

# Herculaneum

I was not the first person in my family to travel to Europe.

Aunt Susie had visited France back in the seventies, the trip still never far from her tongue. All of Aunt Susie's nieces and nephews knew about her ascent of Notre Dame, her exploration of the Louvre, and her profile pose for a sketch artist in Montmartre. Our favorite Aunt Susie story, though, was the one my sister and I called "The Legend of the Lost Hotel Key." When we first heard it as kids, the story revolved around a handsome Parisian hotel manager named Henri. Since then, Henri's role had faded, gradually supplanted by a female concierge "dressed fashionably, yet sensibly."

"European men think American girls are of dubious virtue," Aunt Susie said while I rolled my blue jeans into her ancient suitcase. When I didn't respond, she wrapped her bony fingers around my wrist and added, "They'll pursue a pretty thing like you, saying all manner of rude things."

"Oh?" I responded.

"I can't even repeat the filth I heard," she said.

I asked her a few times, but she still wouldn't tell me.

My younger sister was married. My younger brother already had two children. At Thanksgiving that year, the family had begun calling me Aunt Susie Junior. None of them were at all surprised when I announced my own trip to Europe.

The first leg of my journey took me to Miami, which is another place I've always wanted to visit. Back then, I had only been to six states, and three of them—Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky—were gimmes since you can practically walk to them from my home. Running through Miami Airport for my connection, foreign languages scraped against me—exhilarating, exotic, and just a little bit threatening. Would two weeks in Italy feel like this? My stomach scrunched so tight that sleep on the Miami to Lisbon leg seemed inconceivable, but before I knew it, the flight attendant was shaking me awake.

“I'm in Europe,” I screamed inside myself, taking big gulps of European air.

“Those are European chairs,” I thought to myself as I walked through the terminal in Lisbon.

“These are European toilets,” I said, already a little wary of European toilet paper.

The customs man opened my blank passport. “I am the first,” he said, stamping my passport clumsily.

Hardly, I thought, before rushing to the Alitalia gate for the final leg of the trip.

When I finally put down my bag in a tiny bed and breakfast in Rome, I was achingly exhausted, so I put on my nicest dress and walked to a restaurant. Before I said a word, the hostess handed me an English menu and escorted me to a table squeezed among five other tables.

“Are you British?” asked the young man sitting a breadstick’s distance to my right.

“American,” I responded uneasily.

He was a bank teller from Milan, making his first trip to Rome. He seemed innocuous enough—certainly not the type who would say all manner of rude things. Regardless, I agreed to meet him at the Roman Forum the next day, where we enjoyed a nice tour followed by a nice lunch.

Now, I love nice. I believe nice is one of the highest virtues. I have nice friends. I will marry nice. But nice wasn’t what I was seeking on this trip, so I gave him a nice hug after lunch and sent him on his way, feigning jet lag.

The Trevi Fountain, Castel Sant’Angelo, Vatican City, the Pantheon...I saw none of those. Heading back to my B&B after lunch, I walked into a bar for a drink of fizzy water and was soon enveloped by Italians who thought *I* was exotic. I stayed until two that morning and then returned each day to eat artichokes and pasta and cakes and olives. It was there that I discovered a profound capacity to consume wine. It was there that I magically began to understand conversations in Italian. I made out with two men simultaneously. I learned to appreciate free-form jazz and abstract painting. My interior architecture shifted from bauhaus to rococo. I finally learned what semiotics meant. When Martina the waitress was sick, I took over for her, earning a thrilling amount of lira, which I blew on a purse designed by a tattooed artist who held court at the bar. I met cops and criminals, a former nun, and a former man. The whole experience was an acid trip for people who would never dream of dropping acid. And then, six days into it,

my upbringing shook me so sternly that I suddenly felt lazy and wasteful. I bought a ticket for Napoli because Martina the waitress said it was a great place to visit.

That train to Napoli was as sleek as an Italian fashion model, and I knew something about Italian fashion models, having made out with one during a particularly dreamy night at the bar. Watching the scenery blur by, my zen was interrupted by an old man. "A woman should not travel in Napoli by herself," he announced.

I ordinarily discount advice from men, but his wife and several other women in the car nodded their heads in agreement.

This couldn't be. I explained about Martina the waitress. The tone in the compartment, however, was unwavering. Finally, a young Canadian woman piped up. "Go see the ruins instead," she said.

"Pompeii?" I asked, trying to sort out hazy memories from National Geographic specials.

"Pompeii is for generic tourists," the Canadian said. "The real travelers go to Ercolano."

She showed me a little dot on a map and gave me precise directions, which I really should have written down because the Napoli Centrale terminal made my head pound. I criss-crossed the station without seeing signs for Ercolano. Finally, I tried out my Italian at the information booth.

"Downstairs. Look for the *Circumvesuviana*," said the woman at the booth. "And be very careful."

The stairwell had such a horror movie vibe that I could practically hear the audience yelling, “Don’t go down there!” A grouchy woman sold me a token, which I deposited into an old-fashioned turnstyle that shrieked like a gothic gate as it spun me around. A train soon pulled up, and everyone but me made a mad dash for it.

The seats on the Circumvesuviana smelled like fear and urine, so standing for the ride wasn’t an inconvenience. Signs on the train warned of pickpockets, but I was vigilant, not anxious. After all, my money and credit cards were neatly sealed inside the zipped-up inner pockets of a very uncool pair of pants that my sister had made for me, while my passport hung from an even less cool neck pouch purchased at AAA. I put on my toughest don’t-screw-with-me look developed during a high school math club field trip to Cleveland.

About forty minutes later, my possessions and I got off the tiny train station in Ercolano, safe and sound. Then, while squinting at the town map outside the platform, Aunt Susie’s ratty old suitcase vanished. Poof.

I ran out of the station, looking for anyone who could help me solve this serious crime. I flagged down a man in an official looking uniform who turned out to be a Fiat mechanic. I then ran into a beauty parlor, a clothing store, and a grocery store with a dead pig in the window. I screamed my plight at a very baffled gardener. My shaky Italian vanished down a pool of panic. I had become the crazy foreign lady running through the town, yelling incomprehensible gibberish. Finally, I plopped down on a park bench, head in my hands,

“Do you need help?”

I glanced up to see a poorly dressed, unattractive older man. I hurried away from him, rushing into a bar where I ordered a cold drink and put the chilled glass against my forehead.

The scary man soon reappeared in the bar.

“Forgive me,” he said in English. “I am sorry for frightening you. I did not mean to offend you. My appearance is not good.” He shook his head in dismay. “However, my offer to help is sincere. How may I assist you?” he asked, bowing his head slightly.

The bar was filled with women. Emboldened, I studied his eyes, which were actually gentle and kind. The theft poured out of me. He listened sympathetically, offering a handkerchief, which I refused, blowing my nose instead on a cocktail napkin.

“You want to report this to the police, yes?” he asked.

I nodded.

“However, your suitcase is already several towns away,” he said with a heavy sigh.

I cursed in Italian.

“Is there anything vital—money, medicine, jewelry—that you must reclaim?” he asked.

I was thirty-two years old. My can’t-live-without-em medicines were several decades in the future. My only jewelry—a silver necklace handed down from Grannie Eleanor—lay securely inside a dresser in Cincinnati. The clothes in my suitcase had a combined value of roughly seventeen dollars.

I shook my head.

He smiled. "Then you have lost little of value but gained an excellent story. Truly, a spectacular trade."

I squeaked out a tiny laugh.

"But, practically speaking," the man said, "you need a place to stay."

This started to feel not alright again.

"The best place to stay," he continued, "is *// Scavi*. It means 'the ruins,' but the name refers to archeology, not the quality of the hotel, which is more than satisfactory."

He insisted on walking me over, which I declined, but he followed me anyway, even opening the hotel door for me. He then negotiated with a stunned looking desk clerk who gave me the room for practically nothing.

My ugly old benefactor then bowed again, and asked if I would join him and some friends for dinner that night. "I suspect you will find my companions agreeable," he added. "Most people do."

The desk clerk, a woman of about fifty, whispered, "Si, si, si," to me.

"How many companions?" I asked.

"Five," he said. "Including my wife."

"And just what is your wife's name?" I asked in a way that would have made Aunt Susie proud.

"Isabella," the desk clerk said to me in the same tone as if I had asked, "What color is the sky?"

"Yes, Isabella," the man confirmed. "I will wait for you down here."

Upstairs in my shockingly beautiful hotel room, I showered the anxiety and heat off me, but then had to put the same disgustingly practical clothes back on.

Down in the lobby, my ragged companion was now dressed in a beautiful suit. I self-consciousness raised to the tenth power.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Where are your companions and wife?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest. “You said we would eat with them.”

“Of course. We will meet them there.” He looked at his watch. “Shall we?”

We walked to a black Ferrari. He opened the door for me. I wavered for a moment but then took a deep breath and got in.

“Where is this restaurant?” I asked.

“Ah, forgive me,” he repeated. “I have given the impression of a restaurant, have I not? But this is not a restaurant. This is...better.”

In a couple of minutes, we were out of Ercolano and speeding our way up a mountain road.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“My name is Antonio,” he said in a voice carved out of salted butter.

“I’m Catherine,” I said, shocked that I had gotten into a car with a man whose name I hadn’t known.

“Catherine. Catherine,” he said, rolling my name on his tongue. “I have only met one Catherine previously. Such a fascinating soul. Unfortunately, she is no longer on this earth.”



The car bucked and torqued up a steep series of switchbacks before suddenly stopping at an anonymous clearing. “*Siamo arrivati*,” he declared.

It was deep dusk, and I could barely see. “The ground has many rocks,” Antonio said. “We must be careful.” He offered his arm for support, and I took it.

We walked silently along a dark path. A new moon rose, silvery and sharp. Stars blossomed. My arm scraped against twigs, which exploded with the scent of rosemary. Antonio—two decades older and two inches shorter than I—moved deftly, bracing my stumbles. When the pathway finally became more certain, he loosened his grip.

“What do you want most in your life?” he asked.

Two weeks before, I would have said, “A nice husband,” but that night I found that I could no longer answer his question.

“A lack of an answer,” Antonio said, “is the best answer, for it means that you are open to life’s possibilities.”

I thought of my day-minder back at work, each half-hour dutifully filled with graphite from a Number 2 Ticonderoga, sharpened just so.

“What do *you* want most in life?” I asked.

“Good stories,” he responded. “They no longer pursue me.” He shook his head in frustration. “One drinks from a bottomless well of creativity every day, and then one morning...”

I am an accountant. Numbers are my pets. I wrangle entropy into cool columns. But when I was a teenager, melodies pursued me, gushing out at the most unexpected moments like three-quarters time Tourette’s. Then, one day in my early twenties, the

melodies suddenly ceased. By that time, I was deep into my accounting studies and welcomed the silent relief.

“Do you do creative work?” I asked.

“I did.” He then sighed in a dramatically Italian fashion.

“Your creativity will return,” I said.

“Have I misjudged you?” he asked, his voice joking, but not quite. “I had hoped for honesty from you.”

“I wanted to be nice,” I responded uncertainly.

“Nice? Nice? Nice is a curse. I married nice. It didn’t take. My second wife, Isabella...she is a much better match for me.”

I laughed nervously.

“Catherine,” Antonio continued, “tonight I am freeing you from the prison of nice. Go!”

“You scared me when we first met,” I blurted, the words squirting out like lemon juice.

“Perfect,” he said. “More!”

“I’m still not certain that you aren’t a murderer or rapist,” I said.

“*Spettaculare*,” he roared. “What else?”

“I want to hear the songs in my head again,” I yelled.

He smiled proudly. “So, I have not misjudged you after all.”

A gush of nonsense words flew out of me—the chaotic flow when a hose is first turned on. A clear rush of melody followed. I had heard it without quite hearing it while at the bar in Rome.

“Who are you?” I asked my homely benefactor.

*“Mi chiamo Antonio Piorelli,”* he said softly.

You might be wondering why I chose to come to Italy instead of France. After all, France was the enchanted land of Aunt Susie. In middle school, I conjugated French verbs. In high school, I read Georges Sand and Alexandre Dumas. In college, well, I didn’t have enough money to study abroad, but I still clung to electives like “The Modern French Novel.” Then, last year, one of my girlfriends dragged me to the art house in Mt. Adams to see a movie called *Chiarezza Casuale*. I ended up watching that film three times, mesmerized by a puzzle that I couldn’t decrypt.

“Wait a second,” I said, halting in mid step. “Wait. Wait. Wait. Antonio Piorelli who directed *Chiarezza Casuale*?”

“I used to be,” he replied.

Not possible. Insanity. Entropy reversed.

“Something in the movie puzzled me,” I said, doubt dripping out of my sentences. “At the end, everyone jumps into the ocean but Chiara. Why didn’t she?”

Antonio laughed. “The original script called for everyone, including Chiara, to jump in, but the actress who played Chiara...”

“Donatella Firenze,” I added, feeling breathless just speaking her name.

“Donatella can’t swim.”

My God. I was walking up a mountain in Italy with Antonio Piorelli. This was a thousand times better than *The Legend of the Lost Hotel Key*.

Up ahead, I heard laughter and smelled something delicious. A woman shuffled up to Antonio, chewed him out for being late, and then gave him a hug and a big kiss.

“Meet my wife, Isabella,” Antonio said, introducing me to his female doppelganger. She gave me a hug and eyed my plain clothes with concern. Antonio gave her a rapid account of my robbery and our meeting.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “Donatella. Come here. Meet Catherine.”

It was *the* Donatella Firenze, twice as beautiful in person, wearing the kind of dress that people wear to the Academy Awards. She hooked my arm in hers and a symphony bubbled out of my every pore. “I am starving,” she whispered to me. “Antonio is always so late.” She poured us each a goblet of wine.

“Why is everyone dressed so nicely?” I asked her.

“Why not?” she shrugged, taking a sip of her wine.

“*Salut*,” I toasted.

A shooting star streaked overhead.

“You’re very pretty,” she said.

Donatella Firenze—a woman who could have been the model for a thousand lira coin—just told me that *I* looked pretty. I felt like a donkey cart standing next to a Maserrati.

“Pretty enough to be an actress,” she continued. “But you are not an actress.”

“I’m an accountant for a carpet company,” I said.

“But that is only how you make money. Who are you, really?” she asked.

In my thirty-two years on Earth, I had never once been asked that question. I tried to upwell sunken traces of my more artistic childhood and adolescence, of music lessons and junior choirs and drama classes, but I knew that I was actually the woman who brought donuts for everyone on Fridays and played Happy Birthday on a Casio when the staff ate cake in the break room. In middle age, I was destined to keep tidy books, nurture three cats, and send birthday cards with neatly folded twenties to nieces and nephews. I would be the bisexual Elenor Rigby, dying discretely and alone—fashionably, yet sensibly.

“Dinner, everyone,” Isabella clapped. She plated grilled chicken and vegetables, hot off a spit.

The other guests talked about movies and movie making. Antonio told a story about a Hollywood legend who fell asleep while directing an action scene. I listened carefully, inhaling every syllable of what would surely be the only glamorous night of my life. During dessert, a French actor asked me (Asked *me!*) about *my* trip to Italy. I squeezed out a few cliches before Isabella demanded a more honest telling. I gulped down some more wine and gave it another try.

About a year after my evening on the mountain, Antonio Piorelli made a film whose translated title was *Six Roman Nights*. The American premier was at the art house cinema in Mt. Adams, not far from my apartment. It became Italy’s nominee for Best Foreign Picture. It didn’t win, but hey, it’s an honor just to be nominated. In the movie, Donatella Firenze plays a young woman from Cincinnati who becomes

enmeshed in a “dazzling world of art, sex, and intrigue at a Roman bar.” I spent four weeks on the set as a paid advisor. After the wrap party, Donatella and I snuck back to her room. The next morning, she gave me the dress I first saw her in, which I ended up wearing to the Academy Awards.

I never did make it to France. I returned to Italy each autumn to explore a different lace on the boot and to speak Italian and grow a little plump on red wine and artichokes.

I never made it to Eleanor Rigby, either. Many years later, while poking around a grocery store in Bomerano, an astonishing woman brushed against my hip, which uncorked a delicious symphony in my head. And, as soon as the laws allowed, I married nice.

THE END