



KISS ME, KATE
FROM LEFT: BRANDI
QUINONES, NIKI TAYLOR,
KRISTEN KLOSTERMAN,
KATE MOSS, AND SHALOM
HARLOW, PHOTOGRAPHED
BY ELLEN VON UNWERTH
FOR VOGUE, 1993.

Valley Girl

When her family traded its native Rome for Los Angeles, CHIARA BARZINI looked to an image of Kate Moss to find her place in the sun.

We were shooting a commercial for an Italian version of Spam when my father told us that our family was moving to Hollywood. "Don't you want to go where it's always summer?" he asked my brother and me between takes. We smiled for the camera as we ate salad topped with fluorescent red meat, duly molded and sprayed by a food stylist to deliver what the director called "a glorious, meaty glow."

It was the spring of 1994. Berlusconi was entering politics, and my father, a director when he wasn't appearing in his friends' commercials, predicted that Italy was about to go down the drain. The best solution, he announced, was to leave, and conquer Los Angeles. I was fifteen, enrolled in one of Rome's most prestigious classical-studies high schools. My twelve-year-old brother had just discovered the joys of taking public transportation unaccompanied by an adult. Neither Latin declensions nor subway lines would be useful where we were going.

I didn't like jogging, I hated the idea of having to drive everywhere, and I was unsettled by the existence of an artificial place like Disneyland. I spent the next month sulking. And yet, I was a little curious about America. My grandfather had lived in New York City for many years and made his big break as a writer with a caustic book about our national character called *The Italians*. His last girlfriend, a Washington, D.C.-born countess called Viviana "Vivi" Crespi, who spoke with a Southern drawl and was intimate with the Kennedy family, used to appear at our Roman doorstep brimming with gifts from the legendary American toy store F.A.O. Schwarz. My aunt Benedetta, a stunning woman who had lived in Manhattan before settling in Milan, told us stories about posing for Richard Avedon and Irving Penn in the sixties, dating Salvador Dalí, and attending Truman Capote's Black and White Ball. My thirteen-year-old cousin Anna, who lived in Washington, D.C., with her journalist parents, sent me mix tapes introducing me to pivotal American music, including an essential Nirvana baptism in 1991.

I prepared by spending my afternoons watching films about L.A.—*Chinatown*, *The Graduate*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and the seminal surf movies *Point Break* and *Big Wednesday*—and became intrigued by the city's beach life. I took out the American *Vogues* I'd collected through the years, sat on my windowsill overlooking Saint Peter's Basilica, and sought out clues about my imminent future. I stopped at a photo of Kate Moss and other models lying in a row on the sand, and gave my first sigh of relief. So this was L.A.: a land where girls wore heart-shaped sunglasses, bikinis, and lip gloss. They seemed happy and bronzed, not burned like the sun-crazed Italian girls. NOSTALGIA > 70

nostalgia **California Dreaming**

of the nineties. They puckered their lips—all of them, except for Kate Moss, the most beautiful and mysterious of the bunch. This was what reassured me. I didn't have to smile in California. There were options.

Two months later I stood with my brother next to a SHARK ALERT sign on Malibu's El Matador Beach, staring at ferocious, tall waves creaming on the sand. I closed my eyes and felt the cold wind scratch against my naked thighs: Nature in California was hostile and unforgiving. This didn't stop my mother from getting naked and sprawling next to my father on the sand. My parents were nudists. All it took was a ray of sunshine and a body of water, and their clothes came undone in an instant.

A helicopter roared in the sky. It was a cop screaming at my parents from a megaphone to put their bathing suits back on. When they got a ticket for indecent exposure, I saw their folly clearly: They were treating Los Angeles as if it were a beach town on the Mediterranean. They had no clue where they were, and, worse still, our father had miscalculated the family budget. Instead of living in Beverly Hills, as my brother and I had fantasized, we'd landed in the scorching San Fernando Valley basin, in Van Nuys, where gunshots, police sirens, and the roar of the 405 Freeway became our new sound track. After picking us up from school, our parents drove us around the Valley in a 1973 convertible Cadillac. My mother played the part of the Hollywood diva in her cat-eye sunglasses while my father told tales of the early 1900s, when Van Nuys and the southeastern part of the San Fernando Valley were prime neighborhoods for movie shoots. "Stars lived here!" he insisted. "Did you know Marilyn Monroe went to Van Nuys High in 1941?"

"Exactly—1941," I shot back. The L.A. riots' aftershocks were still fresh, and the city was rife with racial tension. The epicenter of the Northridge earthquake, which had occurred on my fifteenth birthday (another terrible presage), was just a few miles away from our new house. The forces were speaking clearly to us: Go back to your country.

My parents, however, loved the anonymity their new life afforded them. Nobody judged them on the basis of their last name or the reviews of my father's latest film; they could go grocery shopping in their pajamas. But I was infuriated. How was I supposed to be enriched by a labyrinthine mass of freeway overpasses? My few friends all had cars, but when we went out, they proposed afternoon visits to the mall. Back in Rome, being underage meant very little if you had a Vespa. I felt trapped.

American school was nothing like what I was used to. I had moved from a high school of 300 students to one of 3,500, where I was ordered not to wear red or blue so as to not be affiliated with the Bloods or the Crips. Even though I spoke English, I was automatically placed in an ESL class. My teacher kept thinking I came from Rome, Georgia. I complained to my parents every chance I got, and befriended a group of Salvadoran kids who went to raves, the only parties a teenager could get into without I.D. On Sundays, I would walk aimlessly up and down the grid of the San Fernando Valley, collecting objects at yard

sales. Something about claiming other people's histories made me feel like I was validating my present. It was a way to accept a city that seemed to have, and to want, no memory of its past.

For all my homesickness, when I returned to Italy the following summer, I soon felt as out of place as I had in L.A. My old schoolmates seemed infantile with their faded political debates that hadn't evolved since the protests of 1968. My best friends listened to Inti-Illimani and peaceful reggae music, but I was secretly falling in love with Trent Reznor's dark and gutsy voice, looping the uncensored version of "Closer" on my yellow Sony Sports Walkman while fantasizing about impossible loves. I had transformed into a strange hybrid: an Italian Valley Girl.

After two years of "taking meetings" in L.A., my father was finally gaining entry to the world that had drawn us away from home. It helped that my mother, who was horrified by the juice culture that was beginning to emerge in California, was an amazing cook. Valeria Golino, Greta Scacchi,

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Carla Gugino, Danny Huston, and Martin Donovan (a coscreenwriter of *Death Becomes Her*) all came down from "the hills," lured by my mother's arrosto alla genovese.

In 1998, my father finally made his debut behind the camera in L.A.: an Italian-American TV series to be shot at the Alexandria. The downtown hotel had been one of the most luxurious venues in the city in the early 1920s, with gold-leaf detailing and a ballroom with stained-glass ceilings. Rudolph Valentino once had a suite there, but by this point it was a run-down, semisquatted mass of apartment buildings. My brother and I ended up writing and starring in one of the episodes, with my nerdy high school friends volunteering as crew members. My mother produced and worked in the catering department.

Right when things seemed to be picking up, my brother fell in with the wrong crowd. He is younger than I, and was more vulnerable. Some of his friends were involved in gangs and drugs, and after a few graffiti-related experiences with the LAPD, it became clear that Los Angeles was not the right city for him at that moment. So in 1999, five years after moving out west, my parents decided to head back to the comforts of the Eternal City. "Aren't you sick of living where it's always summer?" my father asked now. By this point, I wasn't.

When I said goodbye to my family, I felt as though I was betraying them, but I knew I had to stay. I went on to live in Santa Cruz, the Bay Area, and eventually Brooklyn. When I finally made my way back to Rome ten years later, I found myself longing for wildness and violent winds. I missed the snow in New York and the Topanga Canyon sunset. I forced my boyfriend, Luca, to move to a remodeled barnyard close to the sea: an imaginary Malibu. We had to drive everywhere. I kept writing in English. I even started jogging. I have my own family now and a rich life in Rome, but my heart still aches for a life that keeps living itself without me. □