mid-century architect, who also did the Villa Necchi. **VILLA CICOGNA** Alessandro Michele had an incredible dinner in this decadently frescoed private *palazzo* on Corso Monforte. **ROTONDA DELLA BESANA** Marni had their flower market here, and I used to jog in circles around it. **PARCO GIARDINO DELLA GUASTALLA** Pepper's first park was small but had a huge fountain that looked like an eighteenth-century swimming pool. **BAR LUCE, PRADA FOUNDATION** This was designed by Wes Anderson to look like a typical Milanese café. **LA SCALA** Nothing is more opulent, or makes you feel more instantly fancy-pants, than an evening inside Milan's red velvet-lined historic opera house. **CHURCH HOPPING** I'm a big church hopper and go only when there is no priest. I sit down and write. I am attracted only to those with crazy frescoed ceilings, which are huge creative vortex points for me. There's Chiesa di Santa Maria della Passione, Sant' Antonio Abate, Basilica di Santa Maria presso San Satiro and, my favorite, Chiesa di San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore. **CIMITERO MONUMENTALE** The first time I went to Milan's biggest cemetery, I connected energetically to all the statues of the incredible dead creative people. It was very powerful. **EMANUELA SETTI CARRARO DALLA CHIESA** During a fashion show, I realized that Milan's ten-year-olds were studying in the most gorgeous spot in town. **MILAN'S OTHERWORLDLY STATUES** A lot of the buildings have statues that look like mythical guardians: half-human, half-animal beasts, angels, and other creatures. They're tucked all over the city and I loved discovering them. There's one that's right near La Scala, around the corner, that is really amazing. And there's one that was near my home on Via San Barnaba.





Some of the miraculous hidden details you find in Milan if you take the time to look





Another sacred space: it's actually a children's middle school in Milan!

## FINDING SACRED SPACES FOR SWIRLING UP MY OWN CREATIONS

I was initially attracted to the churches in Milan and Sicily for their visual splendor—the soaring height of the wavy structures, the gloriously painted ceilings, the marvelous stucco work, the gilded walls, the intricately intarsia-cut marbled floors that fit together like a puzzle, the gleaming jeweled altars. But soon I began to get strange sensations in empty churches. Something was waking up. Coming into the quiet when the priest and congregation were long gone, I would sit, gaze at, and internalize the beauty, then close my eyes and finally go deep into my soul.

Sometimes I would meditate, sometimes I'd creatively pray, and other times I would whip out my computer and write like crazy in front of Jesus Christ. The creative channels were wide open in these churches.

Later I learned that most of these churches were built on the Earth's energetic leylines and were literally power seats. Additionally, Italy's Renaissance master craftsmen were all experts on sacred geometry, working with lines, proportions, patterns, and colors to evoke the divine. These were the world's original art galleries; all the creativity that existed on the planet was being funneled into these churches.

Whenever I sat there, the sacred visuals would swap out whatever gunk I had in my head, sink into my skin, and drill through my heart like a handheld Bosch hardware set. I began communing with the energy of the original creators, feeling lighter, more inspired and empowered to create my own inner and outer temples. My creative way-showers became the Baroque artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

### ◆◆ PHRASEBOOK ◆◆

#### **SCOMODITÀ: INCONVENIENCE OR DISCOMFORT**

*Usage: As in, you have to work at it!*

*Italy requires a bit of elbow grease and effort to dig under its surface and get to the good stuff. It's like great vintage and it's like the city of Milan itself: the prize is not presented to you on a perfectly edited rack. (Take, for instance, the interior at left, which I randomly walked into during fashion week, only to discover it was the school of my best friend's kid!) You have to jump into the dark, dig around, pry her open, and eventually Italy's shiny pearls will pop out into your hands.*



# FLIPPING THE CREATIVE SWITCH

**T**he kingdoms of Italian fashion and design I'd been traveling in for the last decade were miraculous, marvelous realms. Both their royalty and spirited, subversive citizens had opened my eyes to how a passion for beauty and craft, fueled by wild imagination and boundless vision, can be transformative. However, my job as a journalist had been largely to listen to other people's dreams and innovations, and to package them into digestible story nuggets for magazines—not really to create intuitively from my own wild gut.

Furthermore, this job had me permanently anchored inside the unhappy role of The Critic: is this awesome? Bad? Ugly? Gorgeous? Cool? Or totally lame? Looking back, I realize that this cloud of power was really fueled by toxic criticism and judgment. I was living in and contributing to the land of fear, but didn't really know it at the time.

Besides, by 2012 the glossy, privileged print media world that I'd worked so hard to scale was now cracking and crumbling, bleeding ad dollars and slashing staffs. The rise of speedy and slim digital platforms—Instagram was just catching on—and their bloggers and influencers meant that anyone could become a writer, photographer, or content producer with the flick of an iPhone.

On top of this, I didn't think I could bear to squeeze out yet another profile of Dolce & Gabbana or Armani, the industry's biggest luxury advertisers (as much as I loved them), or any of the other deep-pocketed designers that every magazine wanted me to lasso for their pages.

The creativity and freedom of those early years had faded. I was a little bored. My stomach itched for something new.





## SEED #1

# TURNING A PASSION INTO A PORTAL

*“You know, you should really sell your vintage collection online.”*

With those words casually tossed off by my husband Andrea over dinner one evening, the first seed of La DoubleJ was planted. But it didn't take root, at least not at first. In fact, I brushed it away. Sell my vintage clothes on the internet? Andrea was at the time running The Level Group, an e-commerce company that built websites for big fashion brands, so he knew what that was about. To me, it just sounded like a logistical nightmare.

Yet over the next few days, after settling in the dark, loamy recesses of my consciousness, that seed began to germinate. Unfettered by practicality or logic, I sat back, closed my eyes, and allowed a dreamy download to come rushing forth:

*Well, if I did want to sell all my vintage clothes online, which were currently busting out of my closets and basement... Maybe I could ask some of my vintage dealer friends if they wanted to pool some of their product too, to have a deeper selection but all curated according to my maximal sensibilities... If I do this, then it would have to look unimaginably delicious and totally different from all the dusty crapola vintage e-commerce drooping on dirty mannequins you see on every corner of the internet... Maybe I could ask all of the incredible creative women I've met and interviewed over the last fifteen years in Milan to be my models. That would be my chance to finally tell the stories of these legendary Italian ladies, fling open their homes,*

*and do full-fledged glossy magazine features on each. I could show their closets, cupboards, tables, revealing how they dress themselves, decorate, and entertain! The whole website could be a shoppable magazine dedicated to Living Like an Italian...*

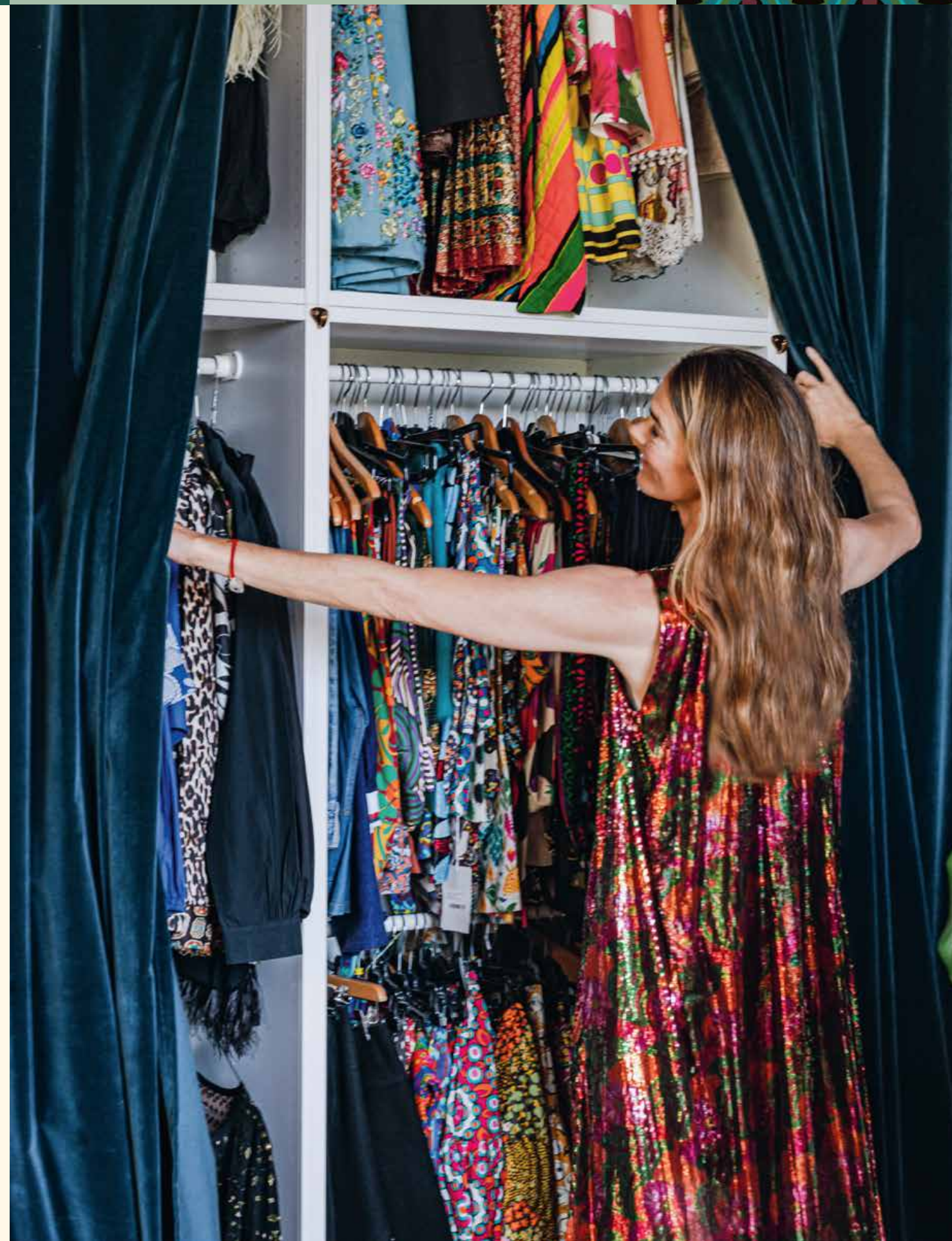
Suddenly, a single small seed to sell my vintage closet had sprung into a jungle rippling around in my head.

Just by creating an open field—free from doubt, criticism, and cynicism—the embryonic idea was permitted to spin lawlessly into a whirl of possibility.

Then, of course, reality set in. I had no business plan. No inkling if anyone in the world was buying vintage besides me (especially the one-of-a-kind historic pieces I was selling, not last season's Prada). There were hardly any good models back then for merging e-commerce with an online magazine. No moneybags investor to foot the bill. And no staff. I was all alone.

But I stayed firm, pulling on the gifts, talents, and passions that I knew I had stashed in my pockets. My body fired up, my skin tingled, my heart glowed on, and I allowed myself to fall in love with this weird idea.

I felt no fear. I became fully ripe with my energy baby growing and spinning inside me.







## ENTER THE GODPARENTS

Starting a company was challenging to pull off in a country packed with centuries-old mom-and-pop ventures and tangles of red tape, and not exactly known for its entrepreneurial innovation; one in which, as I've said, there's an expectation that you need to be *un figlio di*—the child of royalty or aristocracy or a billionaire industrialist—to make any impact. This is where my ballsy, American, I-can-do-or-be-anything approach came in handy. But this defiance had to be coated in a uniquely Italian glaze. It had taken years of persistent coaxing, flirting, vacationing, and long lunches to squeeze out the sustenance that this life form would require. My years of toiling in Milan had created an enormous sticky web of friends, colleagues, contacts, and collaborators.

So, I did what any Italian would do. I called everyone I knew, blew my enthusiasm into their ears, made the energy contagious, and invented ways for us to work together. Everything popped up and out of these relationships, including mutual backscratching for those who wanted a stage to flex and squeeze their creative juices to the max. I didn't realize how important this was to photographers, stylists, designers, and writers—how creative people working in fashion often feel strangled or deflated.

At this point, Andrea was rolling his eyes about where I'd run off with his little seed. But he agreed to consult on the business and his company, TLG, would build our website—thank the goddess.

Then I turned to Alberto Biagetti, a furniture-designer/art-director friend I'd met in Milan in 2001 when he was on the founding team of Yoox. Biagio, as I called him, was an imaginative Italian maverick, unfettered by the chains of logic. His heart was straight out of the Renaissance. He lit up at my challenge to whip up the most gorgeous, funny, and fabulous website ever. His company, Frank Studio—co-owned by TLG—didn't charge a fee for our first year.

A key godparent in all this was freelance stylist Viviana Volpicella, a Puglia-born, Milan-based firecracker with fabulous taste whom I'd met when she was star-stylist Anna Dello Russo's assistant years before. I needed someone to help me put together the photos for the website, and her face popped into my head one day while daydreaming at Cucchi. Viviana and I met in the back of a car between shows during Paris Fashion Week, where I proposed the idea. "I will be your fashion director!" she practically shouted.

From that moment on, she and I became a vortex of volcanic creative energy, a Mount Etna of ideas feeding off each other, and laughing our pants off the whole way.

Nothing I said to her was too weird. She took every idea I had—such as "Who Wore it Best? Vintage War" photo shoots using ourselves as models—and made it better, more brilliant, and more beautiful. She devoted herself to La DoubleJ as if it were her very own baby, showering her with her impeccable taste, styling shoots, wrangling women, and sketching my wacky ideas in rainbow markers. Together, we were totally seismic. This is the power that occurs when you co-create with your soul family.

Viviana brought in photographer Alberto Zanetti to take the portraits of our Milanese wonder women—divided into "Great Gorgeous Girls" for the younger creative set, and "Legendary Ladies" who held world records in style and entertaining but were also fierce creative powerhouses at work. They all fed into a column called "The School of Sciuira" (using the Italian for "Supreme Milanese Housewife"), because they also knew the rules inside and out on how to be commanding domestic goddesses. Albi had been an assistant to photographer Pier Paolo Ferrari and art-world-darling Maurizio Cattelan on *Toilet Paper* magazine, so he was trained in visual humor and irreverence. He volunteered to work for free so long as I paid his assistants.

Superstylist Viviana Volpicella and wizard photographer Alberto Zanetti on one of our early shoots





The DoubleJ "Wunderwall" designed by Luca Cipleletti, featuring our godparents  
 Andrea Ciccoli, Cristian Musardo, Viviana Volpicella, Laura and Alberto Biagetti, and Alberto Zanetti





The portraits that Albi shot for the first two years of the company were eye-popping masterpieces, that made our e-commerce operation sing a wholly original tune. There was tough, turbaned design queen Nina Yashar, standing barefoot on her Carlo Molino–designed dining room table; design-gallery goddess Rossana Orlandi removing her signature sunglasses in public for the first time; and ex-Moschino creative director Rossella Jardini arriving at her Milanese abode in a bathrobe and gold jewelry, carrying her dog.

In all, we produced fifteen full-scale photo shoots in two months with the same quality photography, styling, and writing I had been doing for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Wallpaper\**. All of it was completely shoppable and highly readable. We ran, we jumped, we laughed, we played, and together our trinity made magic.



Gallerist Nina Yashar at home in Milan, barefoot on her dining-room table and wearing our vintage caftan  
Opposite: the very day during Paris Fashion Week, in October 2014, when Viviana agreed to become Fashion Director of La DoubleJ



# DOING BUSINESS WITH THE DIVINE MOTHER

The start of La DoubleJ was pure Divine Feminine in action, born from nothing but a dream and inner delight. I never followed any business plan. Instead, the company grew from my instincts and one strong seed—and then another. It was a stage for everything that I loved deeply in Italy. I watered this weird creation with love and joy—every shoot, every collaborator was a friend and a helper and a shepherd for this great project. It was truly a collective effort that was buoyed by a sense of playfulness and fun.

This endeavor also required a lot of masculine energy, which I freely exercised because, as I've mentioned, I was born brimming with it. First of all, I worked my ass off. Too much for the first several years—but all of that activity and action propelled things forward. I almost never took no for an answer, from *anyone*. So that was my “refusal”—

a masculine trait that is often not good, but that can be helpful when you say, *No way, I don't accept a no, we can do this!*

On the other hand, I also learned that when I got a No over and over again, it was the universe sending me a message. *Back down, baby.* It is very hard for people with a lot of masculine energy to surrender. It feels like drowning in bloody defeat. And yet when we finally do, we soften, and in the softening the feminine can come back inside us and plant new seeds, new ideas, new possibilities to help us grow.

Over time, I found many ways to run the business with a big heart over a small belligerent fist, with inspiration over perspiration, with fun freak flags rather than freakouts. Every day was Bring Your Divine Mother to Work Day!







## LESSON 1

## IF YOU'RE BASHING YOUR HEAD ON ONE DOOR... FIND ANOTHER ONE

Our first business model flew and flowed... until it suddenly didn't. Rather than keep insisting that what I had in my head come to exact fruition, though, I stayed flexible and fast. I moved from a vintage sales site to building a new brand, something I never intended nor thought I could do. I didn't put up resistance but constantly refined, changed, and transformed the business, based on flow.



Of course, you should have objectives and work towards them. But in the process, if doors close, go to the next one and try to open it. See what happens. There's always a doorway leading to light and new opportunity. But to find it you have to stay creative. I don't mean doodling (though that can sometimes help!). I mean locating the sparkle within you that finds solutions, that is inventive, that approaches situations with curiosity and playfulness, and can imagine something new. The sparkle that is flexible and receptive enough to realize you may not even know what is for your highest good.

If you are open to it, the universe will shower you with gifts.



## LESSON 2

## FLIP DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

I'd started working with Elisabeth Manning, my energy healer, six months before La DoubleJ was born, and very quickly I began seeing the benefits of that powerful inner work. Explosive creative power pounded out of me and around me, but so did its shadow side. The company became a testing ground for every bit of progress I made on my meditation mat: employees quit before their legal three-month notice; architects, artisans, and suppliers warned, "You'll never be able to create what you want with your budget!" All of these snafus—and dozens more—were tests I had to pass to prove to myself that I can consciously create in the midst of chaos, able to transform any darkness, any density, any miscommunication into light.

## LESSON 3

## FOLLOW YOUR HEART—AND GOLDEN GUT



In the end, my tortured journey to have a baby channeled my fertility into a geyser of creativity. I learned that I could be a mother to a business, to a book, to a whole gaggle of young employees who were yearning for mentorship, coddling, and growth. I learned a lot about listening to my heart and my intuition, softening my masculine cudgel rather than playing whack-a-mole with every problem.

The result is that our company is deeply guided by the sway of feminine energy—it's intuitive, mysterious, receptive. We're feelers just like Italy is; we go with the flow, just

like Italians do. We bounce on the juicy waves the universe throws us. When we don't, we get slapped in the face, as happened to me many times on my road to unusual motherhood. Whenever I was behaving in a pushy, bossy, or mean way, I got smacked back into reality.

This company is a love child, and she only responds well to love and joy. To this day, not much logic drives my creative process—though of course I need our brainy business-people to keep me on the rails, and I listen to them and their ideas and concerns. But then I go off and start spinning in a very detached and illogical way.



Many friends and acquaintances whose fashion companies had investors cried to me that they never had this freedom. A private equity firm is generally not set up to trust the mystery of the uncertainty of the Divine Feminine. They want results and they want them now. I always felt strangled by not having enough money, but as I look back it provided total liberty for the company and for me as its creative leader.

I truly believe the creative spark for our business comes from the heart; it comes from our golden guts. And when I see something—a new print, a new silhouette, a table setting—that is original, exciting, and alive, I feel it immediately in my body, not in my head. My cells warm up and go volcano-esque. I'll start yelling, "Winner, winner, chicken dinner!" I do it so often, it's become our company slogan (along with *Ciao, Babe! Raise your Vibration, and Pepper Approved*).

## LESSON 4

## CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEOPLE WANT TO WORK

The single biggest lesson has been keeping my head in a state of kind receivership and my body relaxed (a very feminine trait), instead of tense and tight. This means learning



to hang on (and not cut out!) when the crap starts flowing in. Rather than storm off, judging things, and criticizing people, I've learned that the best thing I can do is to be a Guide and Wayshower. If I stay calm and upbeat, everyone else will move into solution mode. If I bring sunniness, joy, and humor to things that have fallen apart or become derailed, suddenly everyone else lines up behind me to follow the new lead. If I become a dictator, a bitch, start yelling, finding fault, and determined to figure out "who's responsible for the mess?" then everyone closes up and runs away.

I have veered off. I've lost my cookies. I've sunk into deep caves of misery when things fell apart. But I've also learned: I cannot hate myself for my mistakes. I must forgive myself and forgive everyone—we all fuck up. Now I know it's up to me as a leader to set the tone of amnesty and collaboration. The rule is, I sit down and talk to the person as calmly as possible with one objective: solution. How can we create something new and better in this now moment?

This is how I have been able to create ties and relationships in the workplace. It's the way I've been able to hire people for less money than they were making at other companies and been able to retain them when other big corporations come in and try to steal them. Employees feel the energy. They want this nurturing, this warmth, they want to feel valued and listened to. They don't want a hierarchical system of "who's the boss." They want to be able to talk and give their opinions. We are creating this company together by fusing the freedom and creativity of the feminine with the supportive, clear, protective, efficient power of the masculine. It is not a patriarchy. It is a collective endeavor where the Divine Masculine and the Divine Feminine energies mingle and marry, and out pops a community coming together as One.





My High Vibration Start-Up Road Map



FIRST OF ALL, GO FOR IT!

Dive in and be prepared that you might not do what you think you will do. Begin at the beginning.

FOLLOW YOUR JOY CRUMBS

Don't do it for money or for fame. Do it because you love it. Go with the flow, be flexible, be humble.

BIRTH AN ORIGINAL IDEA THAT TRULY MAKES YOUR HEART PUFF

If you copy someone or something that's been done before, your project won't have the same powerful energetic signature.

EMBRACE CHAOS

The first five years will never, ever feel under control.

DON'T BANG REPEATEDLY ON DOORS THAT ARE CLOSED

Go where the energy flows. When you get shut doors, that's when you get creative. Never keep banging on a closed door. Get curious and feel around in the dark for the next one—a hole, a key, anything.

ALWAYS BE REINVENTING!

Reinventing always brings new expansion—not just of the company's coffers and reach, but also consciousness.

GET KIND AND CREATIVE WITH TRAGEDY, FAILURES, AND SHUTDOWNS

They are merely messages from the universe that a particular path wasn't meant to be, but others are, if you strap your joy rockets on again.

UNDERSTAND YOUR TALENTS AND THEN HIRE YOUR EXACT OPPOSITE

People who can do things you are incapable of (finance? project management?) are invaluable. Your potential stops at the edges of your own talent pool. Understand this and plot it strategically.

DELEGATE LATER

In the beginning, you are an eight-armed goddess. You will work every day, every night, every weekend.

YOU ARE THE MOTHER

Regardless of your gender, you are the mother of this project: you fertilized it, incubated it, and gave birth to it. Now you must nurture and nourish it before it leaves you and goes off to some amazing school. In these early years, you have to show up. You have to listen to what the baby wants. Pay attention when she screams or fights back. Do not leave her in the hands of unloving caretakers. This is a living energy being.

ONLY HIRE PEOPLE WHO CAN THRIVE IN CHAOS

Never take anyone from a big cushy job who is used to an assistant and a fleet of staff. They will hightail it out the minute they realize they too must make the coffee.

AS YOU GROW, REALIZE THAT THOSE ANGELS YOU FOUND WHO THRIVED IN CHAOS ARE NOT NECESSARILY ALSO GREAT WITH STRUCTURE

You need to bring in people who can “manage” in more traditional ways.

NEVER HIRE AN ASSHOLE

Every personality counts. Any pessimism, gossip, negativity, or criticism is going to take you and the whole team down. Be very mindful of this as you interview people. Sunny dispositions will save your life.

LEARN THE ART OF MUTUAL BACKSCRATCHING

I was the queen of barter and exchange in the early years of DoubleJ. Without much money, I constantly invented ways in which I could give creative people or other companies something they wanted. It's important to check in frequently to make sure the exchange feels fair and you both make good on it.



LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

Opportunities and great ideas come from everywhere and everyone, including the intern who’s never worked a day in her life. If you want to create consciously, you must be open to what other people have to say—buyers, customers, editors, your sister-in-law. You don’t need to doubt what you do, but rather listen with curiosity as you consider always what you can do better.

ENCOURAGE THE YOUNG ONES TO TALK

In Italy, junior staff are not usually allowed to express their opinions in meetings. I insist on everyone sharing their opinion. They’re all allowed to babble on, shrug, shake their heads, and hopefully, more often, jump up and down in joy when they like something.

IGNORE THE DOOMSAYERS

If someone is a constant naysayer and can’t bring solutions, get rid of them.

DO NOT GET DRAGGED DOWN BY EMULATORS OR COMPETITORS

If you’re doing great things, inevitably people will copy you. If you get enraged by this or try to smash-talk great competition, this will lower your vibration. Enjoy the giant creative field you are all sharing.

REMEMBER, YOU ARE THE MOTHER

Every time something went wrong in my business or caused me stress, worry, or frustration, I began to realize it was the result of either (i) not being clear enough in my expectations, (ii) not having the proper structure in place to support the action in question, (iii) not having the right people in the right roles. And you know what? No one was responsible for any of the above items except for me.

MAKE CRITICISM CONSTRUCTIVE

When you have your own business, you have forty-eight eyeballs that see every wrinkle and wart. You must point out the flaws, but to do it in a way that doesn’t shut the other person down. Inspire them to find new ways and new solutions. It’s hard. We’re often taught that the only way people learn is by criticizing or punishing them. But the true gift is holding your vision in yourself, embodying what you want to see in others, and creating a bridge so people want to come towards it and you, rather than run away in fear. You want to give feedback in a way that inspires people rather than belittles or makes them feel ashamed.

REMEMBER, IT’S A VERY ITALIAN THING TO PAUSE

Wait. Listen. Pause before you react. I give myself a two-minute check-out by going into the bathroom, sitting on the toilet, and breathing. Or, I smoke a cigarette like an Italian. I remove myself from the team.

THE TEAM MUST BE SHEARED TO STAY HEALTHY

In Italy we can’t just fire people when we no longer like them. It’s against labor laws. This is not a bad thing. It has helped me a great deal to meet a person on a human level and figure out why they couldn’t do the job. I’ve found myself giving life coaching advice to unproductive employees. They usually end up leaving the company on their own, once they realize they’d be happier doing something else. Carrying dead weight afflicts the whole team; you need those who love the vision, bring fresh perspectives, and are willing to work like crazy. You will survive the pruning, as well as losing people you don’t want to let go of.

GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK

You’re doing an awesome job. See yourself. Give yourself a pat. Everything is fine. Including if the whole operation goes down the drain.





# SITTING IN THE DARK AND SWIRLING UP OUR SISTERHOOD

Covid began in March 2020 as a pure fear dump. I was literally pacing around the empty apartment in Milan that I had just moved into with a mattress on the floor and one lamp. We could not leave our homes except to go to the supermarket or pharmacy. Streets were patrolled. DoubleJ sales orders were cancelled by wholesalers left and right, not only from the new fall collection, but also from the previous collection that was already cut and sewn. Two massive global launches—Ladurée and Acqua di Parma—which were meant to explode us across multiple sales channels in Europe, the US, and Asia had to be trimmed down to bitty morsels. Many staff were panicked; some were frozen with anxiety and couldn't work at all.

At this bleak moment, I pulled out an Ayurvedic cookbook, began a massive detox, and enrolled in an online Spiritual Ascension course by Sandra Walter in Sedona, Arizona. I did morning Teams calls with the office and spent the rest of the day in absolute silence and stillness. It was the first time I'd ever spent three months by myself, and the experience rocketed me off into a completely new dimension. My editor, Scarlett, told me I should get on Instagram to discuss ways in which some of my spiritual tools could help people navigate their Covid fears. So, one morning I jumped on with an unscripted video pulled straight from my belly about what we could learn from the Coronavirus and what insights we could glean from sitting home alone. I immediately felt a new surge of energy.

I felt free and unbuckled as a river of messages came out of my mouth and onto the worldwide whatever we call it. The response was overwhelming. I received hundreds of private messages of encouragement, thanks, and requests for more advice. In that moment, I realized that what I was practicing with my teachers, healers, workshops, books, and downloads was something that our DoubleJ customer not only wanted but needed. Very soon, we began to host online virtual workshops for free for our community, introducing my roster of practitioners who have been so

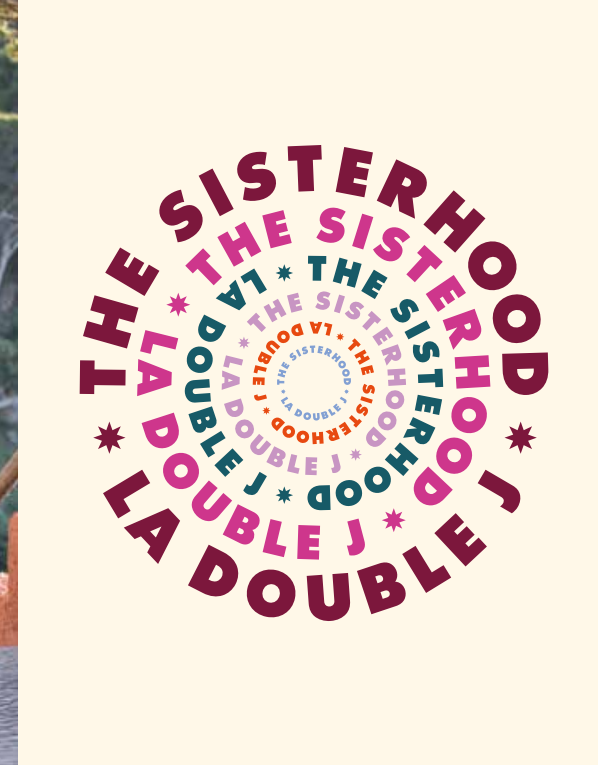
helpful to me along this bumpy road—and giving them a platform to share their tools. A new star constellation was born during Covid: the DoubleJ Sisterhood.

The Sisterhood is a circle-based container for our High Vibration manifesto. It is also a practical manifestation of what we mean when we talk about Divine Mother frequencies: connection, listening, feeling, sharing, and learning to expand our consciousness, together.

The activity of the Sisterhood unfolded in virtual or live circles at retreats, workshops, and across social media and podcasts. We created Spirit Tour editorials on some of our favorite Sisters; we mapped the best places to raise your vibration or expand your consciousness. This broadened further when I launched my Spirit Tickle Newsletters—jam-packed with essays, Q&As, personal revelations from my own spiritual practice, and practical tips on how to start.

Once we were able to travel again, we rethought all of our events, swirling in some spirituality. Our Bergdorf Goodman pop-up shop opened with a holotropic breathwork session with a shaman; our barefoot-on-the-beach dinner with Kirna Zabête in the Hamptons featured an energy-healing circle; and we did immersive yoga with Catalina Denis in Paris. Eventually, we took the spirit show on the road with the Six Senses Ibiza retreat. I led a spiritual gathering at the Mezzatorre in Ischia with yoga teacher Manizhe Rimer, then I co-hosted a “Sacred Journey to Egypt” with my friend and high priestess, Dee Kennedy (at which most of our fellow travelers showed up in La DoubleJ).

The Sisterhood is about a shared spirit of creativity; we've expanded our circle to women creating in other fields—launching a campaign with The Selby in LA and highlighting the amazing work of designers and architects during the Salone del Mobile. The majority of our clients are women, but we feel the Sisterhood applies to anyone who wishes to sit in a circle of community, sharing, and listening.







(BIG ASS) SEED #3

## LET'S OPEN A STORE

A few months later, Andrea called me up and delivered his biggest, baddest seed yet. He had somehow managed during the shutdowns to secure a lease on Milan's Via Sant'Andrea, a fancypants slice of real estate next to Chanel and across the street from Bottega Veneta. *Let's open a store!* he trilled. *No effing way!* I immediately slammed back. We had somehow managed to keep sales floating on our website during Covid, thanks to my team's incredible dedication, and had not fired a single employee. But we were skin and bones, well below sales goals, and emotionally exhausted. A few weeks later, my hard "no" softened into a "maybe" and then into a begrudging *okay, let's try it.*

Once I moved into acceptance mode, I got another download. We could open a shop, but it would look and feel like no other. Andrea kept asking me to deliver "a concept" and I kept yelling back at him, *I don't have one!* Instead, I just moved where my own spiritual waters were pushing me and began unpacking a messy bag of inspiration nuggets. A few months prior, I had dug down into reading *The Kuan Yin Transmission* by spiritual guide Alana Fairchild and had grown obsessed with the five archetypes of the Divine Mother. I discovered a Romanian artist called Aitch on Instagram who I loved and cold-wrote her asking if she'd illustrate my Divine Mother archetypes—she had no idea who Kuan Yin, Isis, Green Tara, Kali were, but she'd of course heard of Mother Mary. We began a furious digital exchange of ideas over the coming months.

As always, we were on a super-tight budget; as always, I called on friends from all over. Architect Luca Cipeletti came in to chop up the place into logical spaces; Paolo Badesco and Costantino Affuso were roped in for interior design and their expert eye for vintage furniture, including a nineteenth-century bar we used as a check-out desk. The artist JoAnn Tan handmade hundreds of lotus leaves from stone paper that we used to cover the ceiling pipes to save

money and to create our flower-headed goddesses in the windows. The entire downstairs floor became a Sacred Grotta dedicated to the Divine Mother, with all of Aitch's archetypes laid out by our graphics team to cover every inch of the cave-like walls, not to mention snakes, eyeballs, yonis, and other magical symbols. Our store is a wild, wacky, funny, colorful playpen of delights. Dogs and kids love it, too.

When it launched in April 2021, most people cried, *Wait, WHAT? You're opening a store right now during Covid?!* Yes, we were. Just as Milan sat empty and dark, we had yet another opportunity to cheerlead for the city and the country. When people were feeling dense and depressed, that was just the moment to turn on our own inner bright lights, shine the socks off everyone, and show the world we had faith even when everything appeared broken. We love Italy, and we were ready for this town to resurrect.

Not only did our shop not look like any other store, it also had an unintended "concept"—it was a Divine Mother vortex. I held Divine DNA workshops in the Grotta, which doubled as a VIP sales room, as well as channelings by the spiritual teacher Claudia Navone and yoga with yin master Marco Migliavacca. The space became a portal for connecting to the same feminine energy I had been cultivating all this time in Italy. We went from Mamma Milano as our muse to off-planet mystical priestesses who were channeling the very same energy.

Although our shop is designed to sell merchandise, it became a bigger opportunity to anchor and engage with the Sisterhood. More and more it's clear that I do not just want to sell a woman a dress. I am happier if I can get her to start meditating, introduce her to a new *pranayama* breath technique, hook her up with an energy healer, get her to open her heart space, and put her in touch with her intuition—all topics of our Zoom webinars and in-store workshops.

Opposite: Some of the most high-vibration corners of our store



# CIAO CIAO!! ENDINGS AND BEAUTIFUL BEGINNINGS

I certainly could never have expected where this journey, which began one desiccated, infernal Milanese summer, would carry me. And Mamma Milano is still bouncing me along on her loopy rainbow path. Did I mention I now love Milan? I truly do.

Being bathed in that gratitude is certainly what has made my experience as a founder that much brighter and more abundant. The baby known as La DoubleJ is now a full-fledged teenager, and she is prancing around like the best of them, wearing a miniskirt and glittery eye shadow, taking selfies, and sass-talking her parents all day long. We love her, though, and have been quick to adjust ourselves to her more mature tastes.

Our company events—with retailers, editors, and clients—have morphed from traditional parties with cocktails and people standing around chatting into deeper realms of inspiration. I always think, *how can we plug this group of people into a higher-realm energy circuit?* We bring in sound and energy healers, breathwork specialists, or a side dish of meditation and yoga, to almost every gathering we do. Even our company off-site started with a sharing and meditation circle before we jumped into reviewing numbers and celebrating ourselves.

And we haven't stopped collaborating: from our furniture collection with The Socialite Family in Paris, to our takeovers of Sotheby's London HQ, as well as cafés in New

York and restaurants in Milan, which we dressed in head-to-toe print for fashion week. We've hung a bat installation in our downstairs *grotta* (where we now have a resident yogi), and we use our shop windows in Milan to highlight the angels, aliens, and spirit animals that are a guiding force in our creative wave.

We are now sold in nearly 200 stores globally; our e-commerce business ships to countries on every continent in the world (except Antarctica!); we make four collections of ready-to-wear per year, two homeware collections, and countless capsules and exclusive products for friends and retailers. We are a swirling pod of non-stop creative energy.

Another swerve I didn't foresee: Andrea and I didn't make it as a couple. After eighteen years together, we split up. Everyone told me I was a fool to keep working with my ex-husband, but I shooed off the naysayers. I knew that both he and I were deeply committed to co-parenting our baby and made a vow to take her all the way—to Princeton if she so desired. Since 2018, Andrea has taken on a much more active role within the company. He was responsible for creating our highly modern business model that blends twenty-first-century e-commerce know-how with his financial smarts and deep industry understanding, all of which has kept us dancing with ourselves, ahead of the competition. For many years, he served as a strategist and part-time CEO. Trickster-farmer that he is, he keeps handing me seeds to plant. He has become one of the key reasons for our continued success. I could not do this without him. Thank you dear, darling Ciccoli.

And let me just remind you of this one little nugget: I thought I had a crap pie when I moved to Milan. But the universe never makes mistakes. It turns out I had the keys to the kingdom. We all do! It's a matter of turning on your own pleasure faucets and blasting your blocks, your shadows, and your frustrations with twenty tons of loving light—then creating and propelling your joy across the planet. My greatest wish is that all of us humans tap into this infinite power and capacity in ourselves, and that, in raising our own single vibration, we make a giant contribution to raising the frequency of humanity itself.



Ciccoli, Pepper, and me



# WONDER POWERS —ACTIVATE!

**W**e are all here on planet Earth to expand ourselves creatively, to follow our own unique spirits into the world, and to watch them manifest. If I—an American without a single contact, no cooking skills, zero friends, and no career—could create all of this in a foreign land, in Italy, what can other women do? All of it, and more.

Our goal at La DoubleJ is to refract our kaleidoscopic energy to help women feel juicy and amazing, to feel confident to shine, and be seen, rather than hide their light behind drab invisibility cloaks. We want our global community to seek joy inside and out, to crack open their hearts with wonder, and to be the goddesses they truly are.

We also want to be a kick-starter to help women trust and tap their own swirling creative impulses, whether it's starting a company, writing a novel, or laying a beautiful table—

to give birth to their own beautiful moments and ideas, and to keep an open nature and a passion for discovery.

How does all of this really work, and how can it be applied to you? The first thing to understand is that this magic of the Divine Mother, or Mamma Milano—or whatever you want to call her—is a force. She is everywhere you look. You just need to apply the basics of energy work. Fortunately, you don't have to move across the planet to make it happen.

This work starts with how you treat, handle, and care for yourself, and then how you broker, nurture, and repair relationships with family, friends, lovers, co-workers. You can start this wherever you are—in the supermarket in London, in a skyscraper in New York, in your Parisian *pied-à-terre* with the plumber. What we're doing, wherever we are, is raising our vibrations while calling in the Divine Mother frequency that prepares our inner ground for new growth.







Our Ancient Egyptian Mystery School-inspired collection, shown inside the Chiesa San Paolo di Converso in Milan





## GET CREATIVE WITH COLOR

This notion of high-frequency energy feeds the mother-lode idea behind La DoubleJ's toe-tapping prints and feel-good fashion: color has vibrational energy, too, and the power to transform moods and minds.

I have long used color and print as a way to flex my creativity and shoot out wild and wacky expression. I find dressing in color to be liberating; it is an unbuckling of my most expansive self that gets me out of my cage. This isn't an exact science and you really don't need to know a thing about color theory. You just need to know that, *Jeez, I feel like a vixen in my pink pants! Or, I feel powerfully grounded in my red dress.* It's very much about your own experience with color. How does it speak to you?

Here's a trick: When you are feeling your most frisky, sassy, and light—like you've just won a little lottery in some life pursuit—stop, close your eyes, and ask, *What does that look like? Does that look like black?* Probably not. See the color that's there, and put it on as a visual marker and a manifestation of your inward state of joy.

Obviously, not everyone wants to wear bold colors head to toe or to mix five prints like I do. There are degrees of maximalism that you can safely dip into. Maybe it's just a printed shirt you'll throw under your black suit armor, or a set of patterned napkins on an all-white table with simple flowers. Go with what feels good in your body. Fashion is just one outward creative manifestation of yourself.

## LET'S GET VIBRATIONAL

"Raise Your Vibration" is not just a cute company motto. It is our galactic mission, an expansion of my own personal spiritual practice.

What does it mean? Let's start with the basics. Everything in the universe possesses an energy quotient, from the tiniest atoms to the most massive stars. Humans—with our sacks of skin, feelings, thoughts, hearts, chakras, spirits, and souls—are not exempt. All of it pulsates with vibrating energy. Energy exists on a frequency spectrum, from low levels that are dark and dense to high levels that are light and bright.

The vibrational frequency of all energy can be manipulated and morphed—this energetic is actually decided by us. We control it with our own free will. Shit may happen, emo-

tions course through our bodies, but how we react to the crap storm is us taking our energetic field into our own very capable hands. It is done first by becoming aware that energy is swirling around you always, then deciding you want to raise your vibration, then moving into that frequency.

So, "raising your vibration" means moving your energetic scale from the heavy, sluggish, bottom rung of the ladder—which is where we often reside in our day-to-day, stressful lives—to the luminous top of the ladder, governed by the energy of love, one of Mamma Milano's biggest tanks. When you do that, you are more connected to your most expansive creative self, and your true higher self that is linked to the great power socket of the universe: source itself.





# ACTIVATE YOUR CHAKRAS



- CROWN CHAKRA: DIAMOND VIOLET**  
Claircognizance, higher realms of consciousness
- THIRD EYE CHAKRA: INDIGO BLUE**  
Intuition, inner sight, clairvoyance
- THROAT CHAKRA: LIGHT BLUE**  
Speaking your truth
- HEART CHAKRA: GREEN OR PINK**  
Love, forgiveness, passion, connection
- SOLAR PLEXUS CHAKRA: YELLOW**  
Inner motor, fire, will center
- SACRAL CHAKRA: ORANGE**  
Creativity, fertility, self-worth
- BASE CHAKRA: RED**  
Safety, belonging, grounding

When you go into your feeling senses and leave your mental faculties behind, you're slipping back into the Divine Mother's fruitful juices. You're allowing your intuition to turn on, and you're accessing different realms of consciousness. While you're here, you might also be aware of your energy body. You have an invisible, highly sensitive bubble of light that surrounds your physical shell and anchors inside it through your meridians (which your acupuncturist taps into) and your chakras.

Anyone who's taken a yoga class is familiar with these swirling vortexes of energy that move vertically from the root of the spine to the crown of the head. It's no coincidence

that each chakra is associated with a different color—each color, and each energy center, vibrates at a different frequency. Each chakra corresponds to a life-force element that is vital to mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Some chakras are underused, some are overused, others are clogged or slammed shut. You can open, cleanse, unclog, and expand these energy centers using your breath, intention, meditation, and energy work—alone, or with a healer. You can also activate them by wearing colors or crystals that correspond to them.

At the end of the day, there's a very good reason why you feel so good in your vixen pink pants.

# DUMP YOUR HEAD WHEN YOU'RE GETTING DRESSED

How do you put together colorful outfits or prints without looking like a car crash? I've noticed that the mind isn't very helpful in this process. I smash together prints like a food processor, throwing everything in to create an artful mix. But I realized that my body is also deeply involved, activated like a finely honed kinesiology test. When I put something on—or looking at new print patterns or dress designs in the office—and my body freezes or my stomach tenses up, it's not right. If I get a blood-rush of bouncing pleasure or feel like jumping or tapping my feet, it's a hard yes. My body's somatic intelligence is a superpower antenna that's plugged into the Divine Mother mainframe.

You can use this approach for bigger decisions in your life. Your body is a wise machine, constantly messaging you with information. Its software program is way smarter than the little digital computer in your head—which is helpful, of course, but shouldn't be the master of creative decisions. Try using your somatic feelers as you're getting dressed. Does it sit well in the stomach? Has it gotten your heart hot

and open? Then go for it! My invitation is to bring meaning to how you dress yourself. Clothing made in a sweatshop or by slave labor is not going to emit a high frequency of energy. Honor yourself and this ritual of dressing. But do not become consumed by it, either. Your spiritual/energetic expansion is about finding your highest potential, which is a soul force, not a closet full of designer clothes.

There are actually a few ways we *can* use our logical heads in this endeavor. I tend to put two prints of different scales together, with the larger-sized print on the bottom half of my body. Geometrics are often a great compliment to floral prints. When you wear vintage clothes, add hyper contemporary accessories to avoid looking like a *nonna*.

Lastly, don't be afraid of originality in your own genius. Fashion culture tells you what you need to emulate, but what you really need to do is tap into your own joy faucets. It might look very different from what you see on others—and this is a good thing.







## BIRTHING A NEW HOME FROM THE DEEP VOID

**N**o one really likes to step into the void. I know I don't, even though I understand its powerful, universal law of creation. But sometimes I'm forced to do it, and I can tell you without a doubt that if you play with the darkness and don't fight it, something magical will sprout up.

This is what happened during Covid, when I moved into a new apartment one week before Milan's draconian lockdown. I was newly divorced, all alone with one couch, a mattress on the floor of the bedroom, two lights, and a couple of coffee tables. I could not go out to vintage fairs or charity shops to do my shopping and decorating of my home. I was forced to sit and pause with the emptiness and muteness of my apartment for three months.

After a few weeks of pouting and stomping my feet on the *terrazzo* floors, I finally just surrendered to the simplicity and vacancy in and around me. I did my daily work calls on Zoom and spent the rest of the time in deep meditation and spiritual courses I took online. I sat for hours with my pile of crystals in one of the guest rooms I'd consecrated as a meditation room. I was inside a dark, empty womb where I unknowingly planted and fertilized a new way of life. The conditions were perfect; I just had to trust and wait.

Every once in a while, I'd drop a seed for a future bloom: ordering furniture from online auction sites, calling an upholsterer for a job he'd complete in four months' time,

laying out all of my vintage jewelry on the floor, only to discover it would all look so great hung on the bathroom wall (once the handyman could leave his house!), inviting the artist Jay Lohmann to sneak out of his Milan home to come paint gold stars on my meditation room ceiling, and commissioning the Norway-based artist Kirsten Synge Kongsli to illustrate some collages I'd found in Bali for wallpaper in the dining room.

I couldn't see anything—except those gold Byzantine stars, which I identified as my guardian angels in this process.

I could not run to the finish line in victorious relief, but the forces of creation were flickering nonetheless.

The darkness turned out to be a marvelous teacher and incubator; this black space I had feared turned out not to be barren at all.

Lucious life was simply waiting to come through in its vibrant, energy-tinged color and patterns.



The *salotto* of my current home in Milan.  
Right: The goldleaf ceiling painted by Jay Lohmann in my meditation room

