My choice wasn't very exotic, though. I had decided to go to Norway for the next two semesters. However, as I sat there in the tiny little loft apartment I rented downtown, I suddenly realized that winters in Oslo are oh, so much colder than Reykjavik. I knew that the philosophy department of the University of Iceland had a good relationship with an Italian university and it was on this moment I decided that Genova would be my destination, not Oslo.

I am of the opinion that the Erasmus exchange programme is probably the best thing the European Union has introduced in all its lifetime. One can debate the CAP and the CFP and the pros and cons of all the other policies, but Erasmus has made it possible for so many European youngsters to explore other countries, to grow up a little bit away from home, learn to stand on their own feet and given the original goal of the European cooperation, it has most definitely increased love and understanding between citizens of different member countries.

The year I spent in Italy has marked my whole life. I have more vivid memories from those 11 months, than from the five years before and after. Most of those memories are good and created the fertile ground for the intense but sometimes rather difficult relationship I have had with Italy ever since.

I'll come to it later why it has been difficult. First the positive things. For a Nordic woman from a rather closed, tacit culture, where no one will talk to another person on the bus, it was a liberation to enter the open, vivid, friendly culture the Italians practice. I could have made new friends every single day. I studied hard and I partied hard. My roommate which I ended up living with after a long row of coincidences (like being evicted from a house for being a foreigner: "Albania, Islanda…problemi", the landlord said) is like a sister to me. Her family in Milan adopted me. I can still come to her mother's house at any time and my pajamas will be

waiting on the bed and she will feed me home made pasta until I break out in tears of sheer happiness.

The language is enchanting. I did not speak a word before leaving, So I just learned it. I've learned to love and adore the Italian language with all its possibilities and fabulous body language. I sometimes take a job as a tour guide here in Iceland for a day, just because I long to listen to – and watch – the Italian passengers talking.

For a 22 year old, it was Paradise. As a philosophy student I was exposed to a different style of teaching and learning. I took my first oral exams (in Italian), sweating and shaking and wanting to run off, watching as my experienced class mates answered every question from the professors with a flow of words in the rhythm of a machine gun. However, keeping in mind how the Icelandic student loan system works I new I had to get through this and pass. So I did and I am forever proud and grateful that it worked out.

I went back to Iceland with an enlarged heart. I had met so many people I grew to love, eaten so much good food, had such good times, learned so many new things. What could possibly turn this relationship sour? The answer is both simple and complicated, as often is the case in any relationship.

When I decided to continue my studies and go to graduate school, the choice was easy. I wanted to go to one of the top three universities in the world in the field of international studies. It so happens that the great Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies offers its' students to take the first year of their M.A. studies in Bologna and the second year in Washington, D.C. Perfect! Inside an American bubble in Italy with all my people, aperitivos. architecture, sangiovese, ragú etc.

What changed between 1997 and 2002? Well, I did. As a more mature person with interest in politics and a staunch feminist, I suddenly realized all the dark sides of Italian society. It was tiresome not being able to sit down anywhere on my own. A young, blond woman will never walk alone in that country. The incredible sexism that seems to be permeated into every part of life just made me crazy. Politics? Just before I arrived to Bologna, one of the professors of my school was assasinated in the street. Marco Biagi's crime was to suggest that labour laws should be loosened a little to increase flexibility in the market. Boom. That cost him his life.

Berlusconi just kept returning with all the sickening corruption and criminality surrounding that man. The result of the politicians' incapabilites has led to empty cradles and brain drain. Almost every intelligent, capable Italian I know – and they are quite many – has emigrated. They live in London, Brussels, New York, Geneva, even in Akureyri, up north in Iceland. Very few of them really wanted to. Italians love their families and their food and history and beautiful landscape. But they can't work there. There is no meritocracy, especially for women. So they take their capabilities, experience and knowledge somewhere else. Other nations reap the benefit. This is the generation that should be taking over, but I'm afraid it won't happen. They only go home for vacation and to see the family they left behind.

This has made me very sad. My own fosterfamily still lives in Milan, but things are really tough for the small artigiani these days. My "stepmother", Maria, a hard working lady in her late 60's just said to me the last time I saw her: "I always get startled when the door bell rings. I'm so afraid that there is some one bringing me more bills I need to pay."

So yes – Italy and I have had our difficulties. I still cheer for the Azzurri. I still sing along when I listen to Pino Daniele and Jovanotti. I still have this warm feeling in my heart, whenever I think about all the positive, beautiful things my foster country has. If I'm feeling a bit down,

all I need to do is to think about that evening in Catania, Sicily…

I would like to return to Italy with my family and give my children the chance to get to know the country I love so dearly, but has also given me a heartache. I don't want my daughter to become a valletta or even to know what it is. I don't think modeling is the coolest thing a girl can do. All the same, there is something in the core of the Italian soul that is so genuine, original and good that I always have to return. This is not said with arrogance, because Iceland can certainly not boast of a perfect system and the greatest politicians. I'm just hoping that things will turn out the best way for both countries so I can continue to defend the Azzurri and proudly serve my Genovese pesto for years to come, without people striking up a conversation about Berlusconi, corruption, unemployment, bribes and political chaos. That is my wish.