

# PLUMBING THE DEPTHS

After he finished matric, **Nick Dall** spent a gap year in Italy with two school friends. The Easter weekend that year put hair on their chests.



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**D**uring my matric year, I persuaded my two best friends – Eliot and Miles – to come with me to Perugia for a gap year. Perugia is a university town, kind of like the Stellenbosch of Italy. All three of us were fascinated by the Italian culture and language.

We enrolled at the University for Foreigners and found ourselves a grungy flat on the third floor of a five-storey

medieval house, with flower boxes outside every window and stairs that puffed plumes of ancient orange dust when you walked on them.

The first few weeks went well. We made friends: Bjorn the rake-thin Swede who ate two bags of pasta every night, Adriana the mushroom farmer from Brazil, and Bo the Korean opera singer who was studying Italian so that he could do a better job at belting out *La donna è mobile*.

We dragged ourselves to class at least a few days every week, sampled more than our fair share of the local wine and even learnt to cook the odd (fairly ropery) meal.

But just before midnight on Good Friday, things started to go south. Eliot was the first to notice the problem: “Guys, the loo won’t flush.”

“No wonder, it probably got bored of waiting for you to finish,” said Miles.

“No, seriously. It won’t go down.”

“Let me have a look,” Miles said, brimming with confidence after his recent decision to join the British Army. He grabbed a plunger and attacked the problem with a vigour that Her Majesty would have been proud of. Eventually we breathed a collective sigh of relief as the room filled with a soothing gurgle and all incriminating evidence disappeared from sight – only to reappear spewing forth from the shower drain.

Miles leapt into action again and redirected his strike. This was not a good idea. Soon, what was once a river, became an ocean.

Eliot fled the room and took refuge in his bed.

Miles and I were made of sterner stuff, probably because we’d spent a month travelling around India the year before. Open sewers? Tick. Pit loos? Done that.

“We’ve got to isolate the damage,” I said, business-like.

“A dam!” Miles suggested.

“Exactly. Those bricks in the hall...”

“But, it’ll seep through.”

“We’ll put them in plastic bags.”

For the most, our plan was a success. What little filth did manage to break through our dam was easily disposed of with a mop. We sat back and thought about what to do next. I washed my hands and, not thinking anything of the gurgles coming from the bathroom, poured us both a glass of rough red wine from the five-litre flagon that lived on our kitchen table. “This is the kind of thing we’ll look back on in a few years’ ti-”

I was interrupted by the flush of the neighbours’ toilet. The “gravity” of the situation began to seep in. The dam wall we had built was also going to have to keep out anything that the floors above us could dish up: the noisy (and extremely punctual) local lovmakers next door, the brooding Belgian computer gamers above us, and pasta-eating Bjorn on the top floor.

We changed into board shorts and sang Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall” as we worked. This was a problem that was going to have to be dealt with at the source. Plastic espresso cups and a sense of humour were all the tools we’d need. We crouched in the shower and took turns to scoop the sewage into our cups, out of the window and onto the cobbled street below, taking care to avoid late-night stragglers stumbling home from the disco.

**We only just made it through the night.** We woke Eliot and the three of us migrated to a café for breakfast. Miles and I rushed to the Gents for a “shower” (liquid soap and toilet paper) while Eliot enjoyed a brioche and a macchiato.

We tried calling the landlord, the letting agent and every name listed under “*idraulico*” (plumber in Italian) in the Yellow Pages, but it was Easter Saturday in a very Catholic country. One night at the front line had been doable, at

times even amusing. But 72 more hours?

We traipsed to the Hotel Umbria, phrase book in hand. Manuel, the concierge there, was our only Italian friend and we were getting desperate. As it turned out, Manuel’s brother (well, not his real brother but like a brother) was *idraulico* (well, not real *idraulico* but *idraulico*’s helper) and he hadn’t gone away for the weekend (well, not far).

About six hours and several mixed messages later, Manuel’s non-brother arrived at our flat bearing a plastic bucket of grubby tools and an electric compressor almost like the thing you’d use to inflate an air mattress. He lifted the lid of the cistern and shook his head. He poked at the outlet of the shower with a screwdriver and muttered. He stirred the putrid minestrone in the sink with – of all things – the end of his tape measure, and sighed. Eventually he hooked his compressor up to our loo, but the pathetic sound of the wheezing motor as it struggled against its invisible foe left us all in no doubt of the outcome. Manuel’s brother actually said it himself: “You need *idraulico*.”

Luckily, his boss had only gone as far as Assisi for the weekend, and he was prepared to drive the 24 km back to Perugia to deal with our problem – for a handsome fee. He was everything an *idraulico* should be: bald, moustached and portly, and wearing a grubby checked shirt and jeans that slipped down his bum every time he bent over. His tools were in a holster around his waist and his diesel-operated compressor was as big as a spit-roast sheep.

He didn’t mess around. We were each given an oversized rubber stopper and told to block exit points. Eliot chose the sink, Miles the basin and I plonked my left foot on a bung in the shower. While we were readying ourselves, the *idraulico* opened all the windows and, gesticulating enthusiastically, shouted “*Boom! Boom! Aperta!*” (Which means “open”).

He attached a giant plunger to the compressor and inserted it into the toilet. He revved the engine and we all pushed our plugs down with extra force. The second time he did this there was a loud boom and suddenly everything was indeed *aperta*. We wiped our arms and faces and shook his gloved hand vigorously.

**I’m not sure exactly** how that Easter shaped the three of us, but I know that it had an effect. Miles never did join the army, opting instead to become a religious historian who has written definitive biographies of several Christian saints, but – as far as I know – no treatises on medieval plumbing.

Eliot is a social worker who has done good deeds in communities as diverse as Langa, Lusaka and Lewisham. He’s no stranger to squalid conditions, but he’s still a big fan of his own clean, functioning loo.

I haven’t done anything nearly as meaningful as either of them and I’ve since experienced even more plumbing disasters. There was the sink in Argentina that spewed water for 17 days straight, the shower in Vietnam that nearly electrocuted me and the washing machine in Bolivia that leaked so badly I got home to soapsuds pouring out of my front door.

Now, for the first time in years, I finally live in a place with decent sanitation. But I’m not out of the woods yet: I have two kids in nappies...

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