

NOTES ON TRAVEL, LOSS AND FORGETTING

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The trip to Europe was a whim, a cheapie ticket, a friend's crash couch in Paris, a farmhouse doss outside Rome. I was raring to get the hell out of Bombay. But it was more than the thrill of travel. A professor I'd been seeing on and off was discovered to be seeing someone else. In the past months we had chatted, mostly as banter, about hitching up, about kids and other domestic tortures, the sort of silly iMessage exchange that can mean nothing -- and everything. The perils of contemporary courtship involved promising lifelong devotion over text message to someone who might be doing the same to other people: Jane Austen with a truthiness problem.

My trip, consequently, was to be an act of forgetting.

Unlike the travel writer Pico Iyer, who is infinitely more appreciative of airports - he recommends exhibitions along the corridors of San Francisco International Airport - I hate them. Boarding a long haul flight involves hateful preliminaries: unnecessary frisking, insolent security personnel, the removal clothing items that do not logically lead to a conclusive sexual act. In Istanbul, my layover, I fought myself from thinking of the professor. But how could I not? As I stepped into the Turkish Airways lounge I was a bit cut up. Luckily, the lounge was spectacular, long aisles with welcoming chairs, gleaming counters of delicious food, a pool table. Here was a kind of heaven, and I was miserable. In limbo land, I could process what had happened: basically, I'd been had, lied to, then nexted over sms. Modernity was a cruel compaction of rites; betrayal arrived on the phone, dressed up in lousy grammar.

Presently, a woman in white asked if I wanted a massage; apparently, the airline offered free massages in their luxe lounge. Normally, I don't like people touching me (unless they've paid good money for it and, let's face it, no one ever does). But as the masseur kneaded my back I sensed something dissolve, a knot of memory containing the awareness of another life's rhythm, their coming and going, their pause at an airport terminal. At the end of any relationship we mourn two deaths. One is the physical absence of the person: they are gone, leaving some room in our heart interminably empty, a room that will never be inhabited in the same way by anyone else. But the other, more crucial and subtle, loss is of the person we had become in their presence, our unique codes of humor, the seriousness they inspired. As the massage continued, I noticed people in the lounge - motion was constant, rest was temporary, everyone would leave eventually. While the discerning mind could do a sterling job at erasure and forgetting, the soul was an expanding catalog of lost things. This is how people grow old, from loss, not age, or time, and the skin at my cheekbones tightened in revolt.

What was more important, though, was the kind lady from Turkish Airlines, the felicity of her anonymous touch.

Toward the end of Wally Lamb's novel, *She's Come Undone*, the protagonist, Dolores Price meets her high school counselor, Mr. Pucci. Years have gone by, he's shriveled, sick, alone, and dying from AIDS. The conversation might have been about large questions of fate and karma, morality and love -- but he's too far-gone for such talk. Instead, Mr. Pucci's advice had been pithy and profound.

"I'll give you what I learned from all this," he said. "Accept what people offer. Drink their milkshakes. Take their love."

I wanted to add to this list: Be grateful for touch.

I'm not sure if there's ever a closure for all the awful things that happen to us. We are allowed only brief, unanticipated sabbaticals from life's insistent ache I figured, as I landed in Paris -- and into a heat wave that made an Indian summer seem glacial in comparison.

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Perhaps Europe was failing not because of the Greek crisis, or that futile political ideal, French socialism, but because no allowance had been made for global warming. There was hardly any air conditioning anywhere. The upside was the French waiters were too heat whacked to be rude, polite from persistent perspiration. I decided to hang in the Bon Marche, not because I wanted to buy unaffordable and splendid things but because it was twenty degrees cooler than the rest of Paris.

It was sale season: SOLDES. Hermes handbags, Santa Maria Novella perfumes, Lanvin dresses, all marked down to half their price, and still too steep to ring up a sale. Well, that's like dating in your thirties: everything is on sale, yet no one is buying. So we throw in another discount, a further 90% write off on the combined worth of our self esteem, our knowledge of astronomy and those yogi slender thighs, our flair with a second language and whipping up a second rate linguine. I could not help but concede that when I began seeing the professor I was dating down: this cookie was not out of my league but miles under it.

This sounds wildly arrogant but when you get to my age you see that modesty is overrated. Modesty also comes in the way of seeing what you're truly worth, and that you don't need a markdown for someone to take you home. Because the only thing I bought from the Bon Marche - a Smythson diary - was at full price. In Paris I learned how travel takes you not only from that known and anguished landscape called home but also how it sometimes returns you to your most intimate and private worth: it might seem foreign on first glance but it is only who you truly are.

One of Bruce Chatwin's central assertions in *Anatomy of Restlessness* is that we are installed with migratory genes: we are all nomads, hunting, searching, wandering, scouting meat or pasture or adventure. But possibly not all our antecedents had been out looking for spice routes and ivory hauls. Maybe it was also the simple, vital driving desire to see anew some fundamental part of the self that had been made invisible in familiar terrain.

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The ride to Florence from Rome takes two hours but we missed a few exits so it was almost 1 when we got in. My friend D and I decided to head to an acclaimed restaurant for lunch. We were the only guests, and as we sampled our disappointing fare, we realized why. The day was only beginning, I thought to myself glumly, and lunch had already proved a discouragement. On a bad day everything is a metaphor for a mid-life crisis, including the mid-day. Early on in our courtship the professor had spurned me, I recalled; a letter soliciting serious relations had gone unanswered, following which a general vanishing occurred (young people call this 'ghosting'). My persistence, however, yielded a voice from the abyss, but after many months. Now, as I sat across a plate of cold cod in Florence, I realized that someone's rejection is also their gift to you: when someone leaves you must let them, and better sooner than later. And this rejection is often the best thing they will ever give you.

Accept this rejection. Wrap yourself in someone's no, I thought as D and I head to the Museo gli Uffizzi.

Be grateful for the touch you are yet to experience.

We had gone to see an exhibit of Piero di Cosimo, but I was drawn, as I always am, to Caravaggio, to the ecstatic gaze, to his golden brashness. In Andrew Dixon-Graham's tremendous biography of Caravaggio he extends the synthesis that unlike the High Renaissance artists who sought to idealize the world, Caravaggio refused to do so: he saw it as it were, and more importantly, as it was to him. His undertaking on canvas was almost like entering a state of love, where everything is heightened, color, temperature, mood.

As I stood before a masterful study of light - and spiritual grace - present in Caravaggio's work, I conceived love as a kind of light in which we witness the beloved. Conversely, without love, without its haunting pearl glow, things appear plain, even banal or drab. Early on, the subjects of our yearnings are so dressed up in our belief and desire of them that without the focus lights of our longing, buck naked, they'd scare the living daylights out of us.

In real time, we'd left swipe on first glance.

Total shizz failure.

But initially, briefly, they had appeared irresistible because we had willed them so: the scimitar wit, the sexy sideways glance was more often than not our own manufacture. In truth, they'd been as they were, ordinary and flawed, true to their own suspicions of minor talent and smart brio, and we had accepted this as a consequence of living in lowered expectations.

Tumbling out into the Italian heat I noticed couples holding hands, nuzzling into each other like young foals. My heart filled with a queer kind of loneliness, emergent from witnessing other people's companioned time. In my younger years this might have made sad; now, it filled me with hope. In my bones I knew these romances were impermanent, some would endure summer, others for longer, most people would leave each other.

I angled my neck in the direction of that great church in Florence, that commandeering testament of human love for God, and I thought one of the things you must permit yourself is a revision of opinion. We can allow that our initial assessments of the men and women we desired had, in reality, been violent failures of judgments. Just as Caravaggio's genius refused to see idealized creation, we must take instruction and see the world, and its mortals, as they are.

And more often than not, they are grade A scumbags.

There you are. There's always something to laugh at. There's always that.

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In Rome, a city I know well, I found myself wandering through the center. I have often walked along the Tiber, watching the night twist into its water. There is a forno I patronize for bread in Trastevere. I have often sat alone under the trees in Villa Borghese, summer winds quailing through mighty branches. Rome has numerous handsome buildings - monuments by two rivals, Bernini and Borromini, the Arch of Titus, fountains, gardens, avenues. The act of witnessing great beauty, if we are lucky to do so in our lifetimes, involves not only absorbing something into our consciousness but also surrender. Inaudibly, imperceptibly, we end up leaving behind in all what we have seen; the dark silt of some sorrow, a privately borne cross of defeat is set aside in an ancient square, in a courtyard with orange trees. Perhaps this is why beautiful things are timeless: they have met every grief, and they have known that in the end it was nothing. Toward the evening, as I was on the corner of via Condotti, the professor texted 'I miss you'. I could not help but think: Not yet, but you will, and then it'll take you out like a bolt of lightning.

Or maybe it won't.

Honestly, I thought to myself, who cares, for my travels had melted many snow caps of memories. What's Clip Clip Clip on an idle Monday morning? That's the sound of me cutting you out like an overgrown cuticle. And it's never easier than when you see that if you both are not ethically on the same page there's no going forward.

The idea of the *yatra* can be central to many Hindus - the pilgrimage, a yearning to see God, to tread barefoot, to go without meals at regular hours, to sleep in squalor and then to arrive at holy places of worship to seek light, joy, atonement (all luminously evident in a Caravaggio canvas). Something in travel releases us from the dead weight of ourselves, the empty husk, the old skin. I don't know how this happens.

Perhaps it's just movement, atoms brushing against molecules, perhaps it is the beautiful things we see that draw in our losses into their secret vaults, perhaps it is simply that time turned and what we think of as a mending is simply that we had become worthy of our wound.

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/siddharth-dhanvant-shanghvi/notes-on-travel-loss-forg_b_8055794.html