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Agrodolce
A Sicilian Journey

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We were outside the airport at Catania walking along an unmarked concrete road, looking for a sign for Europcar rental. A car came by, forcing us onto off the road; then a van. Far above, the white Sicilian sun continued to send fierce rays down to earth despite the lateness of the afternoon. My white floppy sunhat and black wide-rimmed sunglasses I had bought to hide myself from the world—or was it to hide the world from myself—were no match for it. Where were we? I could no longer remember why I had decided to make this trip with Michael. Drops of sweat were coursing slowly down between my tiny breasts, gluing my American cotton dress to my ribs. We had been traveling for over a day, and now we were finally in Europe again after so long. Yet I felt nothing. Nothing.

“Maybe that’s it—that little building over there?” said my companion Michael with dispirited exhaustion. He gestured toward a small stucco building under a palm tree, hidden from all but the most persistent foreign traveler.

Inside, people crowded in messy lines around several rent-a-car counters, speaking half-familiar languages, wearing European clothes, European shoes that were so like ours and yet so different. A scent of heavy perfume such as no one would dare use in America drifted by, followed by a crude, strong, and antiseptic smell of an industrial floor cleaner with carbolic acid in it. I have been married to Michael for more than 20 years, but once, before Michael, I had lived in Germany and taught English there. Germany: a country my ancestors had fled eagerly and exiled as much as possible from their imagination. Germany: a country that, I remembered only when I was in Europe, I had not wanted to leave.

“What do you mean, we have to take the insurance?” Michael was shouting at a Europcar employee wearing a uniform in an official-looking dark blue. “And what is this 20 percent tax? None of this is in the agreement I signed. Look, here—”

Michael and Signor Europcar confronted each other in a loud flood of mutually misunderstood languages. Fumbling in his backpack, Michael brandished a crumpled piece of paper in the warm Sicilian air.

“If you don’t sign, we will not give you the car,” said the Europcar official, enunciating each word with a careful vitriol.

“The agreement I signed says *no tax*—” said Michael, his forehead turning red.

“Michael,” I whispered, looking at the long lines of sweating tourists all around us. “Calm down. This guy looks serious about not giving us a car if we don’t sign, and it’s August. All the other rental car companies may be fully booked.”

I stood back. This was my first visit back to Europe in a while, but I still remembered keenly how any demands for special treatment were certain to remain unmet.

“Turn right towards Autoroute 54,” I read from my Iphone as Michael drove the tiny but brand new black car slowly out of the parking lot down a narrow road lined with Mediterranean palm trees. It was five o’clock in the afternoon, but the Sicilian sun did not seem to know this.

“It’s this way,” Michael said. “I saw it from the air—I’m sure.”

“But the phone says *left*,” I said.

“Well, it’s wrong,” said Michael.

“I’m just reading what the gps says,” I said, exasperated.

I have lived with Michael for enough years to know protest would be futile, but I kept on, filled with a cranky exhaustion.

We were heading, perhaps not directly, towards the highway. Now we were driving between green uneven hills; the red-roofed houses; a grove of trees, some bearing small unripe fruits; flowers. A scent reached me through the warm Sicilian air, midway between perfume and lemons, or perhaps oranges.

I went through my purse and found the sunglasses I had ordered specially for this trip—thick black frames, UVA protection adequate for the Antarctic—only to find they were no match for the blinding white sun above. I felt anxious: would make our way to Taormina before darkness fell on the unfamiliar mountain roads?

Ahead of us, a tollbooth blocked our entrance to the *autostrada*. I say *tollbooth*, but without coin basket, attendant, or barrier, and with a sign in Italian I couldn’t with my knowledge of the language, gleaned mostly from opera, translate.

Welcome to Sicily! Welcome to us and all the other drivers, European and otherwise, who can’t read Italian!

Soon we had exchanged the *autostrada* for a heavily trafficked two-lane highway. A line of cars all as tiny as ours was moving caravan-like up the switchback of a mountain road. Just as I was beginning to think we had taken a wrong turn, a beautiful thin-spun steel suspension bridge appeared before us under the late afternoon golden sun. It swung imperceptibly over the chasm of a deep mountain gorge.

And at the end of the bridge, we were there, in the city of Taormina: in a crush of people, cars, motor scooters, bicycles all funneled into one tiny medieval cobblestoned street, the brightness of the sun alternating with dark shadows from the buildings. No time to stop! No way to turn! Whoosh—a chalk-white church and a square. Whoosh—a throng of people wearing sunhats or shaded umbrellas, all swaying slowly as if in a trance. Whoosh—a whiff of sugar and yeast and fresh lemon peel from a the open door of a bakery.

The ordeal of arrival was over. We had entered into the real realm of the traveler, the realm of the imagined past. This was a realm I had happily explored in my European days and on many trips since. An infusion of relief filtered through me strong as the rays of the Sicilian sun.

The first thing I remember about the villa is how at the entrance a brightly painted ceramic head smiled down in greeting from where it sat on a stone column. From its ochre porcelain crown and collar, I thought it must be the head of some ancient Sicilian king, or perhaps a character in local legend. Was it looking down on us magisterially at us mere mortals? Had it been left there as a symbol of victory, the remnant of a decapitated foe?

I was too tired, too happy to ask. As in a dream we allowed ourselves divested of the little car and our suitcases. MICHAEL, who takes care of me in such moments, went off questing for food and drink. Gratefully I sank into an old worn couch of crushed red velvet in the main salon. Through a wall of open windows, the volcano itself—snow-laden Mount Etna—looked down over the red roofs of the towns all the way to the light blue of the sea. Far off, a single sailboat (the same one I saw from the plane?) drifted lazily through last of the afternoon.

Above my head, warming lamps glowed red as a long-established fire. I took the glass of *prosecco* MICHAEL put in my hand along with a plate of bread and a cold eggplant dish, no doubt a *caponata*. But not like the *caponatas* I had known before. This one had almonds instead of the pine nuts and a sweetness that complemented the salt of the olives and capers, a sweetness of unknown provenance. Sugar? Honey? In any case, *agrodulce*: a medieval style. Bitterness of vinegar for preservation; sweetness to entice. As I gazed contently round the large, old-

fashioned room, I could almost feel the spirits of the wandering Brits who must have stayed here in the nineteenth century.

At the other end of the room, a thin, balding fellow was reading a large book with photographs, the kind Americans call “a picture book.”

“Have you just arrived?” he said.

I nodded.

“You know, they”—he gestured toward the hotel staff—“tell you where to go and it seems so simple but it isn’t really. Basically, the town has one street. You want to do that street on your first day. You don’t have to ask them to drive you. You can take the steps down the mountain if you like. They’re very wide and thin so it’s not hard at all. I must say I don’t like that volcano much though.”

I looked up with surprise at the peaceful white mountain.

“It’s erupting, you know,” he went on. “They told me it wouldn’t, but it’s been erupting the entire time we’ve been here.”

Oxbridge? London? I murmured something meant to signal sympathy and a distance. I murmured something about how the eruptions were not likely to be dangerous.

“Yes, well, I asked when I booked the room and they told me it wouldn’t erupt, you know. “

He was going to Siracusa tomorrow for the day, he said. He had rented a car. I murmured that we would be going to Siracusa too. Should we have done the same? I wondered, anxious. Was the drive to Siracusa worse than the one we had already done?

MICHAEL ensconced himself on the couch next to me, another plate of *caponata* in one hand and our brand-new Michelin for Sicily in the other.

“We’re from Washington DC,” MICHAEL said in what was clearly meant to be a friendly conversation-opener.

“Ah—really,” said the Brit.

“I rather thought so,” he added, bending back over his book.

It had grown dark while we were talking, or not talking. Below the villa, the lights of the town had begun were glimmering like artificial stars. Above the Mediterranean, the sun hovered as if reluctant to say good-bye, a last passionate

burst of red. At the horizon, shades of sunlight mingled like matter suspended in a colloid. It was all too beautiful to be real. When I turned back, the Brit had gone. He had not said good-bye.

I felt a spasm of anger flash through me. It had been a very long time since I had experienced such dismissive rudeness. What an upper class twit! No doubt he had never taken a risk in his over-insured European life. I had forgotten how one found such people everywhere in Europe. I reminded myself that such people no longer had any power over my life. They meant, they should mean nothing to me now.

In the room Michael at once turned on his laptop and began to deal with the day's e-mail. I listened with some annoyance to the familiar clicking and clacking sounds. From the bedroom wall another ceramic head, this one with a collar made of triangles, looked down on us impassive as a caryatid. It too was in primary colors and bold peasant washes: chrome yellow; royal blue; a deep burnt sienna. On the nightstand the telephone—a brass 1930s affair with a rotary dial—came accompanied by a four-inch yellow sharpened pencil like the one I had in kindergarten and a pad so tiny and elegant I could not imagine anyone using it for the mere humdrum of a note. It all completed the fantasy world, the image of the far-off yet accessible, at all times nonexistent past.

I walked out on the little balcony to be alone—a loggia really.

The lights from the town and the smog from the now-becalmed traffic made a soft glare over the horizon, but the stars above were invulnerable. No wonder they had once been called “fixed stars.” Somewhere out in the darkness that was Taormina, people were suffering, striving, yearning, enacting cruelties on one another—but in the cocooned space of the fantasy hotel, I felt none of this. I felt that life would go on and on without limit, that its possibilities for me were whatever I made them. The old illusions rose up as if not yet disproved; I let myself bask in magically revived über-confidence of youth.

Suddenly I wanted a cigarette—no, a cigarillo. How long had it been since I had even remembered that once I had smoked? Long, long ago I would smoke when in this mood. Slowly, with anticipatory pleasure, I would extract a single cigarillo from a green-and-white metal case I always carried with me. The case bore the image of a swarthy man with a moustache—a northern European fantasy image of a South American *caudillo*. I would look down with a faint thrill as, with what I hoped was panache. I struck the match smartly, as I had seen women do in the grand cafes on the *Leidseplein*. This was the European me who had accidentally fallen in love with an entirely unsuitable man in an entirely impossible situation, who had then equally unexpectedly and against his better judgment and volition fallen in love with me. A risk-taking, hell-for-leather me, in existence for only a few years and then no more: a mirage me, a me that now existed for brief moments only under a European sky.

I looked up and around at the myriads of stars. Alone, I stood in the darkness, myself and not myself, remembering things that could be told to no one; happy and deep in dreams.

Next morning over our breakfast of fresh bread, farm cheeses, and jam distilled from local figs, we mapped out a circuit route to Etna. But as soon as Michael guided the tiny car off the mountain, we were lost. Suddenly we were on a different road, not the road we wanted that would have taken us along the coast.

Inland now, we passed row after row of seedy hotels, each with a decayed and flaking sign swinging in the breeze. On the street someone had set out a scratched mahogany armoire with a sign "for sale." On a hangar, a thin, flouncy mini-dress in need of washing fluttered over a dull mirror. At a traffic light, people stared with dark, unfriendly eyes at the brand new car and the rich foreign tourists, then crossed the street. This too was Sicily.

On the road up the mountain, cars turned ahead of us without signaling, cars backed out of parking spaces, cars came to precipitous, honk-filled stops. To distract myself from the prospect of imminent death or dismemberment, I got out the Michelin and began to look for a town where we could have lunch.

In the town of Castiglione, I read, we would find "Castel Leone (*now reduced to a ruin*) . . . a lookout point since ancient times . . . [with] magnificent views."¹ I turned a page and looked up. The little car was passing by an untilled, still green field. On one side of the road, someone had left a large American car to rust. On the other, a brand new mansion with an enormous swimming pool that could have been in northern California. Far above, the snow on the volcano looked colder than it had from the villa. And then as we decided on no basis whatsoever to go left at a Y-junction bereft of any helpful sign, I saw where we were going. Castiglione the town and Castel Leone the castle: the town a row of gray stone buildings circling up the hill; the castle an ancient white edifice looking standing like a chess piece in the noonday sun.

The town was a one-way street up a switchback of cobblestones needing maintenance. It narrowed, then narrowed again. Finally I rolled down the window and turned the side mirror in. MICHAEL braked the little car to a stop in a small cobblestoned square, whether because he thought we were near the summit or because he could take no more, I was not sure.

As I opened my door, the air that had been warming itself all morning blew in my face like a suddenly opened pizza furnace. All was still. The only sound was a tumbleweed being blown over the broken stones toward a boarded-up restaurant

¹ Michelin, *The Green Guide: Sicily* (Greenville, S.C.: n.d.), p. 50.

and a few rusted-out café chairs. From all sides, gray stone baroque buildings looked down forbiddingly. Even the church had closed doors. Only a small pile of black volcano ash neatly swept up and left to sit on the cobblestones showed that human life still existed in Castiglione. I had seen depopulated towns in the Eifel district east of the Rhine, I had seen the crumbling white remains of a medieval village in rural Provence, but this! This! I thought of a novel I had read as a teenager, the only novel I knew that was set in Sicily. *Il Gattopardo, The Leopard*. The plot, the characters were lost to my memory. All that remained were images of blinding sunlight and darkened great houses: a land of mystery and secrets.

Vaguely disquieted, I turned around. Where was Michael? At the other end of the square, I saw his back disappearing up a staircase of wide, broken paving stones.

“Where are you going?” I called, suddenly afraid to be left alone.

“To find the castle,” he called back.

I followed up the staircase. Soon I was on the outside of the town, climbing up to the invisible castle. A pair of scrawny cats, a small red flowering plant drooped on a wrought-iron balcony, and a bit of washing flapped on a grimy white plastic line. Had a neutron bomb vaporized the population of the town? In the open-air basement of a decaying baroque townhouse, piles of soggy antique newspapers and a small television in a style I had not seen since the 1950s complete with rabbit ears were decaying. And then, at last, we were there, at the summit. Below me, the thin road twisted its way to a far-off pale blue could have been the sea, or the sky.

I stood quiet next to Michael. So this was where soldiers and townspeople would have watched for invaders. And how many invaders there had been! First the Phoenicians; then the Greeks; the Carthaginians; the Romans; Arabs—Berbers and Persians; the Normans (the Normans? Were they lost?); Swabians; Angevins; Guelphs I put down the Michelin. Indeed, who had not invaded Sicily, in one century or another? There were too many for me to hold in my mind all at once. And for each it had been the same, sad story. One after another, they had fought and conquered; one after another, they had been expelled.

“But the castle,” I said, suddenly remembering why we had done the climb. “Where is the castle?”

Michael pointed behind me to a white turret with a chain around it, a closed door, and a sign in Italian that said “closed.” Thinking of the tollbooth the previous day, I felt neither disappointment nor surprise.

“Are you hungry?” I said. “I thought I saw an open restaurant just before we got to the square.”

And so I had. On the corner of a steep street, hotel-restaurant Federico II—three stars, family owned—advertised the menu of the day: pistachio ravioli in saffron cream sauce with red wine and bread, all for 13 euro. Inside, a cheerful young woman in a white apron ushered us to a table covered with a red-and-white checked cloth, familiar and comforting. A moment later I dipped a piece of fresh focaccia in the local olive oil while Michael poured four fingers of wine into short, squat water glasses. At another table, three men talked quietly over cigarettes and half-finished espressos. They looked like they were conducting a business meeting, Italian style. It was just past three in the afternoon.

In the years in Europe I had been in countless other places much like Hotel Federico II. The locked side of my brain was fully open now and the images were tumbling out. Other cobblestoned streets, other little two- and three-star restaurants. Early morning sounds of the European street. The clattering of the heavy wooden blinds being cranked up over the outside of shop windows. A truck in spraying the gutters clean. The sound of coffee beans being ground in the industrial strength machines of the cafes, the sound of milk being steamed. What it feels like to crush a baguette without any paper wrapping under one's arMichael Reading, or trying to read, the newspaper in a new language where phrases and sentences at random are as blank if they had been redacted.

And me enjoying every pleasure with abandon, unashamedly selfish and guilt-free. Me inhaling the rough smoke, me ordering a cognac with the espresso. In towns with unpronounceable names, in provincial cities left behind by time, me filled with the sense of gloriousness uselessness, the absolute freedom that is one of the most unique pleasures of exile.

For exile had its secrets. One was that you left behind all those who would measure you against their expectations. After enough time had passed in exile, you yourself lost all pre-exile hopes and dreams. Eventually you no longer missed them. Was that, I asked myself, why life in Europe had felt so different and so good? Exile simplified life greatly. All I had to do make enough money to enjoy good food, good wine, and the magnificent art of civilizations much older than my own. No longer did I need to think of myself as the person who had to look after the extended family, a person who had become if not famous at least highly successful—all the expectations I carried as the third-generation only child of a New York immigrant possible in America, of absolute freedom?

The raviolis were gone, as was the good bread. The saltiness of the pistachios and the sweetness of the saffron cream sauce—the *agrodolce* of the afternoon—had melded together so exquisitely that Michael and I had sparred playfully over who could eat how much. Slowly, with some reluctance, I poured the last of the wine as if it were a libation. Why, I wondered, had someone carefully swept up ashes from the volcano into a single blackened heap and left it in that little square? An abandonment as unmodern, as enigmatic, as the town itself.

Through the unscreened open window, the late afternoon sunlight and the shadows of the baroque stone buildings made a chiaroscuro on the narrow, ancient street. An old man with a cane made his way with evident difficulty up the cobblestoned slope. At the top, out of the shadows and into a space of sunlight, he rested, bent over his cane. A sight peaceful and beautiful as a Renaissance painting and, like so many Renaissance paintings, an image of suffering. Here was no place for high-tech health interventions for the very old, no place for cheery American optimism about aging. Here, the slow decline of life ran its course like the sun over the pale blue sky. As I finished the last of the wine, the old man uncurled slowly and moved on. One part of me—selfish and European to the core—rejoiced silently that I was not yet that old. This is what I have come for, I thought. To feel a complete absence of pain.

With regret we retraced our way to the little car slowly. As we left the town behind and began the drive back down the mountain, something large and black slithered off the edge of the road, then vanished into the darkening forest. MICHAEL stopped the car. We got out, but it was too late.

“It moved like a cat,” I said, “but it was much too big for a cat. Are there black leopards in Sicily?”

Later I read that large wildcats, said to resemble those in Scotland,² still roam the mountains in this region, and I thought of a legend according to which Federico II’s father Henry VI of Swabia had died while hunting on Mount Etna.

On the drive to Siracusa the sun disappeared behind blank hazy clouds. But even obscured, its force remained amazingly unchanged. I put on the new black-rimmed sunglasses and rolled up the windows of the little car. These actions made my eyes a tad more comfortable but otherwise merely put a barrier between the unbearably hot air outside and the equally unbearable hot air within.

² “A few wild cats thrive in the large national park on the slopes of Mount Etna and also in remote parts of the Nebrodi and Madonie and a few other protected areas; these regal hunters are similar to the wild cats found in Scotland and in the Pyrenees. The cats survive in Sicily because they live in wooded areas on rugged slopes where few people venture.” Found on May 22, 2012 at <http://www.bestofsicily.com/history1.htm>

Although I should have known by now that these actions were unlikely to make me feel better, I took them anyway. I mused at my own foolishness—I was acting like the person who pushes the elevator button over and over as if that would make things go faster. Or was it something else? After all, I was simply acting out of habit. In another climate—the one I was most used to—my actions would have made perfectly good sense. How much of human life, I ruminated, is unreasoning reflex, reflex that cannot be unlearned? And is that why I cannot remember my life in Europe when I am not there, because memory itself is merely a reflexive response to stimuli?

These thoughts, of doubtful validity, served at least one useful purpose. They distracted me from paying too much attention to the erratic behavior of the other cars on the *autostrada*—for even high speeds clearly did nothing to reduce the general unpredictability of Sicilian drivers. And now the *autostrada* was taking us away from the sea, through tunnel after tunnel as if we were driving in the Alps rather than on an island with a few modest hills. On each hill a grove of olive trees stood sentinel in the warm breeze. Was it merely my vain imagining that the trees had been there since antiquity and the tunnels had been built to preserve them?

Just at that moment Michael braked and swerved, then swerved again. A high-speed white convertible with two young men laughing and talking merrily weaved its way all too rapidly in and out of the lanes. Abruptly I left the realm of abstractions behind. Instead I thought of the Brit we had met in the hotel at Taormina was planning to go to Siracusa. The unabashedly mean, thoroughly European part of me was pleased that the Brit had been forced to endure this drive.

Just before the entrance to Siracusa, Michael announced he had to stop for gas. After going several times round a traffic circle, he figured out which exit would take us to a gas station we could see in the distance flying by. We were low on cash, so once the tank was full, Michael put his credit card in the machine. Nothing happened. He tried again, with the same result. As Michael continued to struggle with the little machine (broken? Defective?), a police car pulled up. Two policemen sporting immaculate uniforms and semi-automatic pistols got out, lit cigarettes with reasonable panache, and watched Michael putting all his problem-solving skills to bear. Irrked and frustrated, I got out and walked around the other side of the little car.

Behind a grimy stucco wall, I could see a tree with small white flowers. As I moved away from the fumes of the diesel, I realized that the tree was in the middle of a cemetery. Stone boxes raised up from the ground bore the names of those within. The flowers were sweet, far sweeter than most. Strangely, this sweetness was familiar. Where had I smelled that scent before? In the cemeteries of the South Pacific? The Caribbean? Both had tombstones like these, both planted flowering trees to mask the smell of death.

After a moment I recognized it. It was the same as a perfume MICHAEL had bought me years earlier on my birthday. It was *jasmine*, as Sicilian as blood oranges or olive oil—all here only because the Arabs had brought them centuries ago.

By the time reached the hotel, the clouds had blown off and the Sicilian sun was once more at full strength. We were staying in modern Siracusa, but like all tourists we headed at once for the old city, the Greeks' first settlement. Called Ortygia, it was a narrow island jutting out into the sea.

Ortygian streets were as just ancient and narrow as in Castiglione, but with cobblestones in better repair and larger, gray baroque buildings. Some had been restored, more not. As we strolled through the medieval labyrinth, we passed again and again from blinding light into shade, from excruciating heat to chill dampness.

Ortygia had so many disintegrating monuments that after a while I stopped looking them. The Temple of Apollo, which had sounded impressive in the Michelin, was merely a heap of white rubble with a few chipped Corinthian columns and metal plates with ancient names. In the market I bought provisions for lunch: a fresh focaccia, some baked *ricotta salata*, and a plastic box of capers preserved in salt as in the middle ages. Washed down with a smooth Sicilian white, each burst, addictive, on the tongue. In the street of the fishmongers, the bloodied head of a tuna left on a wooden board turned its filmy eye toward the sun. Already it was past noon. MICHAEL was walking slower and slower. Suddenly I realized I needed water. I needed water now.

Down a side street I spied a few empty tables—an outdoor café of some sort. Card tables really, with card table chairs. An older woman in a plain black dress set discolored plastic menus before us, then hurried off into the tiny shop—a small bar counter with a cash register, a dilapidated refrigerator with soft drinks, a single tiny table at which was a young man in a wheelchair. Something, I don't know what, made me think he was permanently stationed there. The woman in black said something to him, not exactly kind but not impatient. He looked up with an expression of resignation, or perhaps habitual despair.

At the next table a couple and their teen-age daughter sat down, then looked about expectantly for service. The husband draped his jacket over an empty chair and lowered his hat onto the table.

At once the proprietress swooped down, hands waiting wildly in the air.

"No hat on the table!" she said in Italian. "In Sicily we do not put a hat on a table. Bad luck! Please! Very bad luck!"

The family—Croats, it turned out—looked surprised. They removed the hat quickly but not quickly enough for the proprietress. I, however, was not at all surprised. Of the three superstitions I acquired from my grandmother in childhood and still observed, one was never to put a hat on a bed. “No hats on tables” was new to me, but it made as much, or as little, sense as “no hats on beds.”

I had always thought of my grandmother as entirely German. Now I recalled a reference made once and only once, in the low voice reserved for scandals and other matters not to be discussed before children, to her having had an Italian grandfather. The details escaped me, or perhaps I had never known the Michael. Something about an illegal border crossing, something about a war. Was this how “no hats on beds” had been passed down to a little girl in New York in the 1950s? Was it a misunderstanding of the “no hats on tables”? A German equivalent thereof?

An older woman in a housecoat emerged from one of the nearby buildings and walked slowly—shuffled, really—toward the proprietress, who greeted her with a warm embrace and a kiss on both cheeks. The flow of Italian between them was too fast for me, but the warmth of emotion was clear. So was the difficulty the woman in the housecoat had in walking, like the difficulty of the young man inside as he maneuvered his wheelchair up to the refrigerator and got himself a soft drink. I watched the two women for a while, touched as much by the casualness of the affection as by its depth.

When Michael raised a hand, signaling we wanted to pay, the proprietress pointed with at all the others now waiting at the little card tables for service.

“Due mani!” she cried in exasperation. “Two hands!”

Which was exactly what my mother would say when feeling harried, perhaps women all over the world said it. I thought of my ancestors who had lived farther north. All had been servants, all had left. What desperation must have driven them to walk up the gangplank to a boat on a long and dangerous voyage across the sea that would take them to a place they had never seen, a place where they would have to spend the rest of their lives. Would I have done that, with no going back? If they hadn’t, I might have been the proprietress of some tawdry little European cafe, with too many customers and too few hands, or worse.

I remembered then the first days abroad—the strangeness of everything, the frustration of trying to speak of a language where I could not produce a single sentence without a mistake. At the same time, much had been familiar, even comforting—like buying new dishes. In the first week I discovered that rental apartments did not come with equipped kitchens. To my surprise here, as in New York, department store basements were where you shopped if you had little money. And the dishes I bought were also familiar and comforting. White porcelain decorated with windmills, fields, farms, peasants, all drawn in a spidery blue ink a style without perspective, they were exactly like the ones on my grandmother’s

canisters. These were kept on a high shelf and never used. As a child I would put my elbows on the kitchen table and stare up at the mysterious names: *Öl*; *Essig*; *Zucker*.

I bought a paperback reprint of a nineteenth century cookbook and began to translate the recipes with my new dictionary. I made first the ones I remembered from childhood, like *sauerbraten* and potato salad with bacon, then others that were new to me. I especially liked *rouladen*—beef slices spread with a grainy mustard and rolled around a dill pickle—even if they did take more than an hour to make. I fancied the great-grandmother I had not known, and all the women before her in that family had made them too for dinner. Little by little I found I liked living in a place where being highly formal and perfectionist, as I had been raised, was not regarded as an annoying eccentricity but was expected—no, demanded.

By the end of the first year some weight I had never realized I carried had been lifted. Every day I was profoundly aware of my own insignificance in the grand scheme of the world, but strangely enough this awareness was the opposite of painful. The language remained opaque, but the larger contours of the culture were not. I cut my hair short, I bought spring and summer clothes at sales, I learned how to pronounce simple phrases so they were close to correct. By the end of the first year, strangers routinely took me for German if I didn't open my mouth, and Dutch or Irish or French if I did. In one way, this was not surprising. They were all part of my DNA.

Now and then I even forgot that I was merely „passing“ for European and in the end would always be found out. I should have learned this on the first day. It was my first trip abroad, and my first experience of jet lag. In the afternoon I found myself at a bus stop, disoriented and stupefied. Above me the late September sky above was gray and cold, like the air, in which there was a smell of coal fires, a smell of approaching winter. I noticed with a dim puzzlement that the street was made of cobblestones and on both sides the buildings looked old and drab, as if the war had just ended.

Next to me a woman in a warm coat peered with irritation at the bus schedule placard. As she began to speak, I realized with horror I could not understand a word.

This came as a shock. I had spent months reviewing my Fehling and Paulsen *Elementary German Grammar*. I had listened to my cassette tape of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* so many times I had most of the libretto by heart. I had taken the same self-study approach I had used in graduate school that had helped me pass the exam in intermediate Latin—slow, cautious, and useful only for reading.

The woman continued to speak, growing ever more and more agitated. The bus, nowhere in sight, was indeed late, but her emotional state seemed out of proportion.

Later I learned that I had arrived on the day when all the bus schedules had changed. This happened every year—it was part of the city’s urban planning process—but the schedules on the bus placards were never changed in time and the locals, who hated the change as both an inconvenience and an unnecessary waste of money, never bought the complete paperback schedule that the city thoughtfully published several weeks in advance.

The woman looked at me as if she expected an answer or a commiseration. Finally I could stand it no longer.

“Ich spreche kein Deutsch,” I said, mentally translating word-for-word as people do who know only one language.

Before I gotten out the last word, her face had shut down. It closed as completely as the external wooden blinds I would later roll down every night with a clatter over the windows of my apartment.

She turned away. I stood there feeling the chill from the wind, smelling the coal fires. A few minutes later the bus finally arrived, and I got on, filled with new anxieties and a sense of foreboding.

This was my introduction to what it was like to feel a stranger in a strange land that was also more familiar than the land of my birth. This kind of thing continued to happen to me for the rest of the time I lived in Europe, and continues to do so when I return. Now, of course, I am recognized at once as an American tourist coming during tourist season and welcomed or at least tolerated as such. Then, especially before I cut my hair and bought new clothes, when I took the tram in the morning I often had the feeling that someone was staring at me. If I looked up quickly enough, I could see the eyes and heads moving as they turned away. I made a lesson of it for myself. I decided this was perhaps just a tiny bit like what African-Americans routinely experienced every day in my own country.

Many years later, Michael and I were waiting to cross a street in a small city in Provence. Without warning a car came around a corner much too fast, splashing us with mud. They two teenagers in it leaned out the window, calling us names in French, some of which I understood and some of which I didn’t. The names would have made more sense had we been, as they clearly thought, German.

All this ran through my brain as Michael and I waited for the bill at the little café in Ortygia. These are all good examples of how, when I am feeling most safe and comfortable in Europe, when I have entered into the illusion that I actually belong, things can suddenly and unexpectedly crumble.

Night had fallen by the time we finished a pre-dinner sherry and changed our clothes. Our trip would come to an end in the morning. In recognition of the occasion, we asked the proprietress at our hotel to recommend an especially wonderful place for dinner.

She puffed herself up a bit up and smiled.

“All the restaurants in Siracusa are very good,” she said. “They have to be because we Siracusans eat in the Michael”

No whit deterred, we posed our question again. With the hint of a sigh, she gave us the name of her favorite restaurant, marking it with an X on the our city map.

“But really, all the restaurants are good,” she repeated. “You can eat in any of them.”

The taxi navigated its way quickly and confidently through the evening traffic of the modern city, then turned into the medieval labyrinth we had walked through earlier. The narrow twisting streets were dark except where an occasional, orphaned lamp threw down a sliver of light from a window or from an open shop. More than in the day, I had the feeling of having entered into some earlier time.

Suddenly the taxi stopped short. We had come to the end of the cramped, street and were facing an enormous open space—the central square of the old city.

At the far end—and it seemed immensely far away—electric lamps blazed out into the black night like medieval torches, casting their triangles of light on the gray stone baroque buildings, huge forbidding façades. The cathedral, the Duomo, was at our right, its doors bolted shut. Had a coach with bewigged footmen rattled by over the cobblestones, I would not have been surprised.

At our end of the square, the darkness was interrupted only by small candles on the tables of the cafes, from which rose up a gentle hum of dinner conversations, the sounds of silverware scraping against plates and glasses clinked for toasts. We found the proprietress’ favorite restaurant easily enough and went in. It was clearly the most elegant and expensive around. The high-ceilinged darkened room rimmed with stone walls felt like a catacomb; candles in stone arches and on the tables were the only light. As we ate our second “Eggplant Norma” in as many days—tomato sauce, fresh basil, and grated *ricotta salata*—I looked up to see a replica of the king-like ceramic head that had greeted us on our arrival in Taormina.

“What is that?” I asked the waitress, a young woman with long dark hair who had told us she was from Ortygia.

“Oh that,” she said dismissively—as everyone knew. “Saracens.”

Saracens? I delved deep in my brain where books read long ago were stored. Where had I heard of Saracens? *Ivanhoe*? The *Chanson de Roland*?

“Moors,” she added.

Later I learned that all over Sicily the ceramic heads painted in bright peasant colors represent a Moor who for his love of a Sicilian girl and was decapitated by her father. For the first time it struck me how odd it was that we had seen no Africans anywhere in Sicily. I wondered what kind of concerted effort must be made to succeed in keeping them out.

As we left the restaurant for our last stroll in Siracusa, a mass of dark shapes began streaming in at the far end of the square. A low humming noise like crickets grew louder and louder. What was it? A riot? A demonstration?

It was the Siracusans, come to eat in the Siracusan restaurants. They were coming, all of them it seemed, at ten o'clock at night. Coming with their children in strollers, coming with their children in their arms, coming with their grandmothers and grandfathers and aunts and uncles and friends they had made in childhood—there would have been no friends made since—everyone noisy and happy, all of them touching each other casually or not so casually, going in and out of the twisting medieval streets now filled and overfilled, everyone illuminated by the lights from the shops, the restaurants, the *trattorie*, all open and as full as if it had been noon. Was anyone still in their apartments? The darkened windows above suggested not. Everyone was outside strolling, even a nun or two. Oh how I envied them! How I wanted to be one of them, always and forever! And how I hated them too, just a little! Was all that warmth between them, that immense joy at being alive, that huge capacity for pleasure, all of which drew me again and again to this continent, possible only because the world they lived in consisted only of themselves and people just like themselves, because the others would always be shut out, ruthlessly and without compunction, the others like me? I thought so, as I had thought so many times before.

“Come,” said Michael, who had been watching me with a thoughtful expression.

Taking my arm, he guided me into a little shop advertising olive-oil tasting.

“This will be fun,” he said firmly.

And then he was darting with enthusiasm here and there, trying each of the olive oils the charming young woman poured out, dipping little squares of bread in each as if in a gentle parody of the mass. And just in case we didn't understand that olive oil was as important, as various here as wine, each was described with an

adjective that surely constituted a legally valid and clearly defined standard: “fruity”; “aromatic”; “peppery.”

One after another, we tried them, clearing our palettes in the interval with the local mineral water. I was surprised to hear Michael carry out a learned conversation with the young woman on the different tastes of olive oils. Where had he learned these adjectives? Fruity, like persimmon. Or with the tang of orange, chocolate, jasmine.

As always, we disagreed, and as always we found a compromise. This time, it was the “fruity” olive oil, with a scent of lemons, the young woman said. This would be our souvenir of Sicily. For now that time in the journey had come.

I went and paid for the oil while Michael debated a purchase of hyperexpensive artisanal chocolates with himself. Some jasmine soaps had been placed next to the cash register. I picked one up, then signed the credit card slip.

“*Merci, Madame,*” said the cashier, handing me my gift as we prepared to go back into the night. “*Merci beaucoup.*”

At the airport next morning, we stared up at the departure board in stunned disbelief. Our flight to Rome was not shown. At the Alitalia service center, we learned that the flight had been cancelled six months earlier. Our American expediter should have informed us, said the woman, who had the same aquiline nose as our proprietress in Siracusa.

Michael began to shout that he was going to miss a very important conference call. I was sad that he once again cared so much about his work but happy he was back to full energy.

“I can rebook you to Rome so you make your flight to Geneva,” said the woman. She pulled her shawl more closely around her shoulder although it was not cold in the airport, at least not to us.

“You know, these kinds of things happen to us every day here,” she said.

She gave us a small, sad smile, and I felt sorry although I was not sure for what.

In Geneva rain was falling on the tarmac, and the air was chill. The hotel room where we would overnight was small and modest, but warm and correct—

altogether *gemütlich*. The light-wood Scandinavian modern furniture—a bed, a desk, a small sofa—looked almost exactly like that in my last apartment in Europe.

I lay down to rest while Michael finished the re-packing. Unlike me Michael always seeks greater efficiency in packing. I knew, but did not believe, that we would be gone in a few hours. I believed, and knew to be untrue, that we were just going somewhere else in Europe: some cozy other hotel, some other unknown and wondrous place. I hoped, not really believing, that someday I would be able to live again in Europe but this time with Michael, perhaps for part of the year—that newly possible lifestyle—and this time (but how? but why?) I would no longer feel a foreigner, at least not a foreigner unwilling to accept being foreign.

Michael continued to move various objects from one suitcase to another a while longer. Then he settled himself on the sofa with the *International Herald Journal* he had bought as he always did in large European cities even though all the articles were now online.

Under the thick duvet I curled up, warm and comfortable. I listened to the rain beating against the window as I waited for sleep to arrive. The rain had been here in the north for months now, luring over the northern part of the continent, and it would go on a few weeks longer until summer finally arrived. Once I had hated the rain, but now I thought it made a reassuring, homely sound. I remembered how, long ago, I had often told myself it was the one thing in Europe I could always count on.

When I got home, I re-read *Il Gattopardo*, where I especially liked this sentence:

“... these people filling the rooms, all these faded women, all these stupid men, these two vainglorious sexes were part of his blood, part of himself; only they could really understand him, only with them could he be at his ease.” [260]