

# From Strangers to Family

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On the first day of my writing class in Venice, Italy, I looked around at the faces of the nine other students in the room and couldn't shake the feeling that we were all so drastically different. I wondered how this was going to work— would we just be 10 islands, as distinct as the small, separate land masses that comprise Venice?

My first trip into the city with my class brought us to a beautiful church at the head of the Grand Canal—Santa Maria della Salute. The church is home to a very famous Tintoretto painting, entitled *The Wedding at Cana*, which had appeared in our reading. Unfortunately, when we got there, no one was present to let us into the sacristy that contained the painting. According to our professor, the readings and experiences in the first week could not possibly capture the painting. We would have to come back on our own and write a brief reflection to understand the written descriptions and see the fuller picture.

Experiences like these did allow my class to become friendlier and a bit more connected as the days went on, but if I were to choose a turning point for us, from a group of uncertain friends to something deeper, it would be the “Venice by Night” walk. We met in the main square. Before we began our walk, our professor encouraged us to use all of our senses. He would lead us through parts of the city that we probably hadn't seen, and our job was to simply take it all in. We weren't even to talk—this was about giving

Venice our full attention.

The walk felt like being caught inside of a movie. Music faded out, chatter and clanking in a restaurant faded, and the sounds of Venice, echoing over water and off of brick, were chillingly beautiful. The variety of smells, from jasmine and ocean to fresh fish and trash, was something I'd never taken particular notice of, but it was so strange and raw. I thought about how many snapshots make up a life—of places and people, of words and scents, feelings and breaths—and felt awe-inspired. I wondered how many things I'd glanced at each day of my life, but never truly seen. The same sentiment, I think, went for the members of my class. I wondered if they had felt or thought some of the same things I had, but the looks on everyone's faces once we came to the end of the walk, coupled with the quiet moments as we waited for our ferry, said it all to me.

Connected by the uniqueness of all that we had seen and experienced together, we had moved far beyond the initial awkwardness. Our time together had pushed us into a new realm—one of unity and easy friendship. As the next two and a half weeks passed by, my class grew more tightly knit by the day. We truly bonded, and I will always think of them as my Venice family.

As the class wound down into week four, there was something on my agenda that still needed to be done. I needed to visit the painting that we'd been unable to see our first week. Henry James, a writer we had studied in the course, described the painting as “a cluster of accidents; not an obvious order, but a sort of peopled and agitated chapter of life, in which the figures are submissive, pictorial notes.” Reading this quote anew and staring up at Tintoretto's massive, colorful canvas, I suddenly understood that my class itself was so like this painting we'd studied—blended together with the intention of something greater than us, complementary in our differences, and beautiful when unified into one picture.

I could have learned to love Venice and found all the beauty in my time abroad on my own, but when the best experiences in life are shared with friends, they take on a new life—growing, multiplying, and evolving until the pieces come together. They paint a vivid picture, where colors are blended, transforming from distinct shades into middle ground and giving way to appreciation for the uniqueness of other people and the picture we can make when we let our distinct shades blend.

*Featured Image by [Abby Paulson](#) / Heights Editor*



