

A walk along the roads of Castel De Novo

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I am not sure about you, but I envy my past self frequently. It is a strange thing to say. I was, after all, my past self, some time ago. Presumably at least.

Can I show you this old memory I have preserved? It is one I pulled from my best, and last, family holiday, before the wrath of the Covid-19 pandemic descended on us. It's small and delicate, and I hold it in the hollow of my chest. I had not expected it to lodge itself there stubbornly like a thousand shards of shattered sea glass for me to circle back to now, over and over again.

Since you are still reading, I'll tell you anyway.

Some time ago I visited Italy – a place of fantasy where the great masters once lived and a place where history was hidden in every crevice and every column sticking up. Every stone, every fresco, every Roman building. We spent days mulling over delicate oil frescos illuminated by candlelight in glorious basilicas. Along rough streets, we walked from landmark to landmark. I felt overcome by a desire to paint ordinary scenes, like the way the bakeries displayed bread in the window, or the way sunlight gleamed off the domed roofs of cathedrals. I did not even know how to paint, or how to create any sort of worthy art, yet the urge still engulfed me like a moth to the flame.

Everywhere I went I would say to myself: “this is it, this is where my future is, I will live here one day.”

My favourite part though was going, by train, to a small provincial town where relatives of my mother lived. Outside the train window, we would catch a glimpse of little villages with houses, like colourful splashes of paint on a Pollock painting at the MoMA.

My mothers cousin was very welcoming and lovely, with a son only a few years older than me, who I instantly befriended, and who showed me around his hometown.

It was, to say the least, everything I've ever dreamed of. The very embodiment of an abroad-the-world cliché. Music played from the village square mere streets away, picturesque, mismatched houses struggled up the large hill the town was positioned

on and there were even houses below, their tile roofs silhouetted against the bright blue sky. Nothing like the grey concrete and tall glass buildings of a modern day city that towered over you, engulfing you in a swarm of melancholy darkness.

As we combed the cobbled, winding streets, I realised how alike my newfound friend and I were. From the same music taste, to learning languages. Even our favourite subjects were the same. We both even enjoyed playing the same games on our playstations. He knew the two languages I spoke but knew about two others as well, something that impressed me to no end.

Reader, I wish I could tell you the similarities ended there. In fact, stop reading this and imagine I enjoyed the rest of my holiday free from an existential crisis. Imagine I was endlessly charmed by Italy, became tanned, and returned home, content with my life and upcoming future.

But alas, when we arrived back to their home where we retreated to his room to game on his playstation, I stopped when I saw the interior. A black and white film noir theme of New York City, or it could have easily been Sydney, or Bangkok, or London. Gleaming fluorescent lights smeared across a starless sky made it all too hard to decipher.

“New York?” I asked him, surprised. I had, after all, been expecting the art that donned his family’s living room to crawl up the stairs and sprawl across his walls.

“I want to move there”, he replied “when I finish uni. That’s where I’ll go.”

My eyes widened, as my confused mind raced to comprehend what he had said. “But Italy is so beautiful! Everything here is beautiful! New York on the other hand,” I paused then since I’ve never been to New York but still, “New York is basically like Sydney: it’s just a bunch of identical tall buildings.”

He smiled sharply. “Trust me, after living here for almost all of my life, I still don’t belong,” In his eyes a somber look, “I’m sick of it here.”

There was a horrible, erratic thumping in my chest at those words, as if a large bird were trapped inside and beating itself to death.

“Besides,” he continued, “It’s like your Wollongong, you know?”

I thought of how I saw my own home: a concrete box in the sky. From my balcony,

trains streamed East to West, always leaving while I watched wistfully, hatefully.
We want what we cannot have.

I changed the subject quickly after that.

Reader, I wish I could provide you with a happier ending, but I can tell you how the trip ended. With me seriously contemplating my life as the plane ascended into Sydney airport. I understand now why the poets go mad after seeing beautiful in such a profound way; everything else pales in comparison.

Isn't it strange that my idea of a paradise on earth felt like a dream while for someone else, someone like me in so many ways, it feels like a nightmare?

I want to swear about the absurdity of it all, the paradox that exists in our deceiving minds. I do not think you'd appreciate redundant colloquialisms, however. All I can think of is this quote by Sylvia Plath. At the time of reading it when I was younger, it seemed rather foreboding but now, it is rather fitting. "I desire the things which will destroy me in the end". Human nature, that is what it is. We live in dreams and long for them deeply. Only when faced with reality, we find that the dream has become a nightmare. Only after living through another lockdown do I truly realise that maybe what I want is only a figment of what I truly need and already have.

Reader, we want what we cannot have.

Sometimes, when we do have it, we find it is nothing like we thought.