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## Stress? What stress?

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## Stress? What stress?

*By Catherine Carabine*

The rain lashed hard against the window of the cottage as I tried to concentrate on the task in hand, I was surrounded by papers, files, investment documents, client valuations, tax returns and just about everything else I couldn't feel enthusiastic about; the April deadline was fast approaching when all the returns had to be filed, and here I was staring out onto a half completed landscaped garden like some bored schoolgirl chewing, as I was on the end of a pencil. I sat alone at my partner's large mahogany desk trying to find the motivation that would draw my eyes away from the garden where small puddles were rapidly turning into large pools as the water cascaded from the roof, over the gutters and into the overflowing drain. As I moved my stare from one element of gloom to another I suddenly caught sight of a blackbird that had taken shelter under the mud filled wheel barrow; he was standing on one leg his beak poking around in his plumped up feathers desperately trying to expel the droplets of water. 'Poor thing' I thought; you could almost tell by the expression in his bright yellow eye that he too was wondering if winter would ever end.

After convincing myself that my work was not going to go away and that no one else was going to do it for me, I knuckled down, the only sounds to be heard was the clicking of my fingernails on the laptop keys, the occasional sigh after each completed file was slapped down on the impressive pile and the thrashing rain desperately trying to get into the house. I had at last managed to move some of the mountain of paperwork from the in-tray on the right to the out-tray on the left. How I hated being this stressed!

The light continued to fade as late afternoon crept towards early evening and the reproduction brass desk lamp with its vivid green glass rectangular shade flickered briefly and suddenly failed with that unmistakable telltale ping which accompanies a dying bulb. "From every negative there is always a positive" I thought. I could stop working with a clear conscience; we had no spare tulip bulbs and as it was not far off five o'clock, a trip to the hardware store was out of the question, especially if I was to have dinner ready by the usual time. Those were going to be my rationally thought out excuses in case I had to defend myself against the lack of 'file swing' from the right to the left when my hard working, and probably bedraggled partner returned from his client visits!

I boiled the kettle and with my frothy cappuccino in hand I settled down on the sofa, my laptop ready and prepared for a brief browsing session; we needed a holiday and there was nothing better for raising the spirits than looking at blue skies and sun-

lit warm Mediterranean landscapes even if you couldn't afford it. Before long I was dreaming of sun drenched Piazza's, pasta lunches that just drift into late afternoons, oh and chilled 'Pinot Grigio'. As if by some strange coincidence, there on the screen flashing before my eyes was an article advertising flights and accommodation in Italy, a country I loved with a passion that was always at the top of my list of places to visit. I peered at the laptops built in camera, "This mysterious website must have been reading my mind, spooky" I thought as a loud crack followed by vertical streaks of hail shot from the direction of the thunderclap and broke the silent world of my thoughts for a brief moment. It was a private villa for rental in a small place called Porano just south of Orvieto in Umbria, a place neither Nick nor I had visited before. The holiday was tailored for four people, for one week and the flights were from our local airport. I nearly fell over the bottom step of the stairs in my rush to get to the office.



"It must be fate" I said to myself, as I flicked through our work schedules for the coming weeks.

"Yes that can be changed, and he won't want to go to that meeting, oh and that one was a last minute change, not his fault he had to reschedule so they can wait!"

Suddenly there were no appointments for the week being offered at a surprisingly good rate and I dashed back downstairs to look at the flights. This would be perfect; a cheap week away after the stress and strains of looking after 'other people's money', we could recharge our batteries and soak up some sunshine and Vitamin D, something the entire population of England was crying out for after all the wet weather, flooding and snow that we had had over the last few months. Quickly I jotted down the details.

Nick would be home just after six o'clock and I would have to make my holiday proposal all the more appealing. The Italian cookbook was already out of the bookrack

and I was thumbing through, flitting like a butterfly through the kitchen cupboards and gathering together the ingredients, the bottle of red wine was accustoming itself to the room temperature, "A bottle di vino rosso no, on second thoughts I'll make that two" I decided, adding another bottle of Rosso Di Montefalco, Nick's favourite Italian wine to the first. I was getting into the swing of it now, hoping that after the first bottle he would as well! With the table set, the scarlet red napkins folded in a fan delicately placed on the plain white crockery, our best Brunello wine glasses sparkling in the ambient light, I grabbed my coat and umbrella and headed for our local shop which I loved, it was not just a conventional corner shop as it had a delicatessen attached.

I added two lean sirloin steaks to my slightly extravagant list and once sliced and pan seared these would form the main course of Tagliata accompanied by rocket and gorgonzola.

"That will jog a few memories," I thought.

"I might not even have to bring the subject of a holiday up, he might just say

"Do you remember that time at the Italian lakes. . . . ."

and I would be there 'like a rat up a drain pipe' as they say,

"Well funny you should mention Italy. . . .". I would also prepare a typical Italian starter or Antipasti of salami and cured meats, Italian cheese and honey.

By now it was nearly six o'clock and after changing out of my wet clothes, I applied a little lipstick and brushed my hair before stoking up the wood burner, dimming the lights and adding some background music. The scene was set.

The wooden stable door suddenly burst open and there he stood, water droplets trickling from his nose, his suit soaked through and the Financial Times looking more suitable for doing something in Papier Mâché than reading.

"I'm sick to death of this climate, all it does is rain, if it carries on like this for much longer we'll all be swept away" he said, trying to correct the inside-out umbrella and allowing the rain that had been trying to break in all day to finally get inside the house. I just smiled to myself and continued cooking, I wasn't about to upset the mood I was trying to create.

"Go and get changed dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

"What's all this?" he said as he glanced in the direction of the dining table.

"Don't tell me I've forgotten an anniversary?" Romance was never Nick's strong point, I just smiled and giggled without replying.

The meal was scrumptious even though I say so myself and it was made all the more perfect by the Montefalco, another plus point when it came to my holiday plan as this was produced in Umbria, in a town just over seventy miles north east from where I was planning for us to stay, another positive I thought "a trip to the very region that your favourite wine comes from" was added to the vocabulary of my sales pitch.





Nick now completely chilled out after his day discussing finance, and risk profiles, I topped up his glass and sure enough

"Do you remember the time. . . . . ." and I nearly swore as the doorbell rang, it was Richard and Linda our next door neighbours.

"Get the corkscrew out Catherine, got some good news, time to celebrate" Richard said holding aloft a bottle whilst unbuttoning his coat and wiping the rain from his face.

"Ciao babies, I'll open another bottle. . . ." Nick said slightly slurring his words and swaying as he rose from his seat, suffering I suspect from my sipping and refilling his glass tactics, introduced as an afterthought into my plan.

"We have only gone and won £500 on a scratch card," Linda said grinning from ear to ear and jigging up and down with excitement.

"Mmmmm. . ." I thought, discreetly raising an eyebrow whilst filling their glasses at the same time. "This might just fall nicely into place!"

"We've decided to escape this British weather and head off for some sun" Richard said.

"I know that look Catherine," Linda said looping her arm through mine.

"What are you up to?"

Two weeks later we were all stepping out of the air conditioned atmosphere of the aircraft into a warmth that bounced off the airport tarmac and shimmered on the distant runway; a brief glimpse of a beautiful powder blue sky with not a cloud to be seen, greeted us as we followed directional Italian hands and smiles to 'arrivals'.

The temperature was into the mid twenties and the depressing rain and wind along with my workload slipped further and further from my mind with every step. Italy was as beautiful as ever and almost immediately my spirits soared. Here I felt alive, I had already developed a spring in my step, gone was the everyday feeling of just existing, here there was no stress and my eyes quickly began taking in the beauty of my surroundings something I was normally too busy to appreciate at home.



The journey to the villa was an immediate source of pleasure the scarlet red poppies intermingled with tall grasses and ox-eye daises danced in the gentle breeze, whilst the vineyards with their regimented lines and ancient wooden steaks divided the landscape. Hundreds of silvery leaved olive trees sat on terraces carved out of the hills each level marked by dry-stone walls lovingly built by past generations; gnarled and twisted limbs and trunks, natural sculptures set against rolling hills. Ruined barns and farmhouses their past occupation marked with Cypress trees stood like broken teeth against a now cobalt blue sky. I was back and totally absorbed in my surroundings! The small villa which was part of a larger estate was what I can only describe as rustic, and much to Linda's dismay a popular choice with the local insect fraternity. The bedroom furniture was also unexpected and unusual for a typical Italian home. It put me in mind of a room from a skiing lodge high in the Swiss Alps. The pine wood headboards had been intricately carved out with hearts and flowers whilst the sloping ceiling and lower walls were clad in lengths of the same. The bathroom was clean, but in need of modernisation and having a personal hate of plastic shower curtains

which has a tendency to grab you in a rather intimate manner as soon as the water is sprayed out of the shower head, I made a point of not closing the curtain and so by holding the shower head in one hand and lathering up with the other, I avoided spraying water all over the room. This also gave the several Italian Field Crickets warning of my intentions not to tolerate their presence for any length of time; resident they may be but I had to draw the line at sharing the shower! Nevertheless I was always amused at their habit of escaping the scene like kids in a sack race as soon the first splashes of water hit their coveted domain. Something that they did not get chance to do when Linda got in judging from the now familiar morning screams that could be heard together with the flapping of a towel and the charge of running feet.



After a couple of lazy days, sat relaxing by the pool and soaking up some of that all important Vitamin D, we ventured into Orvieto, a beautiful medieval town perched on a table of solid rock. I had read that it was founded by the Etruscans and is peppered with tunnels, tombs and storehouses beneath. Slowly we made our way up through the narrow paved streets, bustling with local people and crowds of tourists. We wandered past the numerous shops displaying ceramics of every shape, size and colour from huge ornate urns to small delicate china espresso cups and on into the main Piazza in search of the famous Romanesque-Gothic Duomo. Once there, the Cathedral towered above us, the black and white striped marble intricately carved, depicted scenes from the old and new testaments on the base of the pilasters next to each of the three huge doors, the main one being made of Bronze, it was an amazing sight. It is said that it took some 300 years to build and you can see why, its interior is just as striking.



Lunchtime was fast approaching and rather than have a typically long Italian lunch we decided to grab something quick and eat it on the move. We found a Panini/Pizza shop, it was crowded with local Italians lining up to be served; it must be good was my first thought. The big display board hung over the counter offering an astonishing array of options, there were well over 20 different types of fillings and then you had to choose the wrapper; Ciabatta, Panini, or Pane. Soon it was our turn and the four of us, heads tilted upwards were now gazing at the menu and being indecisive, especially as none of us really had any idea of what it was that was on offer. The young assistant focused on me with an expectant look in her eyes, my dark hair, olive skin and black clothes topped off with a pair of Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses had given her the impression that I was Italian and a machine-gun like succession of words hit my stunned expression all at once. All four of us looked at each other and laughed

“Aah Inglese!” she said, pleasantly but knowingly, joining in the laughter as we all decided simultaneously to opt for the standard version of the ‘anything will do’ lunch concoction, on this occasion we couldn’t go wrong with the Pizza. We were now pointing and gesticulating as the assistant’s metal tongs hovered hesitantly in the general direction of the Pizza counter, she, waiting patiently with a broad grin on her face. Nick took four cans from the chiller cabinet and placed them on the counter, the assistant then said something in her native Italian tongue and we froze, our expressions now blank with just a tinge of embarrassment.

“Sì” I said, in response to what suddenly dawned on me was a question, I merely nodded agreement without really knowing quite what I had agreed to.

“What did she say?” Nick said turning to me with a puzzled look, more at my response I think, than her question! “Your guess is as good as mine,” I said peering over the counter and looking about for clues. With some uncertainty and after paying we moved to one side to wait. I pondered absentmindedly over a large display of ice-cream and we started to try and decipher the labels describing the different flavours. We were suddenly distracted from our game by a group of tourists gathering outside in the Piazza, each deep in conversation with their neighbour; they followed, sheep-like, a bright pink polka-dot umbrella which seemed to hover above the crowd unattached until I noticed it being waved aloft by the until now unseen tour guide, desperately trying to herd her flock into some semblance of order. I was suddenly snapped out of my voyeuristic amusement as the assistant’s mobile phone rang loudly to the tune of Ricky Martin’s ‘She bangs’ and the word ‘Pronto’ boomed through the air, once again we were back listening to the sounds of the café, the gurgle of the espresso machine and the loud hiss of the steam-jet warming the milk, when I noticed the neatly wrapped parcel on the counter next to our drinks.

“It’s ready I said to Nick look,” pointing to the package sat on the blue and white ceramic tiled counter. I picked up the items, waved to the assistant who was engaged in conversation and shouted, “Grazie.”

Thank you. Another of the Italian words I had managed to learn and from my phrase book on the plane here.

“That wasn’t so bad was it? The pent up tension that comes with sheer frustration and being placed on the spot slowly drained away and always positive, I said



"Now we can add ordering food in Italian to our list of skills."

Nick, who was by now ravenous and keen to tuck into his Pizza, walked over to join Richard and Linda.

Once seated on the steps on the other side of the Piazza, I opened our parcel to find. . . . well, I'm not entirely sure what it was, but it definitely wasn't Pizza, in fact it looked more like the most enormous Cornish Pasty you have ever seen. Feeling my face redden with embarrassment, I quickly closed the wrapper and darted off across the square hoping not to have to explain my blunder to Nick, Richard and Linda who were still distracted by the hovering pink polka-dots.

I say darted but perhaps that wasn't quite the right word considering I was wearing a pair of three and a half inch black stiletto's, maybe tottered or even teetered would have been more apt. By now I had been swallowed up by the crowd but still moving in the general direction of the fast-food shop when suddenly I was ejected, unceremoniously from my much loved shoes, one of the thin sleek pencil heels had fitted, rather too snugly, into a small crevice in the beautiful, ancient cobbled surface of the Piazza. Fortunately I was inconspicuous, the attention of the crowd was still concentrated in the direction of the Polka-dots. I was hobbling about in my stocking feet while the toe of my shoe pointed in the direction of the sky like some controversial exhibit at the 'Tate Modern'. I was now trying to balance on one foot whilst bending over to gently ease my precious shoe out of its snare when the shout

"Andiamo" (which I later found out means "Let's go!") went out from the direction of the umbrella and I was left fully exposed. Nick, Richard and Linda who at first appeared totally oblivious (or were they just pretending they didn't know me?) eventually rescued me. Once back on my feet or heels and no longer doing my Bambi on ice impersonations, I finally reached the shop, out of breath and feeling very dishevelled. How on earth I was going to explain that I had taken someone else's lunch was beyond me! The shop by now had built up another steady flow of customers so there was little I could do but take my place at the end of the queue clutching the cold limp package, now showing similar signs of distress, the wrapper having absorbed most of its moisture and olive oil. I prayed for the shop to suffer a temporary lull whilst I tried to make my apologies. The assistant having recognised me shouted "Signora" at the top of her voice and gestured for me to come forward, I was already a reluctant celebrity and with my heart 'beating ten to the dozen' and a wave of heat rising up the back of my neck, I edged forward. She was waving a white package and was giggling whilst chatting undeterred to a regular customer. I wondered if she detected my stress or if she was telling her friend of my stupidity, I could have died! Much to my relief, she simply handed me the package and said in her best English "Do not worry it eez no a problema. Signora".

"Stress; what stress?"

## About the author

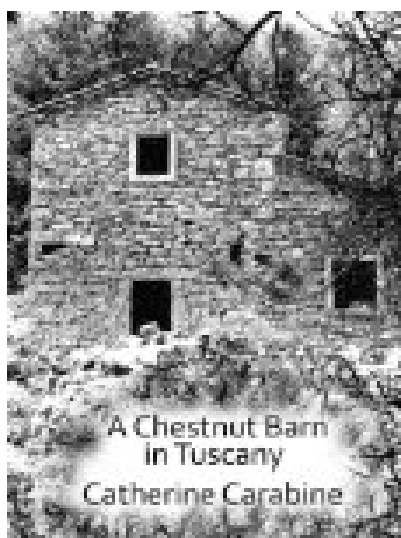
Catherine Carabine was born near London and grew up in the South West of England.

Her undeniable enthusiasm for all things Italian started in her early teens and blossomed during her formative years. Holiday visits to Italy only served to fuel her passion; deciding to make Tuscany the idyllic location for her wedding she unintentionally stumbles across a revelation that was not only difficult to come to terms with, but would reverberate through her deepest thoughts for many months to come. The story is revealed in her e-book.

Later and after leaving behind the stressful and sometimes thankless world of financial services, Catherine moves to Northern Tuscany with her husband Nick; here she finds a new self-confidence, a new way of life and begins to understand why this change of life has been so easy. Her new understanding has led to the desire to write and to share her experiences of the country, the people and the culture that she cares so much about.

'A Chestnut Barn in Tuscany' is her Debut book and she hopes the first of many. It will be available to buy in paperback form on Amazon by the end of July 2013. Life at the Chestnut Barn is still evolving and everyday brings a new dimension to a complete change of lifestyle.

## A Chestnut Barn in Tuscany



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