1975

Homecoming

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The couple stood on the top deck of the ferry boat across the Messina Straits. On this hot August day, there were several other people, mostly Sicilians, returning from holiday trips in Southern Italy, looking across to where Messina stretched along the shore. The hills beyond the city were very lovely; green, mound-shaped and not at all jagged. The ferry ride took nearly an hour, and there was plenty of time for the people to get out of their automobiles and the train cars from Rome to come up from below and watch the island slowly grow larger and clearer. There were several benches along the sides, and the couple walked over and sat down."

Cover Page Footnote
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"Rome was far enough," the girl said. "Did we have to come all the way to Sicily?"

"I told you why I wanted to come," the man said. "I used to be stationed on the island in the Navy. You didn't object to the idea when we started."

"I didn't expect it would be this far. I was tired in Rome. We've been on trains for nearly two months. Besides, I just can't understand why anyone would return to where he was stationed, especially some place as far as Sicily. We should have gone to Venice instead."

The man reached in his shirt pocket to get a pack of cigarettes. She watched his eyes, but he didn't look at her.

"Want one?"

"I don't want to start that up again."

"Holidays are no time to quit smoking."

"No way." She looked away from him. "You're not talking me into this. I've been talked into enough already."

"What the hell is wrong with you? You've really been uptight all week." The man lit his cigarette as though he were glad to have something to do with his hands.

"Why not?" she said. "That 10-hour train ride from Rome, and I couldn't sleep in that couchette with all that snoring. I haven't had a decent bath in I don't know how long. We've been packing and unpacking since we started, packing and unpacking. I am just exhausted from traveling last class."

The man inhaled loudly looking straight at the hills behind Messina. Several people along the railing were looking below at the water. The girl turned slightly to the man, watching him and the cigarette hanging from his lips.

"Look," he said after a while, "you'll like Sicily. We'll get a chance to relax. I had a great time here, once."

The girl folded her arms, crossed her legs tightly, and stared intently at her dangling foot.

"What's over here besides your base?"

"The people." His eyes were eager to meet hers. "The Sicilian people really hang on to their traditions. I doubt anything has changed in nine years." He paused, then continued, "And there's Etna."

"Eh?" She looked up at him for the first time.

"Mt. Etna, the volcano. You can't see it now because we're too low, but when the train gets a couple of miles inland, you'll see it. Boy, I've got a lot of good memories from here. If I hadn't come to Sicily or even hadn't joined the Navy, I'd probably be married with five kids, working in the same mill as my father."
"I still don't get it," the girl said, "Everybody you knew then is gone now, right? So, what's the point?"

"Look, I've been promising myself this for nine years and finally here I am, I came to Sicily a green kid from Maine. I didn't know much about anything. I went to my first opera, my first concert, and did a lot of sightseeing. It was here that I decided to go to college. I met an older guy who took a liking to me and treated me almost like a son. He was the one who told me to go to college. Believe me, I needed that kind of thing because I didn't get much of it at home. I'm sorry if you can't understand that."

"Sure, I can understand that. Well, can you understand this? I have my needs too," she asked. She looked at the island, then continued, choosing her words carefully. "There's something about you. I can't put my finger on it, but it's bothering me. When I first saw you at the bullfight, sitting in the front row by yourself holding your camera, you looked very fine. I liked you. I remember that you didn't especially like the bullfight and said so, but I thought you took the whole thing pretty well."

"I didn't understand it, that's why."

"Yes, but you took it pretty good because you stayed to the end, and I like that in a man. Then after we met and decided to travel together, I began to think that this trip to Europe was going to be one great time for me."

"We have had a good time."

"Let me finish. You see, I needed someone to lead the way around Europe, and when you told me that you had been here before, I said to myself, 'Hey, why not go in with him?' Besides, you seemed like the type of guy I wanted to travel with. After a while, I even began to believe something might develop between us. But lately I've been thinking."

"About what?"

"I've gotten over it. But it's the green kid from Maine. Gone now, right?"

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fewer people were on deck now. Several couples were still leaning across the railing and some children were running to one end of the boat, then hurrying back to their parents. "Let me tell you what happened to my mother," he said. "She worked in a factory in my home town where they make ladies' shoes. Her job was to put the stitch at the front of the shoe." He lifted his foot and showed her where. "She was at her machine one day where a salesman from a company called Henderson, Barlow & Robbins came up. He was there to sell shoe leather. My mother told me he watched her work, examined her machine. After a while, he asked her what her name was and she told him. 'Oh, so you must be a frog,' he said. My mother was insulted." "She was?" "She turned to him and asked what his nationality was, but he ducked the question and said he had none to speak of." "What did your mother do then?" the girl asked. He stood up and imitated a woman's voice. 'I looked at him face-to-face and told him that we had a word for that kind of people. We call them 'mongrels','" The girl laughed. "Your mother's pretty good." "Yeah, I'd say she is. She complained to her supervisor, and the salesman was never allowed to return." She looked up at him. "Tell me the rest of your story about the base. What happened after they called you a frog?" "That's it," he said. "That's it?" She faced him directly, twisting her knee under her other leg for comfort. "There must be more to it than that." "What more do you want?" he said. "I was called a frog. That's all there is to it." "Don't get sore at me. You just laughed about it a minute ago. I didn't ask if anyone ever called you a frog." She studied his face while he smoked his cigarette. "Jesus, there's something about you." "Oh, cut it out." "There must be a reason why you don't want to talk about it now. Your mother didn't mind. I remember that you didn't want to talk about the bullfight either." The man swirled the coffee in his cup, seemed intent on studying its contents. After a while, he looked up at the mountains towering above the city of Messina. "Look," she said finally, "it's been nine years. So what's the big deal? It's in the past. Gone. Finito, as they say in Rome." The man now looked at her.
"O.K. You're right. It's no big deal. There was this big black guy on the base. He worked in my shop, but I didn't like him much. Our job was to keep all the big equipment — tow tractors, flatbeds, cranes, fork-lifts, stuff like that — in shape."

"Just the two of you?"

"There were probably fifteen of us, but he and I were assigned to work together quite a bit of the time. And we had the same rank; Third Class Petty Officer. Anyway, we tolerated each other until one day he overheard somebody — I don't know who — say that French-Canadians are called 'frogs'!)."

"All I heard for the next six months was 'Hey Frog! Here cum de Frog!' with that Southern drawl. It was 'frog' here, 'frog' there. I couldn't get away from it. He had all the other guys in stitches. But, he leaned forward a little and said in a lowered voice, "he would never do it when we were alone, only when there was an audience.'"

"Did you try to get back at him? Boy, I would have."

"Get back at him? Look, there were no other French-Canadians on that base, nobody to go to and say, 'Hey man, you and me, we're both frogs.' I was all alone!'" His voice crunched the words. Then he sighed. "And so, I took it ... had to take it. I used to sit in that hut where we worked seething, trying not to let it show."

"It must have showed," she said, "for him to stick at it so long."

"Sure, he knew I hated it, but he did it all the more. He was a real son-of-a-bitch."

"And I'll bet you hated him."

"Oh, God, did I hate him. I've never hated anyone more in my life."

"You're capable of that."

He glanced quickly at her, then continued, "Soon everyone else wanted to get into the act. For example, if I was walking a little distance from the shop, some of the other guys would yell like a god-dam chorus, 'FROGGI!' just like somebody calling for his dog."

He hesitated for a moment, "But this bastard, Lamus was his name, got so good at calling me a frog that these other guys would always stop to watch his little act. A couple of them even imitated him. Only they didn't do it for very long."

He rose quickly and stood in front of her. "Let me show you one thing he'd do. He would squat down and croak like a frog."

The man squeezed his hands under his armpits, bent his knees as far as he could and began to jump up and down while deep from within his throat came, "Redep, Redep, Redep."

The girl laughed and clapped her hands. "That's really good," she said. The man returned to the bench beside her.

"It's funny now, but then it wasn't."

The ferry was approaching the island rapidly and now only the man and the girl remained on deck. "Did you really want to come back to Sicily just to be reminded of those days?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say that's the reason." "What is the reason?"

"I simply wanted to visit, that's all. I told you I wanted to see the people and to look at Etna."

"But you already knew what the people looked like and you said yourself that they don't change."

"Well, then, I wanted you to see them." "Coming down here was part of your trip, not mine," she said. "And to look at Etna, you say."

"That's right."

"Climbing Etna made you feel like a big man, didn't it? Did that guy, Lamus, go with you?"

"No, he didn't."

"Coming back, what did you have in mind, conquer ... yes conquer Etna again and maybe take another leak?"

"No!"

"Is that where you get your guts? Climbing volcanoes?"

She stood up suddenly. "Oh, wait a minute ... wait a minute!"

She was looking down at him where he sat on the bench. She spoke softly, mockingly, "Now I think I know what I've been wondering about you. It's that guy, Lamus, isn't it? What he did to you really stuck, didn't it?"

"That was nine years ago." "Sure, but bottled up in you all this time."

"I don't feel like listening to all this."

"No, no. This is getting good." She hesitated. "When Lamus called you a 'frog,' why didn't you just call him 'nigger'? Your mother would have. Yes, she's a real matador."

The man looked at Sicily, but seemed oblivious. "It might have made you feel better," she said. "You might even have earned his respect or fear. There couldn't have been too many blacks on the base."

The girl now looked at the man directly. Her voice was lower. "It's too late. Lamus isn't going to be here ..."

"ALL RIGHT!" the man screamed. "KNOCK OFF THE SHRINK CRAP!" A light spray of his saliva touched her face. "I told you why I wanted to come back. I didn't ask you to analyze it!"

The girl stared at him then took a piece of tissue from her pocket and meticulously wiped her face. The ferry had docked and cars were already being driven off. The girl carefully put the tissue back in her pocket and walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" the man asked.

"Back to the train," she said, then slowly disappeared down the stairs.

The man walked to the railing, leaned over the edge and stared blankly at Sicily. Above Messina and beyond the hills Etna stood, smoking.