

Stalking Youth and Women in the European Outback

By

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To the memory of T. C. Abbey who planted the seed

Day 1

When Steve gave me a ride to the airport, I was not ready—but could not have been more eager—to get out of town. Three long years of unsuccessful struggle to avoid financial ruin had left me limp and lethargic, resigned to my fate, and tired of life.

But of course Nancy had begun to revive my spirit. This worldly child of 22, with big dark liquid eyes and a body by Porsche, has the sort of confidence that comes from lack of failure and should be ample warning to an older man of the dangers that lay ahead. I called her from the airport. It was nearly ten in the morning but I still managed to wake her up. It was pleasant to hear her sleep sodden since ordinarily her telephone voice is sharp and bright and brisk and has none of the purring, liquid flow that makes men meek. It was as if I had caught her off guard—not that she is ordinarily on guard but just that her usual impervious gaiety was replaced by a faint hint of vulnerability. If only it were so.

Here is a mystery for you. This good Mormon girl with her four sisters and one brother is regularly on the phone with various members of her family making

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family plans and resolving family affairs. She goes to church every Sunday and views the world through the eyes of a true believer whose perspective is predetermined by the confining limits of LDS doctrine. She knows she will marry a good Mormon boy and she expects she will have children—probably a lot of them. But set all this against the fact that she is career driven and intends to do an MBA and an LLD before becoming a successful entrepreneur. Throw in the fact that she views this time in her life as an interlude in which—quite literally—sex, drugs, and rock and roll are worthy pursuits and peerless delights. Now add in the unapologetic manner in which she carefully hides this wild side from her family and the result is a complex set of charming contradictions that surpass the already high levels that characterize the female sex.

Contradiction is, I suppose, the essence of being human, and by this standard Nancy is far more human than most. It fascinates me, of course, even more than larger scale contradictions like the way China professes communism and practices capitalism. China's paradox is grander by far, but I can't touch China.

It is comforting to pretend that the magnetic draw between the two of us is magnified by our mutual recognition that we have no future. I do not mean no common future; I mean no future at all. I am living in the sunset and, although the golden light and long shadows make this perhaps the best of times, I know that soon the sun will set and that a peaceful twilight period of greater or lesser duration will inexorably pass to total darkness. In Nancy's case, I imagine that this mad, wild spring will soon give way to a lazy, languid summer of

such somnolent sameness as to leave her suffocating. I do not think she can imagine this as living.

I could not sleep on the flights to Milan, and it was these thoughts about Nancy that played with me during the restless hours. You might find it socially unacceptable for a man of my age to be contemplating intimacy with someone so young, but I am unrepentant. Consider the positive aspects of this sort of arrangement. If I were to find a woman my own age, the two of us would be rather disconnected from the modern world. Neither of us would be able to effectively operate a DVD player, or the myriad modern telephone functions, or—God forbid—a computer. We would become increasingly cut off from the rest of the world, rather like a piece of space litter that somehow finds itself bumped out of gravitational orbit and doomed to interminable passage through the vast, empty void. An intergenerational relationship solves this problem as the older partner provides wonderfully esoteric pieces of useless wisdom while the younger one can at least keep them in orbit.

Then there is the question of health. As we age we become increasingly obsessed with physical malfunctions and it is not at all uncommon to see elderly couples in which both partners are constantly complaining about assorted aches and pains—a form of one-upmanship that spirals ever downward and cannot be that intellectually satisfying. If I were to have a younger partner, however, I would be very reluctant to mention these sorts of physical ailments because it would only be a reminder to her that she is saddled with second hand goods. Surely this would help me to avoid a preoccupation with health matters.

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I should think that feminist organizations would particularly applaud the idea of young women marrying old men since neither individual would know the first thing about maintaining a household and so the two would be obliged to address this problem as a team. Still, feminists are a devious lot, and I wouldn't put it past them to throw their support behind intergenerational relationships in the hope that the woman can get on with her career while the man retires and looks after things at home. Of course feminists would be adamant that there should be an equal number of intergenerational relationships in which the woman is old and the man is young. All the better, I say. If women my age want to chase after young men then I will have no option but to pursue young women.

Anyway, people generally recognize that as we age we become increasingly eccentric. There is nothing to be done about it; it just happens. I am getting on in years, and so there really should be no problem if I choose to express my legitimate claim to eccentricity by paying attention to young women.

* * *

On the leg from Atlanta to Milan, I was seated next to a Catholic priest—Brazilian in background—who belonged to a certain small, specialized order of unknown name. He was traveling from his posting in Kansas City to a one-month seminar to be held at a bucolic location not far from Milan. He was a cheerful, kindly man, smallish in stature with a full head of well-trimmed, uniformly graying hair. He liked to talk—at least more

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than I—but he had a refined social sense and could easily detect when I was in the mood for conversation and when I was not. Ordinarily, this would very much endear him to me—and indeed I was appreciative—but mostly I found myself mildly disturbed by how ordinary he was. How can a man who dedicates his life to service and celibacy not be in some way special or unusual or odd? Could it be that he was not a priest? But no, that made no sense. He seemed much too ordinary to ever have conceived of such a deception, to say nothing of acting it out. I wonder what he ought to have been in life. I feel sure he missed his calling; nothing in his manner suggested that he was striving, striving, striving to find some grail, holy or otherwise.

Day 2

At times it is entertaining to have an incomplete sense of what a language is all about. When, in the early hours of the morning, after having floated across the sharpened shoulders and snow-capped crests of the Alps, after having swept down into the broad, flat, richly green valley surrounding Milan, we bumped down on the Malpensa Airport runway, I could not help wondering why anybody would name an airport “Bad Thought.” Years ago, I studied Spanish poorly and Latin as little as possible. Now, decades later, I am left with residual vocabulary and little else, but my mind remains unalterably convinced that “mal” connects to bad and “pensa” is associated with thinking. Of course, I never studied Italian.

Surely there was no specific intent to burden an airport with such negativity, so there would be no harm in pretending for a moment that the name means what I think it means, and speculating on how that could be. Only two possibilities come to mind. One is that some dark and pagan and perhaps Celtic notion attached itself to a living landscape feature in this region—a feature that

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elicited foreboding in the hearts of those early believers. Then the name was transmitted through different languages and different human epochs until at last, stripped of its original power, it hangs as a meaningless relic on a 20th century creation. This is not a sanguine thought, but at least it rings true as to how Europe came to have its layered complexity. It accords with the myth of European evolution and so its parallel trajectory with a greater truth may make it even more true than the lesser, real truth.

As for the second tenable explanation of such an inappropriate name—it is that the airport commemorates an illustrious Mr. Malpensa whose worldly achievements came to be viewed as considerable. At least by some; others no doubt judged him in a different light. Whatever the balance of his virtues and vices, he inherited a name of dubious distinction and yet the probability is that nobody noticed. People, it seems, can be the bearers of all sorts of unfortunate surnames without having to feel apologetic. After all, a name is just a name.

Before departing from Utah I had only slept about five hours and now a second night has passed with no sleep at all. This day, however, is to be long and refreshingly new, and so fatigue only casts a pale shadow on my limbs, leaving my mind in a heightened state of awareness. I pass through customs, retrieve my luggage, ride in the front seat of the bus into the heart of the city, store the bicycle at the central train station, decipher and negotiate the Metro to the very core of Milan, locate my hotel, and find myself resting on the bed in my room by shortly after noon.

Ten minutes is enough to persuade me that sleep is unthinkable, and so I venture out onto the cobbled streets to locate a public phone where I hope to connect with Venera. Venera: now here is a name that has a real and urgent associational problem—one that even during this very first meeting I unsuccessfully try to confront, unsuccessfully because Venera turns out to be particularly pleased with her name. It must carry a different set of associations in Russian.

Venera answers on the second ring, and her voice has a childlike smallness to it. I imagine her as Japanese, speaking as she does with a high softness. Our conversation is brief, but remarkably relaxed for two people who have never met. We reconfirm our plan to meet on the steps of La Scala at 4:00 PM and in her small voice she forewarns me that she will try to not be late.

Venera is an Internet acquaintance. I only first wrote to her about two weeks ago. If she had not listed Milan as her home I doubt her photo would have captured my attention, and even at that I think it was her commentary rather than her looks that motivated me to write. She came across as direct and unmanipulative and independent and her subsequent letters reinforced this initial impression.

I was quite pleased by the prospect of meeting Venera in Milan, eventually spending time with Irina in Kislovodsk, and possibly even locating a third Russian woman to brighten my weekend stay in Moscow near the end of the trip. All this while leaving behind Nancy who appeared so suddenly a few weeks before my departure from Utah.

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The irony here is that in spite of her deceptive double life, Nancy probably is being more honest with me than I with her. She has openly declared her paradoxes to me and she has made it clear that she manages to go out many nights every week, that she sees as many different guys as possible, and that she likes it that way. I, on the other hand, remain silent about my Internet relationships and about my extravagant interest in women—a behavior that might be thought diplomatic in a young, attractive man who quite clearly would have many options available, but skirts the edge of deceptiveness in an older man like me.

In the few hours before my rendezvous with Venera, I wander the streets of central Milan, locate La Scala (which is undergoing wholesale reconstruction), amble around the second largest cathedral in Christendom, chase away some young Arab touts in the large Piazza, and generally kill time. I find Milan quite agreeable, actually, stout and substantial and mildly serious—like a good father. Guidebooks damn it with faint praise, protesting that there is more here than mere industrial obsession. From such a promotional source this sounds contrived, but perhaps it is not.

Venera evidently staked me out. I arrive a minute or two ahead of schedule and she appears beside me only moments later. Her English is quite good—especially if it is, as she claims, entirely self-taught. Her physical appearance is just as described on the Internet: 5'7", 112 pounds, short dirty blonde hair. For a woman who is 37 years old she is unaccountably slender, firm, and wrinkle-free. She is quite pretty, actually, although her eyes are set a little close together and have a tendency to look

somewhat fierce whenever she worries her brow (which happens with fair frequency).

We walk to the park where the Sforzesco Castle is located and spend many hours sitting on a wooden park bench talking about her life. It has been hard, evidently, what with her husband leaving her for no stated reason during the depths of the post-Soviet depression, and supposedly having been paid to do so by his boss who wanted to move in and take his place. I continue pressing Venera to tell me more—which she does—and eventually she begins to weep. It does not last long, but both before and after she seems so tightly strung that that her body nearly vibrates. She behaves almost like a hunted animal. I must admit to myself that Venera is not the right kind of woman for me.

In the evening we have one drink and then go to a restaurant where we share a bottle of wine with our food. The worry disappears from Venera's brow, the secrets tumble out with surprising rapidity, and eventually we agree that we get along surprisingly well for total strangers. Through it all, Venera is very ladylike and quite proper—even in the way she flirts. We part at the Metro station around eleven in the evening with plans to meet the following afternoon at four, but this time at the park bench near the castle.

Day 3

Whatever kept me going all day certainly disappeared at the stroke of midnight when I finally got to bed. I slept for fifteen hours, waking with barely enough time to prepare for our afternoon meeting. Once outside, I call Venera and she sounds relieved to hear from me because she is going to be late. We arrange to meet an hour later.

I wonder why it is that I am so captivated by mystery. When a woman does something unpredictable—no matter how thoughtless or inconsiderate—my first impulse is to track her down and find out more. In this instance, Venera does not show at the arranged time and after half an hour I move on to a public phone and call her. I get a message saying her phone is temporarily out of range (in the Metro or avoiding me?—probably the latter). I try again an hour later and this time a message in Italian seems to be saying that she is not taking calls. That pretty much settles it, I think—she is trying to shed me. Still, even though I now know I am not so interested in her, I find it hard to believe that she is really that cool about me. When I make one last effort late in the evening

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she answers immediately and showers me with apologies. I suggest that we set all that aside and address the real question: Does she want to meet again? Her answer is “of course,” and so we agree to get together when I return to Milan in a couple weeks. She suggests that I send her an e-mail from Corsica to arrange the specifics, but I think I will wait to see if she writes to me.

There is a fascinating mystery here, but I think I will be able to resist the temptation to try to solve it. Venera claims she got to the park bench a bit before 6:00 PM but how can a woman with no children and no job be two hours late to a meeting? It would be interesting to know what is really going on.

* * *

In the evening I found a better hotel for the same price and made a reservation for when I return from Corsica. It is situated above a small bar that had attracted me to that location in the first place, so when I came downstairs I went into the bar and listened to a surprisingly good band whose lead singer was a handsome young Black man—perhaps American—who sounded more than a little like Aaron Neville.

Most everybody in the place was Italian, but every song that this group played was American. There were no Italian lyrics whatever and all the rhythms and melodies flowed from blues or reggae or rap. American culture rules. People the world over absorb our style—often intentionally but sometimes, as in this case, almost unconsciously. Of course what it all means to an Italian is unfathomable and this is proof incontrovertible that

the process actually is an Italianization of Americanisms rather than an Americanization of Italians. There is a big difference.

On the surface, this wholesale importation of American culture by other societies all around the world does not seem like such a sinister thing. After all, people are free to take what they want from elsewhere and so the adoption of Americanisms is a matter of choice. It is not as if the American government is going to revoke most favored trade status if Italians fail to turn out in adequate numbers for “The Terminator” or so ignore a McDonald’s as to drive it out of business. Pieces of Americana are not forced on the Italians, the French, or anybody else, and so why do we hear complaints about American cultural imperialism?

I think one of the reasons is that the most visible aspects of American culture are systematically marketed overseas by transnational corporations, which know how to manipulate the thinking of potential buyers and have the resources at hand to do so. In other words, those who worry about cultural imperialism are in fact identifying a form of economic imperialism. In spite of the legal fiction to the contrary, corporations are not human beings, and their motivation for doing anything is always inhumanly practical—making money. Although American culture is not sinister, corporate marketing is, and its methods are used without regard for the needs or interests of the consumers. What is interesting here, though, is that the process impinges on cultural practices just as much at home in America as it does in overseas areas. What is popular culture, after all, but a corporately managed way of living that insures cash flow?

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An obscure band playing American music in Italy is not an example of corporate manipulation, and so I think the degree to which it successfully penetrates the Italian consciousness is largely a function of whether or not Italians happen to like their music. Most societies import vast amounts of things, ideas, and values from elsewhere, and as long as this is not an orchestrated invasion there seems little harm. Would the people of Europe be justified in resenting Palestine because Christianity came from there? Should the Japanese shun the Shinkansen because its original technology was imported? Might Moroccans mumble apologetically because they speak a language that is not home grown? Surely not, so why should the world view with alarm the spread of Americanisms? If dissemination is a case of planned invasion by powerful corporations or political entities then the concern is valid, but otherwise it is not.

On the other hand, cultural diversity is disappearing at an alarming rate. Languages, for example, are going extinct faster than new ones are being developed. If one believes as I do that diversity is intrinsically good then the global pattern of cultural simplification is a source of concern.

This diminution in cultural variety is having a beneficial effect by making it possible for ever larger numbers of societies to coexist peacefully, and this is clearly in the best interest of the world (especially given the long term impossibility of containing the spread of weapons of mass destruction). Still, one cannot help but feel that the kinds of advantages that flow from biological diversity must have a parallel worth in the realm of human cultures.

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The logic of the situation suggests that the spread of culture is a benign process as long as it is not forced. But there is a vague sense of unease associated with the ongoing simplification of culture patterns around the world, and this emotional response should not be discounted just because we happen to live in an era that values reason. Reason, after all, was the touchstone of communism, and look where that led.

Day 4

Another sleepless night and it can't be blamed on the bed since sleep was not a problem the night before. Many unworthy thoughts slipped through my mind during those darkened hours, but also some that were neither mean nor self-pitying, and one of these I suppose I shall mention.

Europeans are enormously taken with the practice of eating outdoors. On diminutive home patios and porches, under countless street side café awnings, in the shade of trees, and under the cavernous open passageways of buildings, Europeans sip and munch and generally refresh themselves. Being from a moralistic background, I have always envied the way Europeans unconsciously slip into this wholesome way of life, and it has periodically puzzled me that Americans who are morally superior in so many respects should be so retrograde in this one. How can we—who practically invented the idea of being in love with wilderness—fail to seek it out in this slight and modest way? I am certain that rural ways are healthier than urban ones and that therefore country folk are less sick than city folk, but still I do not automatically

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select the outdoor eating option whenever it is available. Indeed, I shun it, only ceding to its demands on those rare occasions when weather, scenery, and all other considerations trump the alternative.

One might presume that this continental distinction is a consequence of more favorable environmental conditions in Europe than in America, but this is unpersuasive. After all, America has a multitude of environmental niches and in none of them—as far as I know—does the American propensity to eat outdoors begin to approach that of even the Danes or Germans who, after all, are hardly blessed with the most benign of climates.

In the middle of the night, an explanation came to me, one of great intellectual satisfaction because it swept away the moral argument and replaced it with an image of Europeans caught up in a psychic struggle.

Everywhere in Europe there are shutters. Beyond their undeniable aesthetic appeal, they are functionless. When you first step into a hotel room, the shutters are closed and the cavernous, gray light that pervades the space lends it a cheerless air. In addition to the shutters on the outside of the windows, there will be curtains on the inside, and it is these that make the shutters useless. Not just hotel rooms have shutters; homes do as well. They are everywhere and they are impractical, for shutters are a maintenance nightmare. They must be painted or preserved, and this generally on stone or stucco buildings whose exterior surfaces are otherwise pretty much maintenance free. A good deal of these shutters, incidentally, are louvered (to let in the outdoors?), which makes repainting them the sort of job that ought to

be reserved for the lowest of the low—child molesters, rapists, and other such prison inmates who have a serious societal debt to repay.

What are the Europeans thinking? Perhaps their outdoor eating habits are nothing more than an opportunity to observe shutters from their one good side, but I think there is a deeper issue here: Europeans are still struggling to move beyond their medieval period. All those black and cavernous cathedrals, all those dank castle passageways—Europe’s highest and most advanced architectural achievements appear to have been little more than elaborate attempts to capture and bottle dreary gray light. Europeans live in the sunlight these days, but perhaps they are haunted by their chiaroscuro past.

* * *

This is a travel day, for I intend to be in Corsica at first light tomorrow. The ferry leaves from Savona, but not until late in the evening, and so my departure from Milan is leisurely. I catch a train from the central station in early afternoon and anticipate an arrival in Savona well before dark. I am charmed by the luxurious seats and clean air of this reasonably priced Italian rail trip, but rather bemused by the terribly bored young American couple seated opposite me. They look as if they are waiting for life to arrive—and tired of waiting they certainly seem to be. They are not even particularly entertained when the conductor comes along and informs me that my second class ticket is invalid in this first class car and that I must move four cars to the rear. When I was younger I would

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have been mortified; now I am simply happy to have had an opportunity to travel first class.

On arrival in Savona, I memorize what I can of the large city map posted in the railway station and start the two kilometer trek to the port. The sun sizzles and the bags grow heavy, and so I reach the water's edge in a hot and sticky state. I pause and ask a gas station attendant where I can find the ferry to Corsica. With pursed lips, a raised chin, and a roll of the eyes he somehow informs me that the ferry is at the *other* port, the one twelve kilometers west that can be reached by going back to the general vicinity of the train station and catching a #6 bus (he thinks).

The French consider themselves civilized, but I don't know how they can sustain such an illusion. In most civilized societies, the bearer of such unpleasant news would know enough to pretend dismay. But the French are so concerned with their own *savoir faire* that they fail to notice the plight of their audience. Does this sound civilized? Still, I must confess that the gas station attendant put me in the right direction. Also, I suppose I ought to mention that Savona is still in Italy, not France, and that one might therefore presume the man was Italian. My prejudice against the French is too strong, however, for me to accept this circumstantial evidence. The behavior was French in my book, and so the man was too. This may sound irrational to you, but most of us have no trouble dealing with inconsistencies in this way.

By early evening as shadows began to lengthen, I was well established in one of the outdoor waiting areas for the ferry. Departure was still hours away but a number

of parties already were waiting there. Over the next hour or two, “late” arriving Germans joined their already large national contingent, and by 10:00 PM the waiting areas were full.

At this point, I decided there was still time to do a practice assembly and breakdown of the Bike Friday that I am going to use to tour around Corsica. My motives were not entirely pure: large numbers of motorcyclists were beginning to find not such subtle ways to show off their machines to the assembled crowd, and so I thought everyone should have a chance to see something truly different. Assembly went without a hitch, but no sooner had I begun the repacking process than the ferry was opened for boarding—a half hour early! I got everything properly stowed and hiked up the ferry ramp with plenty of time, but by then the only spare floor space suitable for sleeping was right beside a family with four children. They were good, though, and went to bed early.

Day 5

My plan is to bicycle around Corsica alone. The trip has been brewing for a long, long time. Five years ago I organized a circle-island expedition for students and faculty in the university geography department where I work. The plan was to have a support vehicle, move as a group, and stay in modest lodgings en route. But of course as the departure date drew near the nine “committed” participants found no end of reasons why they had to drop out, and about a month beforehand it became obvious that the venture would have to be cancelled. Such practical people: I cannot understand how life can have meaning if all decisions are sensible ones. Only foolish, outrageous acts create new situations, and only a new situation can salvage a day from oblivion. I was, as you can tell, mildly peeved at the time. Ever since, I have been plotting to do the trip on my own and the day has finally arrived.

* * *

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From the ferry, Cap Corse in the predawn light was a massive, looming hulk of silent majesty. It was more than I had expected, more, even, than I had hoped. Its dark, dramatic flanks plunged to the sea from lofty heights and the tiny wavelets of the gentle Mediterranean gathered around its shores like a multitude of insignificant supplicants.

It was not as if the Corsica-Sardinia Ferry Service had made this grandeur easy to observe. The ferry was in fact little more than a floating convention center with bowels eviscerated to provide ample space for trucks and cars. The vessel was like a silent space ship. You could not hear the engines, you could not feel vibration, the Mediterranean offered no noticeable resistance to the forward floating motion of the hull, and the many decks were entirely closed in. Only a systematic search revealed the one deck with its few sets of doors affording access to the narrow, exposed space where all the lifeboats are kept. Out there you could see the breathing, beaconing body of the island, but otherwise, it was just a pretty picture through a window.

I will say this, however: the Corsica-Sardinia Ferry Service has raised its marketing to such a level that only the blind and the aqua phobic would ever be able to resist a ride on one of its floating wonders. The company has chosen as signature colors cerulean blue lettering on a background field of marigold yellow. And the smokestack of every vessel is fitted out with the outline of a Corsican warrior's head, a rugged profile in black and white with a yellow headband tied tightly in place and the tie ends splaying out behind the one visible ear. It is a good symbol and I think it fair to say that French

business has exploited Corsican identity with far greater effectiveness than American business has been able to do with Indians.

Early morning rays slapped the sleeping city across the face as we all disembarked on the pier at Bastia and before the breakfast crowd had sipped its last cappuccino I was settled into a hotel room with my little green collapsible bicycle set up and waiting for action. Nothing to do but hit the open road.

The north end of Corsica is a long, narrow peninsula pointing straight and rising proud. Tiny villages sprinkle both sides while the continuous crest running down the center is high country devoid of people. Michelin says that an abbreviated trip—up the eastern edge, across the mountain ridge, down the western side, and returning over the backbone is a 110 kilometer circuit, and that sounds like a good way to get started. After all, I won't have to haul the trailer. I depart in a fit of excitement and only after a few kilometers have drained the surplus from my adrenaline tank do I settle into a thoughtful analysis of what I have undertaken. I quickly realize that this is going to take me a few hours and that I probably should not plan on any late afternoon sightseeing back in the city of Bastia.

About forty kilometers into the ride, more or less as I crest the first pass at the north end of the peninsula, I hit the wall. This is a commonly used phrase—I've used it myself—but only if you have actually run into the wall full bore and experienced the totality of the event do you have any sense of how thorough and all-encompassing the physical disintegration becomes. It must be a little like staggering around in the desert with no water—not

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as deadly but just as disorienting. In fact, for me it is a lot like that since I ran out of water around kilometer 30 and I have not had any food except for a couple croissants, which would be fine if the French ever provided anything with them.

I will spare you the grim details of the remainder of the ride and only touch on the high points. Fool that I am, I descend from that northern pass on its western side, thereby sealing my doom. Around kilometer 70 I finally stagger into the courtyard of a restaurant where I consume a foot-long sandwich (very good it is, too) and systematically drain a 1.5 liter bottle of water. After a half hour nap I venture out again and in the early evening hours begin my sluggish ascent of the second pass. It breaks me, eventually, and I have to walk the last couple kilometers to the crest. I get back to the hotel at 8:00 PM.

Is there anything to be learned from this? I should think so. For starters, get in condition before you go. Create a sensible plan for your ride. Food is fuel and make sure you have some. Don't get dehydrated. These are all pretty basic rules, aren't they? I knew them all before I got to Corsica. But it is never as good to just know something in your head; you must know it in your gut as well. If you do not, it is only a shallow and insubstantial sort of knowledge. I teach this concept to the students in my classes all the time. I wonder if they ever listen. I certainly didn't.

Day 6

Down at the old port, Bastia shows how little French fishing villages are supposed to look—a cubist choir of closely gathered structures arrayed around the tiny harbor, a sunny stonework promenade rimming the water's edge, projecting piers with their tethered boats that look as if they all are nursing, a bulwark jetty guarding against the sea, and splash after splash of bright awnings facing the promenade with their backs to the buildings. This is aesthetic. This is charming. This is really very pretty.

These little port towns, though, are much alike. The features I have described do not distinguish Bastia from the others; they define them all. The *category* is special—most small villages around the world are either poorly shaped or poorly dressed, but Mediterranean fishing villages almost always exhibit style and grace and good conformation. But what puts old Bastia in a different class? What makes it a special place, a cut above the rest? Nothing, actually. Old Bastia contains enough beauty and class to satisfy any reasonable person, not just for today but for a lifetime, but it would hardly

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be considered the best of the lot. So the question arises, “How does one distinguish between the ravishing and the merely beautiful?”

It may be very little—a more balanced composition here, a more dramatic backdrop there. All in all, when it comes to this kind of town the difference between the winner and the also-ran probably is so small that straightforward linear measurements would only barely detect the difference.

Imagine yourselves, gentlemen, in a room with twenty lovely women, all of them tall and slender and blond but only one of whom transports you to a world of dreams. If you are rational about this, you will admit that she is special not because of some profound deviation from the norm; if she were really different she would be ugly. No, what makes her the only one for you is nothing more, perhaps, than a half inch less in waist measurement, or a quarter inch more of finger length, or eighth inch longer (false?) eyelashes. From a rational point of view, her physical advantages are trivially small. But you are not rational, are you, and the differences that are so miniscule in the logical you are in fact determinative in the willful and living you. Since your behavior is at the mercy of your wanton will, I cannot share the optimistic judgment of contemporary social science that people are predictable.

Most men prefer narrow waists but others hardly care, and this is an issue for social science because it flags the fact that different people are motivated by different incentives. Social science recognizes this flaw in its approach and adequately compensates by presuming that most “normal” men prefer narrow waists (a reasonable

approximation of truth) and by finding background characteristics that account for the “aberrant” men. This all works and social science concludes that it is well on the way to solving its predictive problems.

But now back to the issue at hand: granting social science its narrow waist generalization, how much narrower must that waist be to motivate the man, and how much more narrow might it be before it becomes a turn-off? We are in the quantitative realm here—the one from which social science derives its confidence—and yet the necessary measurements would yield up correlations that are not simply non-linear and measurement differences that are not merely miniscule. To make sense, they must also be relational—that is, relate to the height and hips and bust of the woman. And then there is the problem that the woman almost certainly has other measurable attributes that give her relative waist size an unpredictable weight in the overall impression that she leaves on the not-so-neutral observer. No, I am afraid that social science never will be able to adequately construct the equation for predicting that a certain man will say to himself, “she is the one for me.” And we are only talking about one woman here, nothing so complex as a city or a country full of them.

There is, I believe, a fundamental flaw in the approach used by the social sciences. They are trying to replicate the success of the physical sciences by using the same methods of investigation, but humans may not be sufficiently rational for such methods to work. If human behavior were governed by reason—as the social sciences fantasize—then the scientific method might be used to explain and predict it. Unfortunately, humans only

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make rational decisions about unimportant things. Did Henry Ford and Paul Gauguin select their career paths based on a considered analysis of all the possible options? I doubt it; more likely, they simply found their calling through some mysterious process that had far more to do with what feels right. Did Liz Taylor conclude that Richard Burton would be her ideal partner because they had common interests and his background meshed well with hers? I somehow suspect that it was more a matter of liking his looks and liking his style. Did some poor, ordinary American soldier who died in the Iraq war arrive at his fate because he realized that his life was the optimum one to sacrifice in order to bring down Saddam Hussein? Probably not. Did George Washington reject a role as permanent president because it was in his best interest? Was Christ rational when he performed all those miracles?

The more remarkable a person, the less believable the contention that her actions spring from a logical and predictable source. Human behavior is governed by love or hate or envy or altruism or greed or any of a number of other wild and unruly emotions. Only when such emotions are not particularly strong does the muted power of reason become decisive. That is why I believe rational decisions only emerge in unimportant situations. Of course, most situations are in fact unimportant, so reason often is involved in what people do. The problem for social science is that it may end up explaining most human behavior, but not the important stuff.

This is a powerful consolation because if social science ever were to achieve its objective—to explain and predict all human behavior—then there would be no surprises

left in the world. The outcome of each life would be known in advance, and the world would be a boring place indeed. No one would want to live in it. Is it not ironic that we seek to predict our own future when even a moment's reflection would convince us that such power would oppress us? And is this not further evidence that human behavior is at heart irrational? What we really want is uncertainty and risk because they make us feel alive, but who can admit it in an age of reason?

There is no good reason for me to be here in Corsica; the choice is driven by irrational emotions. My appreciation of the old port of Bastia is a purely aesthetic matter, and there is nothing reasonable about beauty. It is aesthetics that drew me to Corsica in the first place and it is insufficient aesthetics that will keep me from throwing away everything and moving to Bastia to spend my latter days sipping cappuccino in the shade of a restaurant awning looking at the pretty boats and the pretty people. I might do it for some other village though.

Day 7

I have been thinking a lot about confidence; Cap Corse lingers in my mind. Those afternoon hours laboring across a peerless landscape—bays and headlands and clustered mountainside villages—with my mind consumed by the single question: “Can I make it?” The experience chastens and the question remains, although now it adheres to the larger context. Can I make it around Corsica on my bicycle? I have been considering the proposition from various angles and have settled on a different plan. There are daily ferries to the Italian mainland from Sardinia and ferries shuttle frequently from the southern tip of Corsica to Sardinia’s northern extreme, and so instead of returning northward from Bonifacio up through the alpine heart of Corsica I shall traverse the island in one direction only and then abandon it altogether. Sardinia may offer a different flavor.

The start of the journey presents the biggest challenge because I must first ascend the very pass that crushed me two days ago—and it will have to be done with the trailer attached. The route to the crest runs past my hotel and

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outside its entrance the road already is steep. I prepare in all ways possible, but even so the trailer has never before been attached to the bicycle and I have no sense of what to expect with it fully laden. I am pleased to discover that I can move the trailer and the pitch is not impossible. I make it to the top in a little over an hour, maintaining a steady speed and without tiring in the final stages. Now in my mind the Corsica trip is done. The days must pass, the distance must be pedaled, the climbs must be made, but I know that I can do it. A certain heavy doubt has been removed and now I can enjoy the trip.

We all know that success requires confidence. It does not matter if it is sports or business or love, the end is achieved only when we believe it is going to be. And yet, for most of us the training and preparation to accomplish things in life is dedicated to learning the relevant skills. This may not be the best approach. Those who develop competence without accompanying belief in their ability often fail to realize success whereas those who simply presume to do something typically end up doing it, and manage to develop the necessary competence along the way. We might be better served by an educational system that teaches us presumptuousness rather than competence.

My most vivid lesson in the power of confidence occurred when I was a shy, young teenager attending a private boys' school in New England. It happened that one of the teachers there was Warren Witherell, a remarkably tall and lanky man who had recently become a national champion water skier. He was utterly sure of himself in everything he did, and even I could tell that he had more than a passing acquaintance with Narcissus. I

was taken by his charisma, however, and counted myself as one of his devotees. We were numerous, but so were his detractors, and there appeared to be no neutral ground. Warren had never done any snow skiing, and yet the school had a national reputation for the quality of its skiers. Late one fall, he let it be known that he was going to become a ski racer, and for those who detested his arrogance this was received with unconcealed glee, for no person—not even an acknowledged athlete—can reasonably expect to become highly skilled in a very different sport without a fair amount of training and practice. Warren was no longer young, and it certainly appeared that his mouth had gotten a little too far ahead of his overconfident self. Over Christmas vacation, Warren went off and learned to ski, and in January he entered a regional slalom race and won it. In subsequent years, he became the ski coach at a competing private school and his protégées were of national caliber. He went on to write a book on how racers ski, and it was received well by those who take the sport seriously.

At the time, I was astounded that anybody could have such athletic ability—and especially someone of such size. In those days, big, tall slalom skiers simply did not show up as competitors in races. I saw him as blessed with supernatural athletic skill, and worshipped him for it. Now in retrospect I realize the truth: he was naturally gifted, but the real source of his quick success was his inability to question his own ability.

Back in the early part of the twentieth century—during the 20's and the 30's, I believe—a man named Harry Pidgeon decided to build a sailboat and sail it around the world. Harry was in his late 40's at the time.

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He knew virtually nothing about boats and he had no experience on the ocean. Nevertheless, he ordered a set of sailboat plans from Popular Science magazine and proceeded to follow them. He set himself up next to a lumberyard on the west coast and at a cost of about \$1,000 built himself a hard chined sailboat. Eventually he launched and christened his new boat, "Islander," and then spent the rest of his life sailing her. He sailed around the world alone, something that had been done only a couple of times before, and only by experienced mariners. He wrote a book about his trip, but it suffered from a lack of near disasters. He avoided hurricanes; he made landfalls when and where he expected; he never was put up on a lee shore or torn from his anchorage by unanticipated conditions. In short, Harry was so successful that he had little to work with when writing his book. I doubt this bothered him much, however, for landfall in some new and exotic place appears to have been his passion and book writing nothing more than a means to this end. In his simple, homebuilt boat, Harry went on to do a second circumnavigation. Then he got married and took off again. He did not complete the third circumnavigation; Islander met disaster in the South Pacific. Undaunted, Harry returned to the States with his new wife and when nearly 80 years old began construction of a new boat. Although he died before completing it, his presumptuous behavior rewarded him with maritime success that most sailors born with the wind in their teeth might only dream of having. He was a confident man.

Day 8

I spent the night in St. Florent, delighted to be there not because of its undeniable charm but rather because in the afternoon light of its broad, westerly facing bay there stood anchored far from shore—and as still as a stag—a white-hulled, three-masted, square-rigged ship. This conjured for me the recollection of a moment of spine-chilling awe. It was the summer of 1984 and I was working as a deck hand on an 84' ketch named “White Eagle.” We were tied off at a dock along the Papeete waterfront and there silently appeared slipping in through the harbor entrance, with the crazy, green spire of Moorea as a backdrop, a white-hulled, three-masted, square-rigged ship. Its sails were furled and it was ghosting into the harbor. It was a French navy training ship and the entire crew was standing at attention evenly spaced an arm length apart along all but the highest of the horizontal spars of those three masts, dressed in their white duck uniforms. Nobody was on deck. The ship ghosted in and the men did not move. St. Florent, you take me back in time.

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But now I am on the road again, and I definitely feel stronger than I did yesterday. The kilometers are doing as they should and actually clicking by. Even when ascending, the progress is acceptable. Each day's ride is driven by the illusion that there is a destination. Today, for example, the task is to reach I'lle Rousse and the hourly advance is a measurable progression towards that end. And yet I do not know I'lle Rousse and I have no particular need or desire to be there. It will be charming, I am sure, and indeed in the end my optimism is rewarded. But why I'lle Rousse? No reason, really. It is just a marker on a journey, and the journey itself has no goal. Of course goals are set—"I will be in Sardinia nine days from now"—but even the goals are nothing more than markers. The only real intent is to be on the move, to see something new with each passing instant. People refer to this mentality as wanderlust, giving it a faintly disreputable cast and burdening it with an implication of aberrancy and sickness. I do not accept this. When Australian aborigines go on walkabout are they sick? Are they doing something disreputable? I doubt it. More likely, they are satisfying a normal human urge and in the process becoming healthier. Unlike most flora, we are designed to move, and so we shall. Tennyson knew this and he used the voice of Ulysses to say it:

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

When hunters turned to farming, staying settled in one place became the norm. Some might offer this as evidence that people are happiest when rooted to a single place, but I am unconvinced. The constraints associated with making a living by tilling the land militated against mobility and obliged people to become sedentary. To argue that this means humanity chose rootedness as a superior way of life would be like claiming that modern people have consciously opted for long commutes to work because it is such an obviously satisfactory use of time.

Cultures may come in an extravagant variety of forms, but one thing they all seem to do is make a virtue of necessity. If, for example, hunting is necessary for survival then culture will glorify the skillful hunter. If a living is best made by tilling the soil then culture will encourage women to marry farmers. If a hardscrabble existence can be cushioned somewhat by smuggling moonshine over the mountains then the smugglers become the heroes. Culture does not cater to the needs of the individual; it crusades for the communal cause. And I do not think there have been many instances in which people moving around a lot has offered a communal benefit. It is for this reason that cultures have burdened wanderlust with all the wrong connotations.

In fact, the judgments of society rarely reflect the interests of the individual. After all, most young people very much want to travel for no good reason, and only reluctantly abandon their yearning for a rootless life when the demands of society oblige them to do so. They eventually assume a more stable way of life and culture rewards them with approval—as the connotation of the

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word “stable” implies. The reason most people end up—as Thoreau claims—living lives of quiet desperation is that somewhere along the way they decided to do what culture wants instead of what they want.

It is commonly felt that American society is more individualistic than most, and I take this to mean that individuals do as they wish more of the time. I have no quarrel with this assessment—in fact, I concur—but if Americans are the paragons of individualism then individualism is in a pretty sorry state. When you were young did you not want to hike to Machu Picchu or ride the TransSiberian Railroad or stand on the banks of the Zambezi and feel the vibration of thunderous Victoria Falls? Well, now you are rich by the standards of the world so why do you not do it? Perhaps your house needs new gutters or your daughter needs new braces or your job needs your undivided attention. The reasons may be good ones. Culture certainly thinks so. But what happened to individualism?

A conventional wisdom is that American society is altogether too individualistic and will inexorably disintegrate as its many members pursue their own selfish interests rather than accommodating themselves to the needs of cultural harmony. I have for many years sympathized with this attitude and even at times silently berated myself for failing to do my part to further the cause of social cohesion. But now as I follow my own trace of thought I begin to wonder if perhaps even in America the need is not for more individualism rather than less. Just as the natural world cares not at all about the fate of each living creature and only pays attention to the matter of species survival, so does culture completely

disregard the desires and yearnings of the individual human as long as the interests of the society are served. But a society is an abstraction that I, at least, find hard to accord the same legitimate claim to autonomous existence as a person, and this begs the question of whether the demands of culture are reasonable. In our political affairs we seem to have hit upon a winning formula in which democracy demands not consensus or love but merely a grudging recognition that contrary points of view have a right to exist. Maybe cultures have to become similarly open-minded before the individuals who compose them can create a more perfect world.

It all seems to hinge on whether we need each other to survive, and of course in certain respects we do. But interdependence does not necessarily require an omnipotent cultural dictator. Perhaps it is time for the culture to do the compromising rather than simply imposing its iron will on all. Perhaps there is something to be said for the outrageous notion that “the less culture the better.”

Day 9

Île Rousse is named for a red rock island outcrop near to shore, and now a curving causeway connects the town's lovely crescent beach to it. The causeway, furthermore, anchors a set of piers that act as a fabricated port, protected to seaward by the island and on two other sides by the causeway and the beach. It is a good arrangement, one in which neither nature nor man has paid too high a price in the bargain. So many places in Europe manifest this sort of equitable compromise and Île Rousse is a good example, not because the overall effect is unusually satisfying but because it is fair in spite of the surprisingly large human role in the shaping of that landscape.

I like to visit Europe precisely because of this attention to balance. In the United States, nature often is inspirational and human works occasionally are, but rarely do the two engage in any sort of cooperative endeavor. On occasion, one sees a building that in color, size, and shape and texture looks to be a natural part of its surroundings—but an entire town? Small New England villages may be an exception; they often look as if they

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were designed by God, and people just happened by at a later time to occupy them. But I may not be objective here, for I grew up in that area.

In many respects, the European view that America is barbaric does nothing more than confirm the general principle that a culture can thrive only if it views itself as superior to all others—even when it is not. Europeans sustain themselves in this era of geopolitical eclipse by resorting to a form of defensive cultural chauvinism that rarely concerns itself with the truth. There may be ways in which the European view eventually will prevail; in spite of all the logical arguments one cannot help but feel a certain secret recognition that, for example, executing criminals is inhumane, or that interdependence among countries (as with the European Union) is a better way, or that time ultimately proves to be more valuable than money. Still, I am an American and my cultural chauvinism is anything but defensive and I tend to view Europe's cultural haughtiness as mostly pretense—rather like an older lady who wears too much makeup and believes her own lie.

Europeans may sneer at the immaturity of Americans who they think are all too eager to violently resolve their day-to-day frustrations, but is it better to repress such antisocial behavior if the price to be paid is periodic outbursts of holocaustic destruction? Europeans will claim that that is in the past, that the new European is a civilized and pacific being within whom such vehement passions no longer reside. That may be so, but if it is because most Europeans are so old. Advancing age takes the edge off such raw emotion and makes a moderate of the most hot-tempered youth. All it would take to

recreate the Europe of old is a literal rejuvenation of its population. More young people, that's all.

A demographically young Europe is not terribly likely in the short run—that is, within the next generation—but those who believe the days of a youthful population are gone forever are denying the one and only immutable law of life: everything changes. At present, Europeans are dieing faster than they are being born, which raises the long term prospect of extinction. To combat this worrying trend—and to provide the youthful labor required to sustain their burgeoning modern economies—European countries began importing young people. For decades, guest worker programs have sponsored the arrival of millions of young immigrants who with time have found ways to pull their families and friends in after them. This is not what Europe had planned; the original idea was to exploit the labor of these young workers and then, when their vigor had waned, wave goodbye as they shipped back home to Algeria or Turkey or wherever it is that they originally came from. But these immigrants—who continue to suffer from a form of cultural prejudice that is equally as virulent as the racial prejudice endured by Blacks in America—decided *not* to go home, and so now Europe has a problem. It cannot forcefully evict these people; to do so would be terribly expensive, of course, but much more importantly would offend Europe's view of itself as a liberal and accommodating society. Now that Christianity is effectively dead in Europe, this humanism is the only basis left upon which Europeans can justify their attitude of cultural superiority. So, no, the foreigners cannot be sent home.

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This underclass of “New Europeans” could drive the demographic rejuvenation that so many today might view as unlikely. This is not its most revolutionary function, however: ultimately, since it contains the vigor of youth, it will force a redefinition of what it means to be European and civilized. The current reluctance to allow Turkey into the European Union (for obviously specious reasons), for example, probably will collapse as pressure from the New Europeans mounts, and then Morocco might be next. But all this is a subject of far greater weight than I had intended to address. My original goal was no more than to make credible the contention that Europe’s population may be rejuvenated by describing a mechanism that could bring it about. I also happen to believe that rejuvenation could be spawned by a reinvigorated continental birthrate among the native inhabitants, but no matter how effectively I might argue *that* contention I doubt that many would be persuaded. In any event, Europe’s days of unrestrained violence are not necessarily dead and I remain unconvinced that secular humanism and practical pacifism are sufficiently real to form the basis of a superior civilization.

But now this brings me back to Île Rousse. Most corners of my mind continue to think that American civilization is at least the equal of European, and in my gut I feel a confirmation. But when I look at Île Rousse—not such a remarkable place, really—the fine aesthetic that links people to the landscape challenges me. Here is one clear and concrete example of how European culture does what American cannot: put people on the land in a way that soothes the soul. This is the only thing I can think of that undermines my

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confidence in the superiority of the American way of life. Why can we not do this; why can we not treat the natural world in a civilized manner? The only strategy we seem to have is that of extremes: set aside pristine wilderness areas in which human violence against nature is absolutely forbidden, but allow total war to continue everywhere else, subject, of course, to the usual set of wartime behavioral constraints—rules of engagement that allow the combatants to feel civilized in spite of their savagery but that really have no bearing on the final outcome of the conflict.

Day 10

Yesterday's journey from Île Rousse to Calvi was delectably short—short enough to accommodate a whimsical departure with utter disregard for time and brief enough to allow for an early arrival still flush with energy. At a younger age I would have blushed if the ease of my day had ever become public knowledge, but that sort of nonsense is behind me now.

This morning I had breakfast at the water's edge, under the orange awning of a quayside restaurant. The town of Calvi was at my back, clinging to a steep hillside that changed abruptly to flat land along the waterfront—land retrieved from the bay and converted into a broad stone promenade extending like a ledge from the bottommost row of town buildings to the edge of the harbor. Outdoor restaurants spilled and sprawled all around the evenly spaced palm trees that punctuated this ribbon, but they left clear zones on either side so that pedestrians might pass. At this hour, though, traffic was very light.

I was seated facing the sea. The hill behind me curled around by my left shoulder and terminated in a

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rocky outcrop on top of which had been constructed the Calvi castle whose irregular shape and massive stone walls were glowing in the yellow light of morning. Directly in front of me I could see the warren of harbor piers with expensive yachts tied to them and lying motionless in calm water. Across the bay in the distance, a green landscape emerged gently from the blue sea, and in the far distance the profile of a darkened, hogback mountain put a border to the sky. This restful scene was bounded on the top by the forward edge of the canvas canopy, giving personal intimacy to a view that seemed to be mine alone.

I did not notice the aircraft coming toward me. It was on the other side of the bay, too distant to be heard, but so low as to be visible below the orange awning. At such a distance and because of its trajectory, it appeared to be suspended in the sky. Suddenly, in less than five seconds, thirty white parachutes blossomed from its tail and floated to ground together in a sort of disorganized unison. Their entire descent could not have taken more than 45 seconds. The astounding sight recurred twice more before I left the café to start my daily journey.

South from Calvi, the terrain undergoes a noticeable change of character. To this point in my daily journeys, the landscape had been a bucolic blend of rural settlement and isolated wild spots, but now nature took charge and grudgingly granted to humans little more than visitation rights. The looming mountains grew larger and shouldered their way to the sea. I began to feel like an ant clinging to the steepening sides of a giant pillow. There were no homes along the road, no resort enclaves down at the rugged shore, no patches of

farmland in the distance. Only the road gave evidence of human activity—it and an occasional boat paralleling the coast—and the sense conveyed by this was that the only useful thing to do with this land is cross it. Such useless landscapes are of course the best ones to visit.

Most of the way from Calvi to Porto the thread-like road twists and wanders along the flanks of mountainsides that vary between precipitous and vertical. As Tennyson would say, “the wrinkled sea beneath him crawls,” and I did indeed feel like an eagle. Down, down, far below, the kindly Mediterranean revealed its translucent shallows of sand and rock through an overlying aquamarine varnish while the deeper waters hid their treasures beneath a dark blue mask. It was a spotless day—not a cloud—and there was no traffic.

It is here that I first began to think of Corsica as the island of my dreams—not the island of my conscious dreams with natural delights that can be articulated, but the island of my lifelong yearning that slides beneath the surface of everything known.

The emotional intensity of my communion with this coast would periodically stimulate in me an analytical effort to comprehend why I was so affected. With seven hours of more or less uninterrupted solitude—hardly any vehicles and very few villages—the conditions were ideal for meditating on such a thing, and by the end of the day I had resolved the question to my own satisfaction.

When I was a child I had a book written by Nathaniel Hawthorne entitled Tanglewood Tales. It was a handsome hardcover, bound in black and containing rather thick and slightly yellow pages. I do not remember a single one of the Tanglewood stories, but imbedded in

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them were colored illustrations each carefully presented in a gleaming, posterized fashion and each protected by a facing sheet of onion skin. They were done by Maxfield Parrish. My memory tells me that in every one the light was morning light or evening light and the world was golden. In every one the landscape was rocky and dramatic and dropped away to the sea from inspiring heights. Each had a placid, benign sea as a foundation, and each showed no sign of human intrusion on the landscape except for the immediate foreground which typically contained a classical patio, a balanced geometry of polished marble floors and Greek columns. One or two people would be present there, one of them always a woman and always dressed in a sweetly flowing silken material that signified sexuality but did not suggest it.

I was in love with these scenes—both their landscapes and their women, but especially the landscapes. I know this because if I had had to choose one over the other I would have rather visited the place than met the woman. Perhaps this is at the root of all the frustration and anguish I have inflicted on women over the years.

Even as a child, I think, I recognized the inherent limitations of imagination: if it can be imagined then somewhere in the world it must exist. I never consciously set out to find these magical places, but never would it have occurred to me that life could not, if so disposed, take me to them. And so it has done, I believe, for the landscape before me is the magical world of Parrish's mind and my youth. The women are not here, but that is the nature of life and the realization of only half a dream leaves a reason to continue living.

Day 11

I am in Porto and I am ambivalent about this place. It is a small (good), modern (bad) resort village (bad) lodged at the head of a narrow bay (good) with precipitous rock walls draping down on both sides (good) and a languid stream (good) sluggishly (bad) entering the ocean between a handsome artificial (bad) beach (good) on one side and a rocky promontory fitted with an ancient Genovese tower (good) on the other. The plan (bad) for the town is good (good), but the people who are here are either tourists or dependent on tourists (bad, bad, bad).

Given the objective—to actually create a village rather than let it happen—it is a fair effort undertaken in a capital setting. The problem is the objective. One gets the feeling that nothing ever happens here, at least nothing that did not already happen last week and the week before.

About a hundred years ago, an ambitious social engineer named Ebenezer Howard thought that the solution to the problem of excessive size and unruly growth in London could be solved by constructing

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entirely new cities physically separated from London and thoughtfully designed to be self-sufficient. He wrote a little book entitled Garden Cities for Tomorrow in which he laid out the details of his scheme. The towns were to have a modest population size, a surrounding belt of soothing rural land, and an adequate supply of everything needed to avoid having to travel out of town to work, shop, or have fun. On paper, the prototype looked nice, and Mr. Howard made a sincere effort to properly address the logistics associated with such a daunting project. His ideas did not immediately find any takers, but eventually, as urban and regional planning began to emerge as a force in the world, his approach to solving the problems of excessive city size became the inspiration for a number of planned communities in both the United Kingdom and the United States. None of them has lived up to the utopian dream. Some had trouble attracting inhabitants, most found it hard to develop the necessary diversity of urban functions, and virtually all ended up as parasites dependent on some large city located nearby. There are some things we find easier to do if we don't think about it. We have a world full of cities, and for all their faults many of them are pretty interesting places. They often turn out to be more than just the sum of their parts, but Mr. Howard's towns never managed that magic.

That's the problem with planning—it creates a pattern and patterns hate disarray. We labor on through life with the illusion that if only we could establish secure conditions and orchestrate predictable outcomes, why, then life would shower us with timeless happiness. Instead, of course, we would drown in boredom—just as

might happen to someone who tries to live an entire life in Porto.

Of course, Porto was never intended as a place to spend a lifetime, only as a place to visit. But, good God! What place could not succeed as nothing more than a place to visit? Alcatraz would be fascinating as long as your stay is voluntary. The sewers of Paris are a three star attraction, but you probably wouldn't want to remain once the tour ends. Even Heaven might not be so bad as long as you could slip away to Hell on the weekends. All in all, creating an interesting spot to visit is not that hard. The trick is to create a place that tempts one to the habitational equivalent of marriage. Good looks and casual entertainment are not enough—it requires a sort of textural richness that ordinarily emerges from organic maturation and not from conceptual engineering.

To me, the interesting thing about Porto is how much nicer it would be if it were part of a larger urban place. As a respite from pollution and noise and bad neighborhoods, for example, its order would be a welcome relief and Hell would be within walking distance. We do need order in our lives, but not too much—just the right amount.

* * *

Before arriving in Porto, I had decided to spend two nights there. The ride from Calvi was by my standards long and arduous and the ensuing leg from Porto to Ajaccio looked on the map to be even more demanding. This was to be my day of recovery but by noon I was bored, and I do not get bored easily. I decided to do a ride—a 24 kilometer hump up through the Spelunca

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Gorge to the mountain town of Evisa—and then enjoy a nice long coast back down. This turned out to be the right choice for Spelunca Gorge is a tremendous rock-walled notch with its feet at the sea and Evisa perched on its shoulders. The narrow, winding road to Evisa is etched into one canyon wall, laboriously ascending at a constant rate by working its way in and out of all the many feeder canyons and steadily adding three or four meters of elevation for every hundred meters traveled. When you are on a bicycle you notice these things.

Although in my opinion Europe has an inflated sense of its own cultural importance, it does suffer from an inferiority complex when it comes to the grandeur of its own natural wonders. Everybody knows that places like the British Lake District and the Swiss Alps and the Greek Islands are beautiful, but Europeans seem unable to grasp how extraordinarily beautiful they are. One could assign it to real (or even false) modesty, I suppose, but the European attitude of superiority about its own culture makes that unlikely. In any event, Spelunca Gorge is world class and yet who has ever heard of it? Why is there no pilgrimage of nature lovers? Part of the problem is that Spelunca Gorge is but one (albeit the best) of many dramatic gorges on this rugged island—but that only makes the mystery even more impenetrable.

With this treasure chest at their doorstep, Europeans spend a considerable share of their psychic and material resources undertaking travel to distant places where, they presume, the real natural wonders of the world are stored. Any good econometrician might tell them that they could get 90% of the grandeur at less than half the cost if they only stayed near home and moved around a

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bit. Their behavior is irrational, but in this respect they are no different from other people of means all around the world. So why do all these economically successful people make the economically irrational choice? Could it be wanderlust?

Day 12

All along this west side of Corsica, mountains drop to the sea and rugged headlands keep perpetual watch. The occasional town or village in this empty land typically is sited next to a bay where a pitifully undersized stream has managed to excavate a gorge and then lay down within it a tiny seaside floodplain that is dwarfed by the great mountains of rock that form the bulk of the island. The only road connecting these communities invariably ascends as you depart from one of these coastal villages, and then high above the Mediterranean follows a contour line until the next community along the way requires a descent to sea level once again.

Getting in and out of Porto is particularly striking in this regard, and so I started early in order to make my ascent during the coolest part of the day. I worked my way up to Le Calanche, which is a curious zone of queerly shaped terra cotta rocks scattered through a forest of loosely spaced evergreen trees, all of it perched on a mountainside overlooking the bay of Porto far below. I didn't stop; the natural delights of the Calanche are real enough, but I have become so entranced by

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Corsica that I cannot help but believe the view around the next bend in the road will offer more than enough to keep me satisfied.

The traffic now is a bit more noticeable, presumably because Ajaccio—the largest city on the island—is beginning to draw near. A goodly share of the traffic is bicycles and motorcycles, not surprising considering how the climate and scenery conspire to make such forms of exposed transit almost irresistible. I can think of no place that would be more curvaceously thrilling for motorcyclists, and the same probably is true for bicyclists in extremely good condition.

The motorcyclists, however, seem to be afflicted with a malaise of social convention that requires them to wear black leather pants, a black leather jacket, and a heavy duty helmet with a plastic visor. I did see one biker wearing Jeans with his black leather jacket and visored helmet; he must be a rebel. From my perspective, picking away at the kilometers in the Corsican heat, this customary attire looks oppressively warm. It might almost be better to get in a car, turn on the air conditioning, and take the helmet off. Given the seriousness with which Europeans take their driving, I imagine there are vigorously enforced laws requiring a properly fastened and properly designed helmet, but surely there are no strictures against non-leather attire. I know that leather is the safest clothing when riding a motorcycle, but the sport is not intended for those obsessed with safety. If disaster strikes, all the leather is likely to do is keep the pieces in a bag, so to speak, and minimize the abrasions, which most likely would be the least of your problems. Caution and motorcycling are a very appropriate mix, but in this case

I think the Europeans have gone just a little too far. Most of them are Germans, incidentally.

I find more understandable the dress code of the many bicyclists who pass by (in both directions), but even here I am a bit nonplussed. They all wear boldly imprinted, body-sleek, zip-up, Spandex bicycle jerseys and for the many who do not have bicycle helmets a proper bicycle cap is *de rigueur*. All this makes sense, for the outfit is practical, but I am beginning to think that there is no other cyclist on the entire island who has lowered himself to an ordinary t-shirt and baseball cap. They obviously are less safety conscious than the motorcyclists (for they rarely wear helmets) and their stylish jerseys give them a certain flair that the motorcyclists cannot hope to match until they remember to leave their leather jackets in the rottweiler doghouse for the winter. I think the bicyclists must be mostly Italian.

Solitary bicyclists are, well, solitary. The great majority of cyclists travel in small packs of four or five or six, and more often than not their colorful matching jerseys pronounce them members of the same bicycle club. I suspect that many of them are pretending to be part of a breakaway cluster in the Tour de France. They range enormously in age and the only underrepresented group is the young. This appears to be a sport for the middle aged and older, which is often quite bemusing when these more degraded physiques pass by fitted out in Spandex. Still, an awful lot of those funny looking bodies could move themselves up a hill at a pretty good clip, so perhaps they are justified in wearing their professional looking clothing and I simply have not yet earned the right.

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By late afternoon I was entering Ajaccio through its more industrial sector, and it was not until I got to the heart of the city that the place began to look good. Unlike most urban places in America, the modern, “planned” periphery is a mess while the older city center is sufficiently inviting to make you want to stay a day or two. That, however, turns out to be problematic since it is a weekend and all the hotels are full. I know because I asked them all. Eventually, after about two hours of searching, a pretty front desk clerk took pity on me and volunteered to call around. I gratefully accepted her offer, of course; I was tired and she was charming. Unfortunately, I did not have much opportunity to watch her work because she was remarkably efficient and found me a room almost immediately. Her *au revoir* was ringing in my ears as I departed for the place she had found. Before the sun was down, I was in my room sitting on the floor of the shower trying to spray myself with one of those uncooperative, hand-held shower nozzles on a flexible hose that the French think is the greatest thing since sliced bread. No wait, the French don't go in for sliced bread. Anyway, you get the point.

Day 13

Today is Sunday. In spite of the wholesale abandonment of Catholicism by the French, old traditions die hard and most Ajaccio establishments are closed. The cafes and curio shops in the tourist district down by the harbor are open, of course, but along the main shopping avenue of the city the stores are shuttered and the sidewalks mostly empty. I have practical matters to attend to—laundry to do, presents to buy, and currency to exchange—but it is evident that these sorts of tasks will end in frustration rather than success, and so I decide to extend my stay in Ajaccio and spend tomorrow taking care of those matters. Today, therefore, I will lounge around in street side cafes, watch the boats slipping in and out of the harbor, amble along the palm fringed promenades, and generally get into the spirit of a day of rest.

As I café hop down the street—shifting from coffee to lemonade to beer and back to coffee—I see a lot of young people passing by. They are smartly dressed and stylish and good-looking, and this has not really been the case in most of the other towns along the way. This

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must be the Corsican Riviera, and even the mature palm trees and stately waterside architecture consent to such a parallel.

Many of the women are very chic indeed, but one thing troubles me: a significant number seem to be saddled with ill-fitting brassieres. They often look ribbed and bumpy and coarse as if their framework were constructed out of whalebone or ostrich feathers or some such 19th century building material. The women do not seem to be distressed by their straightened circumstances but at times the whole construction looks so uncomfortable that I am tempted to give the poor woman a break and hold them up manually for a little while. It is unconscionable, really. The French must have invented this device—how else could it have gotten its name (unless, of course, the Brits dreamed it up but were too embarrassed to admit it). Well, if it *was* a French idea, I think they have lost their technological edge and have failed to keep abreast of the field. *Ce la vie.*

I shouldn't focus entirely on the negative, however. There are plenty of young women passing by with natural curves in classy clothes. I wonder if any of their undergarments were imported. No, no, that's not possible. Surely no respectable French woman would be so culturally retrograde as to show herself in public wearing some inferior cultural artifact imported from some foreign place—like America.

My pen is running out of ink, so now I find myself scouring the curio shops looking for a replacement. Respectable stationary stores are of course closed and eventually I end up with a cheap plastic pen that costs a staggering three Euros. Only after exiting the shop

do I discover the reason for this astronomical price. It is a Napoleon pen—that is, the upper half of the barrel is clear plastic and liquid filled, and contains a card imprinted with a colorful scene of Napoleonic cavalry galloping into battle while there in the foreground is a full-bodied cut-out of Napoleon—funny hat and all—that in front of his troops slides up and down the barrel, depending on which end of the pen is raised. This is French high culture, I suppose, and one can easily understand the French dismay with crass Americanisms creeping in to displace these French cultural treasures. The French are so concerned that they have passed laws prohibiting such invasions.

I would like to state here and now that I give my wholehearted support to any acts of Congress designed to protect America from comparable French invasions of sliding barrel Georges or Abrahams. Probably I am too late. Probably these things are selling like hotcakes at Valley Forge and Gettysburg, but nobody in Utah knows it yet. Probably we Americans did dream up the idea in the first place. If so, my (half-hearted) apologies to the French.

Napoleon, incidentally, is a fine example of just how flexible human loyalties can be. He was a Corsican born in Ajaccio, and the city honors his memory with museums and statues. I am too much an outsider to personally evaluate his status in the hearts of Corsicans, but everything I have read suggests that he really is a favorite son and not simply a convenient device for separating tourists from their Euros.

And yet, at the time of his birth the Corsican people were struggling to maintain an existence independent

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from the Genoese who for centuries had controlled them and from the French who had designs on their island. For a couple decades in the mid-18th century, Corsica actually was politically independent and in fact operated a liberal form of representative government—presaging the American and French Revolutions. Buonaparte family members were key players in this nationalist movement. France eventually moved in, however, dismantled the Corsican polity and thwarted all opposition to Francification, an opposition that has continued sporadically to this day as a Corsican nationalist movement.

As the French grasp on the island tightened, Napoleon became increasingly French. He changed the spelling of his last name—dropping the “u” to make it more French—and more and more actively participated in the French attempts to assimilate the island culture. When Napoleon eventually emerged as *the man* in French politics, there is no denying that he found plenty of ways to put his relatives into positions of power, but that was nepotism pure and simple and had nothing to do with expanding Corsican cultural influence. In fact, Napoleon became French and tried to get the Corsican people to do the same.

Of course, the history of Napoleon’s accomplishments as a leader is well known and nobody can deny that that in a limited, amoral way he was a great man. But that Corsicans can revere someone of such duplicitous behavior is a testimony to the fact that we humans can find a way to rationalize anything if we really want to.

Day 14

It's all coming clear to me now. The hotels here in Ajaccio were full not just because it is a weekend; they were jammed with people because it is a *long* weekend. I don't know what holiday it is, but the French do seem to have their share. They also seem to go in for labor strikes more than most. Right now, for example, the rail workers are on strike and the highly popular train ride through the mountains between Ajaccio and Bastia is just not on. It may be tomorrow, though.

My impression is that the French do not much care for epic strikes, the kind that lasts for months and grinds down the adversaries until one side surrenders in exhaustion. Their specialty seems to be the lightning bolt strike with its surprise attack and swift but unpredictable retreat. I presume the function is rather more tactical than strategic. Obviously, a two- or three-day strike is never going to break the back of management (assuming it has one), so the real purpose must be to make a point and then create sufficient inconvenience that somebody notices. It may sound childish, but at least nobody gets hurt too badly. And besides, there is a lot to be said for

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a scheme that regularly reminds management that its employees are *people* and not just units of labor.

I wonder if this business about making a point also happens to be particularly French. I recall an incident that occurred in Montreal when I was a teenager, and at the time it astounded me. Even now it seems pretty remarkable. The perpetrator of the incident was French Canadian rather than French, but lets not quibble (after all, General DeGaulle didn't when as president of France he visited Canada and gave a speech encouraging Quebec separatism).

I was walking in the downtown area during rush hour, and the traffic was so bad that cars were hardly moving. The flow through a stoplight was painfully slow, and when the light turned red the last car through obviously was trying to squeeze itself into the waiting line on the other side and in a most inconsiderate fashion ended up blocking the intersection instead. The first car in line waiting for the light to change was a taxi driven by a French Canadian. He leaned out the window waving his fist and yelling in French what I can only assume were obscenities, and then he proceeded to drive into the passenger side of the offending vehicle. The sound was spectacular and the deed was a real attention-getter. The two drivers got out to scream at each other but since the wreckee was English Canadian and evidently knew no French they had to argue in English, and so I was able to understand the exchange. I won't try to recreate their language—although I wish I could—but in the end the taxi driver's justification for making a wreck was that "Your car shouldn't have been there and I had the right of way, so I drove into you." I may have been astounded,

but the English Canadian was speechless. Ever since, I have had a suspicion that the French really, *really* like to make a point.

It may pay to keep this in mind when dealing with the French. Quebec separatism, for example, has been popping in and out of the news for decades, and many might view the chronic nature of the constitutional crisis as a pretty clear sign that a certain portion of the Quebecois are determined proponents of political autonomy and national independence. The stakes are too high for any other explanation to make sense, are they not? Not necessarily, not if making a “Statement” of some sort is one of the things that define who you are. I would not be the least surprised if a significant part of the willful energy that sustains the separatist movement is nothing more than a strong desire on the part of Quebecois to remind their English speaking compatriots that the French are supposed to be equal partners in this grand Canadian venture. The fact that the French Canadian taxi driver had to make his argument in English is *prima facie* evidence that the partnership is unequal and may say more about the root causes of separatism than any amount of abstract discussion of historical grievances.

The whole idea of Canada was to create a bicultural union sustained in equal measure by both societies. It was a dream, of course, one that has struggled ever since with awkward realities: a preceding history of English control over a French cultural group, a continuing and continually expanding English majority in the populace, an enduring condition of greater affluence among the English Canadians (although widespread poverty in

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the Maritime Provinces has ameliorated this potentially explosive situation), and a linguistic imbalance in which constitutionally enshrined equality is mocked by the reality of English dominance. The failure of Canada to live up to its societal ideal is nothing new—after all, an ideal can exist only as long as people fail to live up to it—but in virtually every instance, an objective observer would have to say, the French Canadians have drawn the short straw. Perhaps the French Canadians are now trying to make a point: “We are equal partners in this enterprise, and you need to remember that.”

The consequences of point making can be really quite disastrous. After all, the French Canadian taxi driver hardly solved the problem of traffic gridlock in downtown Montreal. Even so, it is important to consider motivation before responding to a circumstance. I don't know the final outcome of the incident, but if the Montreal police issued citations to both parties in the matter and proclaimed a “no-fault” cause for the “accident,” then I suspect that both men were outraged, the English Canadian because he had to pay to get his car repaired and the French Canadian because any fool can see whose fault the whole thing was. If, on the other hand, the English Canadian was issued a citation for blocking the intersection and the French Canadian was obliged to pay for repairs to both cars, then I imagine that both men walked away from the incident comfortable in the knowledge that the world is working as it should.

Day 15

The Michelin map of Corsica clearly shows the mountains, which—in case you didn't know it—are respectable. Monte Cinto, the highest, is about 9000' and there are others around that give it a run. Since the major mountain masses are in the middle and northern parts of the island, the road south from Ajaccio to Bonifacio looks as if the challenges will be less.

The Michelin map does not lie, but neither does it tell the whole truth. The mountains may trail off into mere hills down here, but, oh, what hills they are! It's as if you face attack by a swarm of piranhas instead of a Great White: the shark may *look* more deadly but either will do you in.

Furthermore, here in the south the highway engineers appear to have concluded that there is no need to screw around—"Why skirt the flanks when with just a slightly steeper gradient we can take this sucker right over the top." This greatly shortens the distance from A to B, and that surely pleases all the cars and trucks—but it doesn't do a thing for those of us on bicycles.

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I left Ajaccio with a certain air of self-satisfaction, knowing that the rougher rides were behind me and that these last two days would be a sort of cool-down phase as I coasted towards the finish line. About thirty kilometers into the ride I began to realize the flaws in my thinking, and the mental calculator had to recompute time, distance, average speed, and eventual arrival. The solutions were a little discouraging, but I soldiered on through gorgeous hill country with brilliant white beaches around every bend, each one pinned by a pair of rocky headlands. And through it all, the roads were empty for I had resolved to take the long way and follow all the back roads. This is one of the advantages of being optimistic: it opens up possibilities that a realist would shun. I survived the ride, of course, and ended up rewarding myself with the kind of day that makes the spirit sing.

I strongly recommend optimism. It takes the worry out of life and when things go bad you always know that tomorrow will be better. What could be more sensible? The key to successful optimism, though, is to have a fallback plan. I don't mean a plan for how you are going to change a new and disappointing circumstance; I mean a plan for how you are going to enjoy life when the unfortunate happens. This all sounds Pollyannaish, doesn't it, and I do have to admit that all the positive thinking I could muster did nothing to ease my saddle sores.

But allow me return to the main point: optimism is practical because it offers hope. It is no more complicated than that. We all recognize that hopelessness is an intolerable condition and that hope in hopeless

situations is very useful. Optimism and pessimism are conceived as opposite extremes, but the former at least has some usefulness whereas the latter is nothing more than surrender. Both, of course, are viewed as being unrealistic, but what really rips me is that the middle ground is occupied by an insidious word like realism. It pretends to be neutral and objective, but there is a dark connotation associated with it that implies a conspiracy with pessimism. Plenty of pessimists, for example, will justify their pitiful attitude by claiming that they are only being realistic. When was the last time you heard an optimist make such a claim? I do—I make such a claim, and my hope is that it will help salvage realism from the hopeless pit that it appears to be on the verge of slipping into.

Children are by nature optimists; on that I think we all agree. “Aha!” Says the pessimist, “There you have it! Children are inexperienced and susceptible to illusions. Only as they get beat up by life do they come to their senses and begin to realize that only ‘realism’ will get them through to the end.” In that case, I suppose it is foolishness to envy children the ease with which they find happiness each day. I concede that this is largely a result of living in the present rather than worrying about tomorrow, but who is less likely to worry about tomorrow—a pessimist or an optimist?

* * *

As the long day of pedaling neared its conclusion, I needed a dose of hopefulness because my body was aching, my butt was sore, and the little hills kept coming

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at me. I knew I was near my destination, but every hill that I thought would be the last would turn out instead to be the next to last. Finally, a short, steep incline brought me into view of the town and I could see that the next hill was, indeed, the last. There in the distance around a broad bight was the town of Propriano, and only a small rocky outcrop forced a final swell in the road.

I arrived in Propriano in early evening, and the village was the first in my travels on Corsica that did not leave me with warm feelings. She seemed a little sad, this town, as if corroded by the ravages of time and weary of catering to people who neither noticed her nor treated her with respect. Still, you know how it is when the sun goes down—everything looks a little gayer and the blemishes become a little less obvious. I wandered the main street for an hour or two as the sky darkened in the east. The silver half-moon was hanging high and the coolness of the gentle night breeze refreshed me. I began to soften my attitude toward Propriano and she immediately rewarded me. First she served me the best pizza I have ever eaten. Then she led me to the ideal present for Nancy (a French bikini). Not only that, she gave me a large room in a hotel that had no stairs, all tile floors, and a wide hallway (no need to haul luggage or jockey a bike tonight!). I'd say this woman is desperate for attention.

Day 16

The healthy way to live is to get up early and do things early—but that is something I have never been able to do. The crack of dawn approach is particularly sensible when there is a set task for the day (such as cycling from Propriano to Bonifacio). When it is summer in the Mediterranean it is downright foolish to find yourself laboring up hills in the midday heat when you could have been breezing up them in the cool light of morning. I am adamant, however: if I am on vacation I will not start my day until I feel like it and that is usually well after all the others have eaten their breakfasts, done their shopping, and drifted off to their various activities. I consider myself lucky if I hit the road before noon, and downright virtuous if I manage to start before 10:00 AM. Today I am lucky.

One of the things that makes Corsica seem as if its main reason for existing is to cater to my desires is that the birds here sing all day long. They don't pack it in about the time I struggle out of bed; they just keep on belting out their tunes hour after hour. As the little wheels on my green bike gently hum down the highway,

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this multitude of onlookers cheers me on with its steady chorus. The crowds are huge and have been ever since I left Bastia. Not a day has passed but the birds have startled me with their numbers. Hitchcock must have vacationed in Corsica.

I have been puzzling over this phenomenon for some time now: why is there so much more bird chatter here than anywhere else I have ever been? At first I thought the birders of the world—an obsessive crowd if ever there was one—must have overlooked Corsica, must have failed to discover a paradise. But of course that makes no sense because birders have scoured the world in search of unusual habitats and unique species. I finally concluded that the uninformed I had been unable to recognize that this bird abundance was nothing more than a few common species whose numbers had gotten out of hand. In fact, the most logical answer to my question is that Corsica actually has only one species of bird and that since they all speak the same language they are constantly regaling each other with gossip and family news rather than just making an occasional plaintive appeal to find a soul mate.

Not far from Propriano is the mountain town of Sartene, considered by many to be the beating heart of old Corsica. I am on my way there, and I know from having studied the map that I will have to claw my way upwards past it. The highway hairpins near the center of Sartene, and about two kilometers outside of town the road coming appears to almost merge with the road going. Four kilometers of hill climb is nothing to be sneered at, and the thought crosses my mind that perhaps there is a shortcut—if I am prepared to forsake a look

at old Sartene. But no, of course there is no shortcut. When I reach the critical location, my road arcs around and upward near the base of a sheer mountain wall and there—suspended high above—is its continuation. I am spared the awkward choice between painful purity and dishonorable convenience. Sometimes life is kind.

What with its cliff-hugging, austere stone buildings brooding over a narrow, cobbled main street winding ever upward and its finely proportioned single arch stone bridge spanning a deep chasm, Sartene proves to be worth the extra effort. But just beyond, where the road begins to move away from town, there is a hill like no other. The road goes straight up it with only a hint of a wiggle at the very top. It is short, perhaps no more than 250 meters, but it is steep, so steep that the issue is raw muscular strength that must be sustained for about two minutes. The hill towers above me and at the top towering over the hill is a tall, stone church with a spire that reaches to the sky. It looks down on me like a judgmental father. You may not believe this, but the church was saying to me, “If you don’t make it up here, you’re a piece of shit.” I am relieved to say that I did not sully the family honor, but it was a near thing. In the lowest gear, with the trailer wanting to go in the opposite direction, I found it near impossible to keep the front wheel on the ground. With the slightest bit of unsmooth pedaling it would pop up off the road, float around for a while, and drop back to the pavement pointing God knows where.

As I crested the hill I was wearing a conqueror’s smile, which of course all women find irresistible, and there where the road curved around the church a young couple was standing by their car with him inspecting the

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wheels and her gazing at the scenery. She saw me emerge victorious and she couldn't help but smile at my success. As my smile grew larger, so did hers—and she was quite pretty. Probably she was only smiling at my childishness, but to think that way takes all the fun out of flirting. I don't know what the judgmental father thought of all this.

South of Sartene, the landscape started to assume the scrubby, windswept appearance so typical of a terrestrial projection narrowing into an empty ocean. But unlike John O'Groat's or even Land's End, this taper to the sea has none of the harshness or sense of desolation that we often associate with such a place. This is, after all, the Mediterranean, which at least in summer displays an inviting sort of emptiness.

About ten kilometers from Bonifacio, the right wheel of the trailer went flat and I was obliged to change the tube on the side of the road with low stone walls and rolling green fields to keep me company. I only have one spare trailer wheel tube and it is suspect because thorns did it in days ago up near Calvi and I am not sure the two patches I applied that evening adhered properly. My patch kit is fifteen years old and had never been used before, so I was not confident that the adhesive was still good. Lacking a better choice, I installed the suspect tube and continued on my way. Sure enough, it went soft almost immediately. It continued to hold a little air, though—enough to keep the wheel rim off the pavement—and so I limped on to Bonifacio in this weakened condition.

Bonifacio occupies a most dramatic site, here in a region of the world where dramatic sites are

commonplace. But this site is better than just about all the others. A long, narrow limestone plateau projects like an arm held with the elbow bent and the forearm parallel to the chest. Between the plateau mainland and its crooked arm extension—hundreds of feet vertically below—lies a narrow and sinuous arm of the sea.

To make the most of its physical advantages, Bonifacio had no choice but to become a two-part town, a sliver along the water's edge down by the harbor and a walled fortress crowning the entirety of the projecting peninsula and raising its limestone cliffs to even greater heights. On the seaward side of the fortress peninsula, the winter storms of the Mediterranean have undercut the base, leaving only a residual collection of sea stacks projecting above the water directly beneath the narrow streets of medieval Bonifacio.

I took lodging down by the harbor in a second floor room (first floor in Europe) with enormous French doors opening onto a small balcony under a sustaining arch and looking out across the inlet at the towering fortress bathed in yellow lights from below and silver moonlight from above. I slept with the doors open that night, letting the silence of the fortress float across me while the distant, gay sounds of the port town night life were gentle music in the background.

Day 17

Since the ferry to Sardinia was not scheduled to board until 9:00 AM, I had time to enjoy a continental breakfast on the patio of the hotel and then look into the trailer tube problem. Water tests quickly revealed that my original patch job was defective. Since only one of the two patches was leaking, the problem with the repairs must be the mechanic and not the materials. I redid the leaky patch, located and patched the pinhole flaw in the second tube, remounted the tube and tire on the trailer wheel, and headed for the ferry.

The cool morning air swept over us as we made our way across the straits between the two islands. Bonifacio shrank to a post card as the irregular coast of northern Sardinia gradually drew near. The waters between these two islands were calm and waveless, shaped only by a confusion of very small swells. A few rubber boats were powering across at full throttle with hardly a trace of the elastic, bounding motion you would expect in a current prone, wind prone passage between two close islands in the middle of the ocean. These straits supposedly are

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treacherous with strong currents and downward eddying whirlpools, but it is hard to believe on a day like this.

The approaching land was rocky and unpredictable with bays and islets and scattered sandy beaches. The closer we drew, the more the confusion multiplied and by the time the ferry was easing into the dock it had become evident that this coastal region sheltered isolated retreats too numerous to count. Behind each cluster of boulders was another hidden beach and each coastal peninsula began to look like an island.

Good bye, Corsica. Will I miss you? That depends on what the future holds. If five years from now I find myself settled down and sedentary, then I expect that I will be missing you—or at least the freedom that you represent. But let us hope that that is not the case, that instead I am moving on from one new place to the next. Then I will have no need to miss you, and not the time to do it either. If I am to miss you, you must be better than what I have. You are sweeter and more beautiful than most places I have known, and so if I am firmly fixed somewhere it is likely that you would be a better place. Ah, but if I am moving on with the prospect of some new scene tomorrow—even a harsh one like the stark Nullarbor Plain or the bug-infested heat sink of the Amazon—how can you compete with that? This may sound callous to you, but you must admit that if five years from now I am dead, why, you won't even notice.

My preconceived notions about Sardinia were not so flattering. I pictured it as too intensely sun-scorched with somewhat diminished features, rather as if the surface of Corsica had been captured as a latex sheet that then was stretched to Sardinia's larger size. In fact, Sardinia

turned out to be as I had imagined, but it affected me much more positively than I had expected. On this day, at least, the sun is brilliantly intense but the heat is not oppressive. The landscape is a grand and endless rock garden with a variety of greenery occupying the myriad of gently downwarped fields between protruding bedrock mounds. The boulder pocked fields are greener than expected and give the impression that a few Irish genes had gotten mixed in with the preponderance of Mediterranean ones. And the beaches—the searing white beaches with their shallow, rock-strewn bays full of water so transparent as to give the appearance that nothing is hidden in this aqua-world. Looking into waters like these, even Narcissus might be distracted.

Such were my impressions as I cycled around the northeast edge of the island, on my way to the main ferry port. I had thought of Sardinia as an interesting stretch of land to transit on my way back to the Italian mainland, but so seductive was the place that it was beginning to become an end in itself. But, alas, by mid-afternoon I was approaching the sprawling port city of Olbia and my time on the island was running low—like a roll of quarters for a Las Vegas slot machine.

Olbia is a working city, industrial and full of grit, but Italian life oozes from its seams and infects you with its wanton pleasures. I pedaled into the center and rested for a while in one of its small central plazas where old men perched like pigeons on the shaded park benches and ripe young ladies strutted by. A young man there, slovenly in dress and body—and missing half his front teeth—was sitting with a friend in the shady entrance to a small store. Everything delighted him. I delighted

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him and every woman who passed delighted him. He could hardly speak English, but that did not deter him: he spoke English to me non-stop for about five minutes until a delectable young woman sailed past and his attention eddied away in her wake.

I went into a small corner store to buy a drink and a matronly woman with a winning smile and warmth in her eyes decided that my real reason to be there was so that she could flirt with me. I was very thirsty but if it were not for her I doubt I would have returned twice more to make liquid purchases, each time raising her to new levels of astonished happiness. What is the point of life, anyway, if not to snatch these little pleasures?

Even when I first disembarked on Sardinia at the little town of S. Teresa di Gallura, the juice of life was coursing through the streets—open and carefree streets of a new town with little apparent history and no somber overtones. We Americans may have more, historical connections with France, but for day to day affairs I think Italians should be our confidants.

Day 18

The port facilities did not violate the industrial character of Olbia. Everything about them suggested a maritime trade in commodities and building supplies and raw materials. Laden trucks were parked in ragged rows and working ships with blunt and awkward profiles were tied off along the piers. Tourists are a big part of the summer traffic in and out of here and many of the ships active today are ferries for transporting vehicles and people. Even so, their design features clearly are intended to cater to the former more than the latter.

Have you ever considered how delicately these large vessels must be handled? They are designed to withstand the raging forces of a storm at sea, but at no time can there ever be the slightest contact with a hard and fixed surface associated with land. Touch a rock protrusion underwater? Disaster. Nick the unfendered corner of a concrete pier? Ruin. Slip into proper position with, say, a tenth of a knot too much speed? Crisis. There can be no fender benders here.

Pretend for a moment that an egg can float. If you were to set it in the sea and let the furies of a winter storm

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cast it about mercilessly it most likely would survive the ordeal unharmed, but suppose that a gentle current and tiny wavelets were to bump it on a rocky shore. Its fragile shell would shatter in an instant. So too with these large ships. They may look tough and durable, and in a certain respect they are, but with all that mass their filmy metal skin is just an eggshell hoping to avoid the unforgiving thing. Just as take-off and landing are the riskiest parts of flying, ocean going ships are most at risk when they leave and enter port: these are the times for adrenaline alert.

The moon was nearly full on the overnight passage from Olbia to Livorno, and the clear night sky and placid sea let its silver rays skitter along a watery path all the way to the boat. We were not alone: an ordered line of worker ferries was steaming in each direction, silent in the moonlight.

In the early morning when we docked in Livorno, the urban chaos surrounding us was so disorienting that I resolved to take a taxi to the train station. The driver who stopped for me was small and slight and moved with birdlike quickness. His personally owned, handsome Mercedes was a fine machine and he drove it assertively. He plunged into a maze of confusing streets, hurtled through narrow lanes and curving backstreet byways, and outmaneuvered the lesser drivers all around him. When he deposited me at the train station and zoomed away, he left me feeling that I had been handled by a professional—although I doubt his temperament would have suited him to being a ferry captain.

On the train ride to Milan, I was alone in a small compartment for six when a young Italian woman from Florence came in and joined me. She knew English,

and as we began to talk she moved beside me. She was short and shapely and slightly ample. She held definite opinions and expressed them with certitude and gentle force. I was surprised to learn that she is a skier and a mountain climber, and also that data systems design is her career. Her physical attributes did not suggest the sports and her voluble gregariousness did not suggest the work. She explained to me, however, that even in fields like hers Italians thought of work as nothing more than means to other ends. She spoke ruefully of the American specialists, from IBM and other such companies, who visited from time to time—such skilled and talented people who seemed to live for their work.

The conductor who came in and asked for our tickets wrote on the back of mine and pleasantly explained in halting English that in the future I should get my ticket machine-stamped before boarding the train. My travel companion turned to me and said that the conductor was being nice because ordinarily I would be fined for what I had failed to do. I seem to be having my problems adjusting to the Italian train system.

The evening in Milan was hot and still, far muggier than anything I had experienced on Corsica—but the streets were full of people and the city was as restless as an expecting father in the waiting room. In the large open piazza in front of the massive Duomo, a political speech was being aired by an array of permanently mounted speakers. The sound system was excellent and the speaker's voice must have been clearly audible even a block or two away. In bold and melodic Italian, the speaker's words would rush to a crescendo to convey their urgency and then slide down to whispered lower notes

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to confide in you. The flow was unstoppable and the phrases were pregnant with meaning. Right then and there I would have taken up the banner—if only I had known the cause I was to serve. The gathered crowd of modest size seemed less inspired, somehow; onlookers gazed at the speaker periodically, and did preserve a respectful silence (by Italian standards), but nobody had that look of rapt attention. Some situations are much more meaningful when you don't understand them.

The man giving the speech certainly was a shock. He was short and middle-aged and nondescript. The speaker's dais was far more impressive than he was; he could hardly see over it. His bland features and bureaucratic air made it look like he had just gotten off work at the bank and—lacking anything better to do—ambled down here to rouse a little rabble for a while.

Before retiring, I decided to stop in at the small music bar that had so engaged me when I passed through Milan a couple weeks ago. As I entered, the band was playing and the singer was a woman. I was mesmerized—what a woman! She looked like a slender version of Sophia Loren, only not so wholesome. Dark almond eyes and pearly teeth and the kind of skin that painters of cheap portraits on velvet spend a lifetime trying to master—all this sexuality driving songs to the edge of ecstasy. She was even better than the park demagogue, believe me. Eventually, I went off to bed, drained and exhausted by the whole experience. It took a while to stop breathing hard, but once my pulse rate slowed down a bit I had no trouble falling to sleep—or dreaming, for that matter.

Day 19

“The time has come,’ the Walrus said ‘to talk of many things,” and the thing to be talked about is, of course, Irina. We met last October in the thoroughly modern way—that is, by Internet. I wrote to her and she wrote back, and since then neither of us has found a good enough reason to end it all. We arranged early on that I would visit her in Russia, and now the time has come.

Internet affairs are particularly intriguing to me, and I must modestly assert that I am rather skilled at conducting them. First there was Alona, and then Miaohuan . . . but those are different stories and I’m sure they would not interest you. What you should know, however, is that Internet relationships offer enormous advantages over those that involve an early meeting of the flesh. For example, what do you suppose is the most common female complaint about the way men conduct affairs of the heart? My theory is that they deplore the crass tendency by most men to be all action and no talk. They want to *understand* their man—or at least think they understand him—before giving him the keys to the kingdom.

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Well, if you take advice from me about women you are a fool, but we have to have a theory about how things work before we can play the game, and this is mine. If you write an e-mail to a woman and she writes back then she must be interested. If you continue writing, she becomes impressed. Furthermore, she feels as if she is in control (a big thing for women) because it is physically impossible for you to take action. In other words, she drops her guard because she can't believe that you would continue writing to her like this unless you really care about her. And of course her reasoning is flawless: after all this effort you probably do. So now we have a good thing going—really good since no matter how serious it gets it is physically impossible for it to progress to the marital stage before you meet. This means you have more control than she realizes. The biggest problem is that all the time you are writing these letters you don't get much sex, so I imagine it doesn't have much appeal for the younger crowd.

Anyway, I am off to meet Irina in the Caucasus—that region where the mountains are high, the locals despise the Russians, and the Chechens fight their never ending war. See what a good idea Internet affairs are?

Irina actually does not live in this region. Her home is in Taganrog, a small Russian city on the Sea of Azov (go to Moscow and head south about five hundred miles). She does not want her friends and relatives to know that she is doing this crazy thing, though, so we have agreed that the small resort city of Kislovodsk would be a good place to find out how much we have been deceiving each other—or ourselves. To get there, I must fly to Moscow, spend the night, and then carry on the next

day to Mineral'nyye Vody. When I arrive, I will have to decide whether to bicycle the final fifty kilometers to Kislovodsk. The road looks straight enough on the map, but reaching the destination will require a substantial amount of uphill pedaling. I wouldn't mind skipping such a slog, but I'm trying to impress Irina, here.

My carrier today is Aeroflot and no matter what you may think of the political system that inspired it, the Aeroflot logo is first rate—a sort of art deco pilot's wings with hammer and sickle in the center. En route, the flight magazine informs me that a contest has been held for a new airline logo, but that none of the submitted designs was deemed good enough to replace the existing symbol. Evidently, the contest will continue, but I personally think that they should keep their logo because its retro look helps prepare the unsuspecting newcomer for what lies ahead.

For any red-blooded American old enough to have survived the Cold War, the prospect of landing in Moscow is bound to reek of sinister things—hidden microphones and one way mirrors; short, thick men in dark coats; small briefcases containing secrets. You tend to be more alert, more aware of everything around you, and that probably makes a better traveler out of you. In any event, your mind already has constructed the place and now you get to find out whether the Cold War really is over.

The final approach to Sheremetievo II, Moscow's international airport, took us down through heavy cloud cover and when we finally broke out the ground was near, wetted by recent rain. Muddy dirt roads bobbed across unruly green fields with ramshackle log houses scattered

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here and there—and the northern forest pressing in everywhere. It hardly looked like the outskirts of a world city. Neither did the airport terminal, a spiritless place lacking elegance and suffering from neglect. Well, so far everything is fitting my preconceived notions.

When I retrieved my luggage, I couldn't help feeling pity for the poor bicycle case—the sturdy trailer that had bumped its way all around Corsica—for it quite obviously had been tortured for some unknown transgression. In addition to an assortment of contusions and welts, one end had been permanently caved in and the seal along which the lid meets the case had been badly sprung. The courage it must have had to hold out for so long before yielding up its secrets! So weakened was it by the whole ordeal that it had fallen from the baggage mover and lay unconscious on the floor.

With no map, no hotel reservation, and no idea of how to get around, I was an easy mark for the legitimate taxi services whose well-dressed representatives float around the terminal looking for people like me. After having been properly fleeced—the details too painful to discuss—I managed to transfer my luggage to storage at Sheremetievo I—Moscow's domestic airport—and return to Sheremetievo II where I had been told I could find a hotel room.

The hotel turned out to be a new Novotel right next to the airport terminal. When I inquired in the lobby about the price for a single room, the answer turned out to be \$234 per night. Considering I usually sleep about seven hours, I estimated that that would be merely \$35 per hour, even cheaper than the rate for taking helicopter piloting lessons or any of the myriad other activities

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that require nothing so technologically sophisticated as a bed. I asked the clerk if there was anything cheaper nearby—when you're dealing in a foreign language you don't screw around with subtleties—and she directed me across the street to a tall, massive, blocky, blank looking building that had an air of Soviet authenticity. It was indeed cheaper—only about half the price—and I was able to rest contented in the knowledge that I had found myself a deal.

Day 20

To say that morning dawned would be much too assertive. Around 3:00 AM, a monochrome outline of the scene outside my hotel window began to materialize from the darkness and hours later the sun hesitantly showed its face, like a sheepish husband returning from an all night binge. Clear skies and cool, gold light gave the landscape a freshness it didn't deserve; the tired buildings and time-worn highway and disapproving forest verge all seemed alert and gay and eager for the day.

The area around the Moscow airport looks as if it was snatched from the northern forest a short while back, and would most likely return in short order if left unattended. It is an outpost, the sort of place one might expect to see in Novosibirsk or Arkhangelsk, but not in Moscow. When I return in early July, I will spend a few days in Moscow, and then when I actually get into the metropolitan area perhaps this sense of being on the edge of the civilized world will be overshadowed by the grand sophistication of a world city.

The flight to Mineral'nyye Vody was smooth—so smooth, in fact, that I am beginning to think these

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Russian pilots are supernaturally gifted. For the second time, we landed not by floating in and then dropping the last foot or two to the runway, but by driving in from a steeper angle and then at the last instant pulling the nose up slightly and contacting the tarmac at such a shallow angle that you could hardly tell when the rubber hit the road. I assume that the appreciative clapping from the passengers on both flights was a standard cultural practice and not an indication that these two landings were especially well done.

People say that a return to ground becomes an occasion for clapping because of the relief from anxiety that many people feel when their lives are delivered back to them by some unknown pilot. This sounds logical enough, but the intimation that the job was particularly well done leaves me concerned that a poor landing might involve some truly unwanted outcome such as the collapse of one wheel or a series of weaving overcorrections whilst proceeding down the runway. No matter how good a landing might be, therefore, I would prefer to not clap on the assumption that it differs from a bad landing by too little to make variations in performance an issue. I will continue to think of bad landings as ones in which the wheels make contact with unfortunate vigor; anything more outlandish—like missing the runway or touching with a wing before a wheel—I shall continue to view as beyond the legal definition of “bad.”

As I walked into the terminal at Mineral’nyye Vody a young taxi tout attached himself to me like a barnacle. He knew I wasn’t Russian; he knew I had to go somewhere; he knew that I was his best opportunity of the day. I liked him; he was good natured in his insistence. He

followed me around the airport like a nagging mother-in-law—first to retrieve my luggage, then into the bathroom to watch me pee, then off to a small kiosk where I bought a map, and finally to an isolated corner of the terminal building where I could assemble the bicycle without having to worry about disappearing pieces. When I opened the case and started the process, a look of discovery and sudden comprehension swept across his face and he began to laugh good-naturedly at the way he had been led around. The setback to his plans for us was only temporary, of course, since a tout without persistence is like a bird afraid of heights. Within a minute he had recovered and was convincing me that our now well-established friendship qualified him to exchange currency for me.

As I say, I liked him, I liked the man. It seems to me that the irrepressible optimism and adaptable initiative that Americans like to believe is part of their defining heritage is in fact at the center of this young man. He will know a million defeats, but never will he suffer a final defeat because after each setback he will gather himself together and leap into the void once again.

Mineral'nyye Vody is a good distance south of Moscow, and so the sense of being on the Arctic fringe now is gone. Here it is the steppe, an open country of broad swells and vales—a sea of sinuosity on which grasses bend to leeward and small stands of forest sometimes crown the slightly higher land. Here near the Caucasus, there are occasional volcanic plugs, sometimes hundreds of feet high, that appear to have pushed themselves up from below, sweeping the grassy steppe

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upward in concave symmetry until at the very peak the rounded rock core has popped through the surface.

Across this open landscape I pedaled towards Kislovodsk, a solitary figure in a largely empty land with no one to talk to me but the elusive wind, whispering out of the west. This open emptiness strips the tyranny from time and puts it in his proper place.

Only in the final few kilometers did I leave this world behind and begin to enter the hilly, forested transition from steppe to mountains. I worked my way up a river valley toward the final destination, and by then it was clear that I would reach my hotel in time to meet Irina at our appointed rendezvous—the fountain in front of the hotel at 8:00 PM. When I got into town, I asked directions to the hotel, and the woman answering my request went on for nearly five minutes in Russian with elaborate accompanying hand motions and a constant smile on her face. Surprisingly, her directions did not leave me entirely confused and ten minutes later, after seeking confirmation and greater specificity from others along the way, I arrived at the hotel. I was taken in like a returning member of the family, and after a hurried half-hour of showering and unpacking the appointed time had come. I went downstairs and out the front door towards the fountain—and there she was.

Day 21

The day had been eventful—and the evening had been too—so sleep was not a problem. The moment my head was on the pillow I slipped out of this world and into the next.

I awoke with sunlight streaming in through gauze curtains and spent ten or fifteen minutes trying to remember where I left my mind. When finally reassembled, washed, and clothed, I made my way to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. Everything was leisurely because Irina and I had arranged to meet again only in the middle of the day. There was, in short, sufficient time to notice a few things—like the elegant place settings with occasionally unmatched cutlery and the dozens of well-painted, elaborately-framed canvases showing Caucasus mountain scenes and the unanimity with which my presence engendered covert curiosity. Nobody stared but I felt as if everybody was looking at me—when I wasn't looking. Is this just the normal American neurosis in Russia? Probably, although there seemed nothing sinister about the interest. It was more

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the kind of non-committal attention you get when you leave your fly undone.

I was overjoyed when breakfast came: the quantity of it! There was orange juice in a big glass, and over here an American sized serving of egg soufflé, and on that side a large bowl of hot cereal, and here in front of me a platter with cheese and ham and cucumber and tomato and—mayonnaise! And there was the basket of rolls and here close at hand was a cup of coffee—not your ridiculous little European demitasse, so small that to make it last three minutes you have to take miniscule sips and hope the liquid doesn't evaporate on the tongue before ever reaching your throat. No, this was a wholesome cup that pleaded with you to overindulge. All these things were presented all at once. Mine, all mine.

Well, the Russians may be lagging behind the rich Europeans when it comes to flashy cars and tailored suits, but at least they know how to serve a breakfast. All around Corsica I was struggling into my day with a thimble full of coffee and an undersized croissant (to ask for more would raise eyebrows as only the French can raise them), but here in Russia there seems to be a general understanding that—for humans, at least—energy comes from food.

Do you think it has something to do with the size of the country? Neither Russia nor the United States shies away from thinking big—American parking lots and Russian statues, for example—but all those rich little European countries can't even visualize a shower that doesn't feel like a straightjacket. Probably they feel guilty about all those cathedrals and castles that took hundreds of years to build and so now they think the decent thing

to do is scale back a bit. Simpler diets, narrower roads, smaller empires—that sort of thing. It's no use, though, for them to pretend that they have always been this way. In their day they did not shy away from the grandiose and the monumental.

Irina and I decided to take a walk in the city park. When you have exchanged many, many dozens of letters with someone, you no longer are strangers and in certain respects you may even know each other better than you would have if you had spent weeks in each other's company. It is pretty hard to write letter after letter without revealing something significant about yourself and all the attention you spend on each other is necessarily undivided. Irina turned out to be the person I already knew—positive, outgoing, gay, and unremittingly romantic. She also is as pretty as her pictures—although slightly shorter and thicker than I thought—and her smiles for the camera seem to have been congenital rather than composed. I am not unhappy.

Irina has dark hair and green eyes—large, expressive eyes with highly arched eyebrows and an animated face that quickly mirrors her every change of mood. She moves with a hint of quickness and there is a restlessness to her that does not bode well for our relationship. These insignificant things can be so important to us sometimes. It shouldn't be that way, perhaps, but life is what it is and after all these years I have come to realize that stillness soothes my soul whereas activity only entertains me. If I had to choose between a person who never says a word and one who cannot stop talking—not a pleasant choice, I grant you—I would choose the mute. The obvious risk with such a selection is boredom but since I rarely get

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bored alone the risk does not seem high. Unfortunately, from my biased point of view, a quiet woman is as rare as a two dollar bill, and so my search for the right companion is hindered by an uncooperative universe. I should say, though, that Irina's restlessness is not a verbal matter—but I will get to that in a moment.

My preoccupation with this question of stillness is driven by a larger agenda. I have built a boat that I intend to take from Wyoming to Buenos Aires using rivers and protected waters. The voyage starts next spring. It may be the beginning of a much lengthier journey that I have in mind, but the limited capabilities of the boat are such that it would be foolish to commit such grandiose schemes to paper. The journey to Argentina is scheme enough for now, for even it will involve 15,000 miles of travel over a sixteen month period. From the beginning I have expected to do this journey alone—and in fact the layout of the boat has been optimized for just one person—but of course I cannot rid myself entirely of the notion that the right companion could rev up the adventure to a higher pitch.

But finding the suitable partner is a very risky operation: nothing could be worse than spending month after month cooped up with the wrong person, cut off from the rest of the world. Irina's restlessness bothers me especially because of this. On the other hand, one of the reasons I was attracted to her in the first place is that she sincerely wants this kind of Spartan, unpredictable, day-to-day life, or at least she thinks she does. Ordinarily, the best one might hope for is a woman with a positive outlook who is willing to put up with this nonsense for her man, but in Irina's case there seems to be a real

interest in the adventure itself and that is quite unusual. But I am worried about her restlessness.

This business of evaluating the compatibility of a potential partner smacks of calculation to a man of my generation. When the right woman comes along, the theory was, you won't have to think about it. I don't suppose this attitude ever really enjoyed popularity with women but in recent decades it has fallen into disfavor even with men. I have come to admit that the modern mentality is superior to the mystical one, and so I have become just as calculating as the next person.

Or have I? The complication for Irina and me is that neither of us can speak the other's language. My willingness to accept that we might find ourselves to be the perfect match even without language as a catalyst is a pretty good sign that I haven't totally given up on the mystical bond idea. As for Irina and her attachment to an outmoded approach to matchmaking, well, I don't think Russians are as *avant garde* in this respect as Americans. On the other hand, maybe the calculus is just absurdly simple: "any man will do if you want to get out of the country."

You may think that not being able to talk with each other would be a terrible handicap, but actually it is not all bad. Figuring out what you are going to do or when and where you are going to meet turns out to be a fairly simple matter. Things only get complicated when you try to convey the reason for something or try to resolve a difference, but these issues arise infrequently in the early stages of a relationship when both parties are falling all over each other trying to be accommodating.

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Furthermore, when you begin to get a little frustrated with the situation the inability to communicate becomes a real advantage. It is a little like swearing when you are alone—you can say the foulest things and nobody is the wiser. When I say, for example, “Irina, you are a little broad in the beam,” she hears her name and looks at me and smiles. When I put an apologetic look on my face and say “I just farted,” she responds with a forgiving expression and utters something incomprehensible, but certainly not accusatory.

Day 22

I didn't want to say anything before I had confirming evidence, but now I have seen enough to pass judgment: the Russians blew it when it comes to designing toilets. A common design has a shallow, plate-like concavity directly below the center of activity, and only forward of this beyond a gentle lip does the drain drop down to connect to the sewer line. When you use the facility, the product of your efforts gets collected in the shallow pan, waiting to be flushed away. This is perverse. If, for example, you absent-mindedly urinate first and then follow that up with something a bit more substantial you suddenly realize you have put yourself at risk of backslash, but by then the process is too far along and there is nothing you can do.

The Russians are clever people and so I am sure I must be missing something. I have spent an inordinate amount of time trying to solve this one, but the explanation eludes me. It is possible, of course, that Russians like to inspect their deposits, but if so then I fear there may be an insurmountable cultural gulf between them and us—one that does not engender optimism regarding

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future international relations. Most likely, I think, is the possibility that Russians like the solid, smacking sound—perhaps because in some nationalistically suggestive way it reminds the people of their peasant roots. For all its crudity, the sound has more aesthetic merit (to say nothing of cultural authenticity) than the weird romanticism of Japanese toilet paper rolls that when you pull on them dispense Beethoven's "Für Elise" played on a calliope.

There is the possibility that the traps in Russian toilets are inadequate to handle any significant accumulation, that sedimentation defeats the efforts of gravity-borne flush water to dislodge it. Perhaps the Russian design circumvents this problem by insuring that nothing enters the system unless accompanied by ample doses of flush water. This potential explanation may have logic on its side, but its mundane practicality is too realistic for my taste.

The subject of toilets reminds me of an incident involving Ray Hutmacher, the permanent captain of *White Eagle*, which is the sailboat I worked on so many years ago. During the lengthy passage from the United States to New Zealand he was discovered one day constantly flushing the ship's toilet. His explanation for this bizarre behavior was that he was trying to detect the precise instant when *White Eagle* crossed the equator. His theory was that the Coriolis effect would suddenly cause the down swirling water to reverse its gyre. His experiment was unsuccessful because the spinning of the waters was a consequence of toilet design rather than natural forces. Even so, I admire Ray's experimentalism and envy his ingenuity. To this day, I occasionally picture

in my mind this tall and angular man, with his natural look of brooding darkness, cramped in that tiny space and peering intently down into the head.

* * *

Today, Irina and I decide to hike up to the top of a ridge located on the edge of town immediately behind the hotel where she is staying.

I should clarify, incidentally, that neither her place nor mine is in fact a hotel: they are sanatoria. Evidently, Lermontov and Pushkin and lots of other famous literary types used to come here to take advantage of the curative qualities associated with the mineral waters that everywhere saturate the subsurface in this region. I have it from a good source that the very name Kislovodsk is a conjoining of the Russian words for “bitter water.” From these 19th century beginnings there developed a visitor industry based on natural mineral water curatives for various ailments and all of the hotels must have begun to cater to the hypochondriacs and the truly ill. With time, health specialists worked out the optimum set of treatments for cardiovascular diseases, respiratory ailments, nervous system disorders, gastroenterological problems, alimentary canal obstructions, urological issues, . . . You name it. I have only recently come to understand that the principle function of my place of lodging is to sort out these various problems for me and that for only a slight increase in my daily room charge I can be cured of just about anything—and get lunch and dinner thrown in to boot. It is worth thinking about. But even if I choose to get treated, I will continue to

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refer to my place as a hotel because the word sanatorium connotes other things for me.

The switchback trail to the top of the ridge is a pleasant walk, but the day is hot and when about a quarter of the way there we come to a tram that will do all the hard work for us we choose the path of least resistance, so to speak. The tram is stopped for lunch and its next departure is not for half an hour, so we walk along a path until we come to a small refreshment stand offering ice cream and drinks. Irina does the choosing, and before I know it she has in hand a small, boxed fruit juice drink for herself and a tall, cold aluminum can for me. It is like a beer can only about half again as tall, and when I examine it I discover that, in addition to a lot of Russian, “Gin and Tonic” is written in English on the side. When I open it and start to drink, it does indeed taste like gin and tonic, and not a weak one either. I start out thinking it must be some sort of clever imitation since it seems inconceivable that anyone would drink the better part of a quart of gin and tonic while strolling in the woods on a hot summer day. By the time I am done, though, it is pretty clear that people do—although not much else is clear.

The trip up on the tram was lots of fun, but I don't remember the details. At the summit we were able to look out over the grassy steppe that I crossed two days ago when cycling from Mineral'nyye Vody. The rolling nature of the land is so muted and on such a large scale that it is many kilometers from the crest of one rounded swell to the next, while the elevational change from crest to trough is simply insignificant by comparison. But as the steppe approaches Kislovodsk, it is as if shoaling water

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forces these gentle giants to crest and break, forming lushly forested hills all around the town. Tendrils of grassland feel their way up the many valleys between these hills. As you can see, this landscape is coming alive for me, but maybe it is the gin speaking.

Day 23

Sometimes, in the fall when the sky is clear and the air is chill and the sunlight is streaming down on a breezy day, the world feels new and your chest is stretched by the thought of all there is to do in life. It is like that today in Kislovodsk. The towering spruce trees that line the street outside the hotel are gently nodding to each other in the wind. Sunlight is splashing the cobbled walkways, the fountain waters, and every lighter colored surface. The coolness of the air is so sharp that your skin feels a million minor pricks.

This kind of day can never exist in the tropics; it is a special gift of the world's temperate zones and even in these regions it is a rare thing. The commonly occurring, routine events must be the ones that shape our character and make us who we are. Both excellence and mediocrity, for example, are the end result of habitual repetition, the only difference being the precise nature of what gets repeated. I cannot deny the cumulative effect that all this has on us, but neither is it the whole story. When a day of this sort comes along it marks us as the special ones and we believe it for the rest of our lives.

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I walk along the main avenue running through the center of Kislovodsk. The town has attached itself to a small tributary of the Kuma River, next to which runs the only significant highway in the region. Branching from the highway and immediately bridging the stream is the entrance road into town. It runs straight and gently uphill for about three kilometers, passing through a zone in which homes and shops are set back from the road, nearly masked from view by large trees and wooden fences. When the road approaches the city center, vehicular traffic must angle off to the right while more or less straight ahead the avenue continues on as a pedestrian walkway with shops and cafes set well back to each side. Walk up far enough, and this linear extension of the entrance road gradually loses its formal structure and almost imperceptibly blends into a large city park organized around the small tributary stream reveling in its youthful freedom before submitting to the degrading standardization associated with the channels and conduits of an urban place. The boundary between the town and the park is not at all clear. The park itself extends a goodly distance and dissolves in turn into the untended nature that surrounds the town. Sometimes a lack of clear boundaries gives us the freedom to move through life without compartmentalizing it—and that is particularly satisfying when you are on vacation.

Very few people in my hotel speak English—neither the guests nor those who work here—but a few front desk clerks know some and two women in particular are reasonably fluent. One is named Tatiana Baychorova, and she has become the person I turn to with all my questions. Consulting with her requires careful planning,

however, because the people who do this job work a 24-hour shift followed by three days off. The employees are delighted with this arrangement because it gives them such large blocks of free time, but I have wondered whether it is possible to deal with the demanding guests 24 hours straight without losing some of the outgoing positivism that generally characterizes a good front desk clerk. So far, though, I have not observed a single crack in the veneer; every one of them seems as alert and bright and full of helpfulness at breakfast time as they did the previous morning when they came on duty. Whether it is the hearty breakfast they ate before coming to work or the tantalizing prospect of three days off, I don't know, but however they do it their stamina is more than I could muster.

Tatiana suggests a bicycle ride for me in the Kavkaz. A tableland, a broad apron of richly green grassland, extends tens of kilometers south all the way to the Caucasus Mountains. Here at the irregular, northern fringe of this rolling plateau the land drops away abruptly and Kislovodsk rests at the bottom. Tatiana is so enthusiastic about this upland that she and her husband decided to start a horseback trekking business there. Her enthusiasm motivates me to go take a look, but since it is already mid-afternoon it will not be possible to do any more than pedal up onto the plateau and then return to town. I manage to accomplish this brief reconnaissance in the three hours I have allotted for it, and the vistas from the plateau are enough to convince me that a full day outing is in order. While ascending, I saw many isolated stands of forest, each of which seemed to contain

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a single type of tree—either spruce or birch, but never a mixture of the two.

Although the trees only occasionally show signs of having been planted in rows, it seems clear that the fairly extensive forests around here are not the residual of a pre-existing wilderness. The climatic conditions obviously support forest growth without human assistance, however, so it must be that the early landscape was almost entirely woods, that human settlement cleared all that away and encouraged grassy rangeland, but that cultural second thoughts eventually concluded that a combination of both biomes would be nice. There is a tendency to think that profound alterations to the natural environment had to await the awesome destructive forces unleashed by the industrial revolution, but we have here a pretty good indication that earlier societies were capable of profound environmental modifications. It just took them a little longer.

When I get back to town I decide to celebrate my successful ascent to the plateau with a beer at an outdoor café next to the pedestrian mall. I prefer this form of self-congratulation because the people around you have no idea how egotistical you are being. You look like any other person getting refreshed.

Sitting next to the broad, cobbled walkway in the late afternoon sun, it strikes me that most of the passers by are young and fair. This is odd since the people I have seen entering and leaving the many sanatoria around town are anything but. Maybe these sanatoria really work; maybe after a week of treatment you are able to walk the streets of Kislovodsk looking like this. A fountain of youth, however, has never claimed to be a fountain of beauty,

and although I can happily imagine all these middle-aged patrons of the sanatoria emerging young and supple and smooth-skinned, I cannot for the life of me picture them looking this good.

And there is a further problem. In my hotel (sanatorium), at least, the men and women come in roughly equal numbers, but here on the mall it is mostly women. The abbreviated English language translations of the promotional literature for these sanatoria say nothing about sex-change treatment plans, but who knows what the right water can do.

The parade of beautiful young women is mind-boggling, and I decide to do a count as I sit here. When my watch reads exactly twenty five minutes past the hour I will start a five minute tabulation of how many men and how many women cross the darker band of cobblestone extending across the mall more or less abreast of my table. Children are to be treated as a separate category.

When the survey is complete and the numbers are in, my subjective impressions have been corroborated by hard science: 60 women have passed by (alas), but only 33 men and 8 children. This numerical imbalance might be an artifact of time of day or particular location along the walkway, of course, and there was that one disruptive incident when the passage of a particularly well-endowed young (very young) woman was so noteworthy that the two middle-aged men sitting a couple tables away engaged me in a pantomime of appreciation and ordered me a second beer. I will need to return to the mall on one or two other occasions to conduct confirmatory experiments.

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I cooked the figures, actually: there were only seven children, not eight. I did this out of fear that those who are quantitatively inclined would be skeptical about the passage of exactly 100 people in exactly five minutes—would suspect me of having cooked the figures if I didn't cook them. Please forgive my intellectual chicanery. At least this minor adjustment did nothing to assist confirmation of my original hypothesis (and that is more than I can say for the kinds of “adjustments” I have seen made in many respectable social science experiments).

Day 24

What does it say about a tourist town when its shops do not sell postcards? I have yet to make a serious search (writing postcards is not my forte) but usually a town with a steady flow of visitors and a surfeit of scenery would have postcards at the entrances to everything from magazine shops and grocery stores to train stations and theatre ticket offices—anywhere, in short, that might catch the eye of passing pedestrians or capture the attention of those standing in line. You can find postcards for sale in places like Des Moines, Iowa (can't you, Bill?) and Wendover, Nevada, and compared to Kislovodsk those places are the ugly stepsisters. One can understand it when a nondescript town in the middle of nowhere like Watson Lake in the Yukon Territory sells postcards because they document the sender's epic journey along the Alaska Highway—but Wendover, Nevada? After all, for most of the world the Caucasus is exotic enough and even for Russians it has a certain glamorous patina, so I can't see why the postcard trade is on the skids in Kislovodsk.

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I won't try to give an answer to this question, although it might not be hard to do if I asked around. Sometimes it is better to leave such minor questions unanswered so that the place can retain a certain level of the exoticism and mystery that made it so attractive in the first place.

This postcard situation is the kind that separates the businessman from the entrepreneur—a difference in mentality if ever there was one. The entrepreneur notices the inconsistency and concludes that there is an opportunity here: “Let's contact a good photographer who can share in the profits when they start to flow. Find a printer and strike a deal. Now all that remains is to make mutually beneficial arrangements with highly visible shops. How can the venture fail?” The businessman, on the other hand, sees no sense in undertaking such a high risk venture. After all, “If there were a demand for postcards then stores would be selling them. There are a lot of liquor stores, though, so let's start one of those and beat the competition at its own game.”

Speaking of business opportunities, Internet cafes are popping up everywhere, just as video rental shops did a quarter century ago. I was able to find them in most of the small towns on Corsica and now here in Kislovodsk I have begun to frequent one that Irina showed me. They seem to have two common characteristics. The first is that they generally are small-scale, mom-and-pop enterprises that typically offer no more than a dozen computer stations, and often fewer. The second is that they do a good business. So far, I have found them in cafes, restaurants, bars, video game rooms, and as stand-alone operations. This one in Kislovodsk appears to be of the stand-alone type, but since it is located upstairs in

the main post office I am not completely sure of that. The clientele here is mostly young women who often sit in pairs at the terminals. My furtive snooping suggests that usually they are either typing in prepared manuscript to send as an e-mail message or shopping on-line. I have yet to see a person who is obviously surfing the Internet; I suppose it is too expensive to engage in this sort of frivolity. As for me, I am conducting legitimate business, of course, monitoring an on-line course and handling e-mail messages from students who have questions or problems. For some reason, I look forward to these Internet outings, plan my day around them, and usually find many work unrelated things to do while on-line. I suppose it is the comfort of being able to function in English.

* * *

In the middle of the day, Irina has a tennis lesson and invites me along to watch. The courts turn out to be an uneven asphalt surface with a thin layer of plastic grass bonded onto it. The two nets are badly worn and look as if they have not been adjusted for some time. The instructor is a smiling, wizened, somewhat hunched old man dressed in ragged clothes. In her bright yellow tennis outfit with brilliant white tennis shoes and a state of the art racket, as well as a matching yellow visor holding back her dark hair, she definitely is the flower in the crannied wall.

Making a splash is unquestionably her aim, but she also takes her tennis seriously, swiping away at served up balls for nearly an hour in the midday heat. At one

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point, she trips in an effort to run back for a lob and the fall to her knees scrapes them up pretty effectively. After an application of disinfectant that mars the perfect image with rust colored blotches, she carries on to the end. Afterwards, she manages to convey to me that this is only her second fall in the five years she has been playing the game. I guess Russian tennis courts take a dim view of players falling down and punish them when they do. In the aftermath, Irina complains a fair deal about her little accident, but through it all she maintains her usual good humor so it is hard to judge the level of her distress.

We arrange to meet outside my hotel after dinner, and at the appointed time I take my bicycle with me. She has not seen it before, so this is a chance to show it off. When I come out of the hotel entrance and head up the rather steeply sloped street toward her place, I see her approaching in jeans that have been painted on, four inch black stiletto heels, and a clinging, black, low-cut blouse—all of which is rather standard for the Kislovodsk scene. I am keen to show her the bicycle and she displays an adequate amount of interest. Finally, I convince her that it would be a good idea to try it out—in spite of her footwear—and proceed to point out how the gears work before she sets off. She pedals up the street with what sounds like genuine delight, and about a hundred yards on turns around and heads back towards me. I see her accelerating down the hill and it suddenly dawns on me that maybe she is not familiar with handgrip brakes. It doesn't look like she is since her hands are out on the ends of the handlebars and well away from the brake grips, and her acceleration is proceeding unimpeded. I try to think of what to do, but yelling at her won't help. Before

I can come up with an idea, she jumps ship, stepping off the low-cut bicycle and trying to run along beside to slow them both down. It is a fair effort, but doomed to failure with those heels on. Both go to pavement and I dash up to assess the magnitude of the disaster. Both Irina and the bicycle emerge unscathed, but of course that is not her appraisal of the situation. She teases me unendingly about trying to kill her with my bicycle, but doesn't seem to hold a grudge. Now, see—if she knew English she probably would be mad at me and would clearly tell me so.

There is a chastening aspect to this whole story that I never worked up the courage to confess to her. When she was on her feet and evidently all in one piece, I looked the bike over and discovered that the rear brake was disconnected. The hotel front desk stores the bicycle for me in a small office where the staff can retreat from public view, and evidently a curious employee inadvertently detached the cable from the brake pull while covertly fiddling with all the fancy components that are hard to find on any Russian bicycle.

I am grateful to be here and not in the United States. In most of the world a no-fault mentality prevails and at the bottom of it all people live with the consequences of their own actions, but back home I probably would be getting a call from a lawyer in the morning.

Day 25

Since I am here for a while and there are only so many bicycle rides to be done, I have surrendered to the temptation of finding out what these sanatoria treatment programs are all about. Today I start a ten-day program designed to make me slimmer and give me better posture. I like both ideas, and all of the other programs imply a level of physical decay that I am as yet unwilling to admit. I am exhilarated by the prospect that in a week or so I may be able to walk along the mall looking like all those other folk. The odds are slim, but they can't be any worse than the likelihood of hitting the jackpot in the lottery, and I have friends who drive all the way to Idaho hoping to cash in on that particular gamble (don't I, Steve?). Besides, I'd rather be young than rich any day.

This particular program is a wildly irrational choice: its modest extra cost will cover all meals, but its weight loss emphasis will put me on diet #8—the one with lots of unadorned vegetables and meats and fruits, and little in the way of desserts or breads. I will be calorically deprived. Still, moderate levels of self-denial always have made me feel especially virtuous.

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The program is serious business. It all started yesterday with a visit to the doctor, a mild-mannered, taciturn woman of my own age who could have passed as a shop attendant or hotel maid—until, that is, she began to write in my little treatment book. Then her wretched handwriting gave her away, even to someone as illiterate as me. She gave me a physical exam and recorded all the results. Then she asked medical history questions via an interpreter named Rasheed, the son of Tatiana. She discovered my slightly elevated blood pressure and gave me a pill to put under my tongue. It took about an hour to dissolve, so I eventually found myself talking (?) with Irina with a pill under my tongue. Why do I slavishly follow these directions?

That was yesterday; today the routine starts in earnest. I am awakened at 6:30 so as to be ready for the nurse who arrives a half an hour later to give me an enema. At 8:00, it is off to the lab for blood tests and urinalysis (the sample jar was thoughtfully provided yesterday so that I could leave a morning specimen at my leisure and the chamber maid could deliver it to the lab). I don't have to worry about breakfast because I don't get one—it's all part of the system cleansing that I must undergo before becoming an initiate. If I had to choose between an enema and having blood extracted, I am not sure which would distress me more: blood taking is fearsome but the enema lasts longer. Choice, however, is not part of the program.

Well, the worst is now over and I can proceed to Room 412 for a rendezvous with the physical therapist. She turns out to be a rather aged (that is, about ten years younger than me), leotard-clad hardbody of odd

proportions. Using vigorous forms of sign language she manages to tell me I should return the following morning when she will begin to subject me to ungodly exercise tortures (on the faulty assumption that I am younger than her and need to be taught what a well-conditioned woman can do). Perhaps I am reading too much into her gestures.

Now it is back to the doctor who gives me a form of electrical shock treatment. I am familiar with the general principle here and have been looking forward to the buzz that comes from having electrical current passed through the body. I have fond recollections of going to the chiropractor in Park City and, after being adjusted and aligned, getting knotted muscles electrified, so to speak. I presume the sensations will be similar, although the objective will be different. A healthy dose of electric current passed through a muscle will cause it to contract and this replicates the strengthening and toning effects of real exercise without requiring all that work.

I have opted to get my stomach muscles toned and the doctor has decided that my biceps could use a little beefing up as well, so I am laid upon the bench and electrodes are attached in all the proper places. The electric current is just as I had anticipated, although for this treatment it is applied in five second surges instead of constant flow—three sequential hits across the midriff (like those neon signs with moving arrows to point the way) and then one in the arms. For thirty minutes I lie there getting tuned while the doctor is parked at her desk processing paperwork. I think about asking that the sessions with the physical therapist be replaced with more of these treatments. They have the same objective,

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after all, and the hotel staff is knocking itself out trying to please me, so why not? On the other hand, I have learned that any sort of minor deviation from expected protocol causes deep consternation and alarm—rather as if a mud besotted pig came wandering into the lobby and laid down on the carpet—and so I decide to go with the flow.

By now it is mid-morning and time for a short break from the sequence of treatments, and so I head for the small tea room where the first of my twice daily cups of herbal tea is waiting for me—like everything else, a very important part of the overall routine.

At 11:30 I arrive at the proper location for my Narzan mineral water bath, presumably the essential treatment that inspired the articulation and development of all the others. There are a series of individual rooms each having a deep bathtub oriented such that while immersed you can look out large windows at the rich greenery and the tennis courts located behind the hotel. A discreetly positioned passageway between adjoining rooms allows a matronly attendant to service more than one at a time. She uses constant purposeful action and appropriately timed disappearances into the next room to ameliorate any discomfort you might feel about getting undressed and taking a bath in public.

I have no idea by what process these mineral waters effect their curative powers. Rasheed had explained to me that the mineral content extracts undesirable chemicals from beneath the surface of the skin, but the superficiality of his explanation may be as much a product of ignorance as imperfect English.

At first, the bath feels like any other, although steady coagulation and release of miniature bubbles along the surfaces of both the tub and your body puts you in a slightly elevated state of mind reminiscent of the anticipation you feel as you watch a newly poured glass of champagne. In short order, though, you do begin to feel a slight tingling and burning sensation that does not intensify but does continue throughout the remainder of the bath. After only fifteen minutes you must be on your way; excessive time in the tub evidently does more harm than good. I had been forewarned by Rasheed that the bath would be exhausting, that following it one should rest for an hour and avoid intensive exercise throughout the remainder of the day. Although at first I felt no such tiredness, I did later and when that evening I met with Irina I fancied I could detect in her a hint of disappointment with my lethargy.

After obediently resting for much of the prescribed hour, I headed off to my final destination before lunch: an encounter with the proctologist. Using a long, reasonably slender, steel tube attached to some sort of flexible hose that in turn was connected to a large, boxed instrument of some sort, he proceeded to grease me up and probe around. He finished his inspection and happily certified my system as sound before sending me on my way.

I had not realized what I was getting into when I signed up for this treatment plan, but I suppose the very uncertainty is what attracted me to it in the first place. The low calorie lunch turned out to be tasty and filling, and when I stood up from the table I did not rush off to the corner store to buy a forbidden supplement. I did

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cheat eventually, though. In late afternoon I stopped at a nearby refreshment stand and bought an ice cream stick. As I was unwrapping it I turned around, and there, not forty feet away, was my doctor, evidently just getting off work and momentarily pausing to talk with an acquaintance. A sudden jolt of guilt coursed through me, and I abruptly turned my back and walked the other way. I am reasonably confident that she did not see me, but I now must recognize that I no longer am in control of my own stay at the Hotel Narzan.

Day 26

The morning routine proceeds uneventfully although the irregularity with which the various treatments are scheduled complicates the task of knowing when to be where. The main variation on the basic treatment program is an alternation between the mineral water bath and an underwater massage. The masseuse is a comely woman wielding a high pressure hose that she directs at various parts of your body while you lie immersed in a large tub that, like a Jacuzzi, has an assortment of built-in water jets designed to strategically knead your musculature. The water jets are mere toys in comparison with the force and volume being directed at you by the masseuse, however. She holds the nozzle of the hose underwater at just the right distance from your body in order to release tension from the muscles; whenever the nozzle gets a little too close you become acutely aware of its potential to inflict pain. To be so much at the mercy of a strange woman injects danger and a little thrill into the entire proceedings.

The regimentation at meals is a little excessive. There is a fixed time for appearance and a designated seat at an

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assigned table. You must bring the proper coupon for your meal, to be collected by the waitress. I happen to have been assigned to a table for four that I share with three other people in a largely empty dining room. The woman seated across from me is vast and round and red-headed. She looks rather like an aging diva. The two men sitting beside us are more talkative than she, although they often momentarily include her in their conversation. The man next to me has a slightly intimidating appearance: large-framed and burly, he has thick lips and even thicker dark, bushy eyebrows dramatized by his shaved head and hairless skull. Today he is dressed in a pinstriped suit and at one point becomes engaged in an animated and sharply worded exchange with the waitress, who calls on a superior for assistance. All eventually is settled and the waitress brings to the table an elegantly shaped and richly ornamented liquor bottle along with four small wine glasses. Drinks are poured, a toast is offered, and the man beside me proceeds to down his liquor in one extended swallow. The other two lag behind, but are clearly attempting a similar feat, so I do my best to not be impolite. In short order, a second round is poured and then a third, by which time the bottle is empty. The whole process could not have taken five minutes. The liquid in the bottle looked and tasted like sweet red wine, but it had the kick of a mule and when I inquired about it the response seemed to be that it was a form of brandy concocted in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Caucasus.

I floated away from lunch and spent the afternoon drifting about town. There is a bookstore near the pedestrian mall, and my premeditated perusal of it is

evidence that my principle addiction is of a literary sort. What could I find to interest me in a store full of Russian books? Plenty, it turned out. For starters, there were large scale topographic maps of the region, and the language of maps is reasonably universal. That led me to inspect a few of the Russian atlases, and immediately below them was a shelf full of translating dictionaries: Russian-French, Russian-Portuguese, that sort of thing. There was even one for Russian-Latin, but I could find nothing that was Russian-English except for an unwieldy Oxford dictionary that listed the Russian equivalents of English words but failed to provide phonetic transcriptions. I moved on to other sections, and in the midst of incomprehensible Russian titles happened across a slender paperback volume in English: Somerset Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence, published in Moscow as a reader for advanced students of English. I bought it for the contemporary equivalent of less than a sixpence, and thus began my unraveling. Experience has taught me that it is unwise to travel with good books because I find myself reading them while the world is passing by; they end up taking on a higher priority than my reasons for leaving home in the first place. The prospect of departing for foreign lands with nothing to read puts me into a state of anxiety, however, so recently I have made it a point to take along two or three *bad* books—paperbacks that I can be driven to when there is nothing else to occupy me and that I can happily discard after they are read. At this point in the trip, my throwaways have all been donated to hotel rooms in Milan, Corsica, and Moscow and it is the return of the old neurosis that drove me to this Russian bookstore.

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I cannot in good conscience allow the passing mention of Somerset Maugham to imply that his work is merely good: it is inspired. When I read, for example, “I do not suppose she had ever really cared for her husband, and what I had taken for love was no more than the feminine response to caresses and comfort which in the minds of most women passes for it” I am reduced to a condition of awed admiration that such a socially revolutionary view can be openly expressed in language so refined and disarming that the reader barely notices the ghostly presence that has been let loose in the mind.

I am ambivalent about subtlety. It is an unfortunate form of deviousness or deception, but its restrained adaptability allows for accommodation with an uncaring world in that great majority of instances when a more straightforward response is inappropriate or ineffective. Mastery of the oblique will smooth the way through life, and one can do worse than to turn to Maugham for instruction in the art.

* * *

Irina and I have made plans to attend a concert in the large theatre near the train station, and my understanding is that we should purchase tickets today for tomorrow’s event. Late in the afternoon, I make my way to the ticket office and am surprised to learn that tomorrow’s event will be in the afternoon rather than in the evening as I had been led to understand by Irina. “Well,” I think to myself, “we can sort it out when we get together tonight.”

We are to meet at her place between 6:30 and 7:00, but I am slow getting ready and do not depart until just before the hour. As I exit the building, Irina is pacing on the street, as elegantly dressed as ever but looking a little agitated. When I reach her, I am met with a stream of Russo-English that leaves me with no doubt I have some sort of crisis on my hands. I gradually come to understand that the concert we are to attend occurs today, that it starts at 7:00, and that she has been waiting for me for nearly two hours. It seems she is not happy about this. Her mood switches back and forth, back and forth, between cloudy displeasure and rueful laughs. My protestations of innocence are met with some degree of skepticism, but when at last I show her the tickets I have purchased she grudgingly accepts the evidence and in only a few minutes the storm clouds have passed and the sun begins to shine. I never thought it possible for a woman to find it this hard to sustain a bad mood. I try to convince her that we can still go to the concert, that we will only be about ten minutes late, but she is not so disposed and we end up going to her place and doing other things instead.

Day 27

By the standards of a small city, the theatre has an exterior that is ample in dimensions and not entirely lacking in architectural merit. One would not expect, therefore, the modest size and functional accoutrements of the concert hall it offers to Irina and me when we arrive in the afternoon. There are no chandeliers or clever lighting arrangements. There is no carpeting. Nothing adorns the walls except a series of large naves all in a row high up, each occupied by a statue of a man dressed in a toga and holding a distinctive musical instrument. The seating consists of row upon row of simple ice cream parlor chairs held in place by the metric equivalent of 2"x2" softwood lumber that is threaded through the support work of the chair seats and attached to each in turn. The entire arrangement is painted off-white and looks quite presentable. The room is purely rectangular. The stage is simple and its drawn curtains are patternless and unremarkable in texture or color. The backdrop is a lightweight, white curtain, the pattern of which indicates that it is the same ordinary material as was used in the foyer to soften the intensity of the sunlight

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that might otherwise invade the space through the large, plain windows there. On the stage is a Steinway grand piano painted white—not in the production process but at a later time by hand, presumably because the original finish lost its luster.

At the time, I was dismayed by this painting of the piano. It seemed a tawdry way to treat a finely crafted instrument. Now in retrospect, I appreciate it and recognize that my initial reaction was a sign of my musical immaturity. Those unfamiliar with boats, for example, find their attention drawn to the elegant yachts with varnished bright work and stainless steel fittings, but rarely see much of interest in a simple fishing boat or a worn and cluttered deep sea sailing craft. Those who spend time on the water have a different reaction. They see the boat as one thing and what the boat does as another. They appreciate the elegance and grace of a finely turned yacht, but their spirit resonates when they see a boat of any kind that looks well suited to its task. It little matters if the vessel lacks classical beauty—if it has the signs of true functionality it will stimulate admiration and cause the knowing viewer to take pride in his association with the maritime tradition. In a similar fashion, I should imagine, those for whom music is more than mere entertainment would see the Steinway as an instrument that can admirably perform, one whose roughly painted surfaces testify to its long history of having done so.

The audience is small, casually dressed, and widely dispersed throughout the hall. When the pianist appears, he is in a black tuxedo and wears a white bow tie. The simplicity of both the concert hall and the audience

could easily make such attire look ridiculously formal, but this man has the air of a master craftsman adhering to a tradition, and he does not look ridiculous. He is diminutive and insubstantial, but his unruly white hair and gold rimmed spectacles cast him as a character.

He takes his seat and begins to play. The early pieces I did not much appreciate, although his mastery of the instrument was clear enough. As often happens at these kinds of events, I found myself struggling to stay awake. Occasionally, I would sneak a look at Irina to see if she was suffering from the same fatigue, but she always looked wide eyed and alert. I cannot believe she found the music that invigorating, so I was forced to conclude that she is better at hiding her real reactions to things than I am. I resolved to keep this in mind in the future. Before I actually dozed off, the pianist began to play Peer Gynt and it stimulated me to recover sufficiently that I could properly appreciate the latter half of a fine performance.

I think people in this part of the world must view classical music as just another part of their everyday life. I do not mean by this that they throng to listen; popularity may in fact be less here than in the United States. But those who do attend such things do not behave as if they are participants in some higher form of cultural activity. The audience often looks as if it is drawn from all social classes and economic niches.

The most unusual classical event I ever attended was a production of Aida at the Bucharest opera house shortly after the collapse of communism in Romania. The country was very unsettled at the time: nobody had anything and nobody trusted anyone. The streets of the

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city were nearly empty and what few pedestrians there were projected a sullen mood.

I went to an evening performance and when I arrived nobody was in sight. For a moment I thought it must be the wrong place, but since the address matched I went up the steps of this grand old building and found an open door off to one side of the main entrance. I walked through it and into one end of an enormously large foyer with an abundance of ornate architectural features and three massive crystal chandeliers, each containing many dozens of small lights. Only one light on one chandelier was actually lit, however, due to a chronic power shortage in the city, and the deep pallor in the foyer matched the mood of the city. One could barely see, but after adjusting to the shock I noticed an open ticket booth where I was able to buy a ticket for what—if I recall correctly—was the equivalent of fifteen cents. I was informed that I could sit wherever I pleased. I walked across the empty foyer and entered the main seating area. It was large, luxurious, and somewhat better lit. It had the usual balconies and box seats above and aisles providing access to the many rows of seats on the main floor. There were two people seated separately in the entire hall—that's all. I took a seat in the second row near the center and waited for the production to start. A handful of people came and settled themselves before the curtain rose, but the paying customers never outnumbered the cast of singers.

When the opera started, the rising curtain revealed a warmly lit set depicting a neighborhood in ancient Alexandria, and the players who made their entrances and exits all were clad in luscious fabrics tailored to

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suggest the attire of the time. The orchestra was located in a recessed area at the front of the stage, and from my seat I could see the tops of the heads of its many musicians. The voices of the singers—all of them—were pure and bell-like. Every aspect of the production was an exemplar of professional excellence and nothing was done that might compromise the grandiosity that makes opera so effective. It was a fine example of doing something well for the right reasons and the purity of it all must have given sustenance to everyone involved as they struggled to survive those trying times in Romania.

Day 28

Whenever I take a trip I expect the weather to be fine. This is not unreasonable; experience has taught me that when it comes to games of chance I will never win but that no one can match my good fortune as far as travel weather is concerned. If I go to the coast of Maine, there will be no fog. If the Alaska panhandle is my destination, sunny days are a certainty. If I'm off to Iceland, the wind won't blow much. I know I am going to receive the best weather a place has to offer, and so I pack accordingly. Contingency planning only makes sense when there is a reasonable likelihood of an untoward event.

This is terribly irritating to those less fortunate. They see me setting off without a coat or umbrella or proper pair of boots and they think to themselves: "He has no idea what he is getting into and he won't make it back home unscathed by the elements without a good piece of luck." They are right, of course—luck has a lot to do with it. If they want to feel better about the situation, they should invite me to Las Vegas.

There are times, of course, when I am truly unlucky—as happened last year in February when I went

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to southern China and it rained for ten days straight—but this is a rare occurrence, freakishly abnormal. I view inclement weather as tremendously bad luck and how I react depends on my state of mind at the time. I can be irritated by it, but more often than not I accept it philosophically and then congratulate myself for being so mature. It rarely occurs to me to feel grateful for a string of sunny days: I enjoy them but they are to be expected, after all. I imagine my attitude is comparable to that of the addicted gambler who curses a string of losses but looks upon a run of winning plays as nothing more than his reason for being at the table.

It may rain today, and I hope it does for it will be a welcome relief after so many weeks of unremittingly fine weather. There have been a few thunderstorms—two in Milan and one here in Kislovodsk—but they came and went quickly and for two of them I was indoors at the time and avoided their inconvenience. Venera and I did get caught in the city park by one, but considering the ill-fated nature of that encounter the storm was just an omen to which I might have paid more attention.

The sky is pregnant with cloud and the weight of this grayness pressing down on earth indicates that the hour of delivery is drawing near. The last two days have been building to this; what started as a few scattered clouds had by yesterday evening become a phalanx, a tight assembly of individuals moving with a singular purpose. So effective was their marching drill that by this morning they had become a single unit, a fused mass of ominous force, blotting out the sky and grinding away to the west. This gray overcast has kept the sun from rising, destroyed

all shade, and oppressed the populace with its implicit menace.

As I walk the streets of Kislovodsk in the middle of the day, the flattened light has reduced all colors to a plebian state and robbed them of their brilliance. The one unfortunate exception is the repulsive luster of the lateritic red that so many women have chosen to dye their hair. The color does not even have the obscene suggestiveness of the strawberry red to which one often hears reference. There can be a certain perverse beauty in obscenity, but this red is too garishly ugly to merit even that questionable distinction.

There is, I gather, a certain weight of accumulated evidence to suggest that we have an inbred emotional reaction to colors. This simplistic view contends that red excites us whereas blues and greens are more like pacifiers. Well, this particular red, this lateritic red, does not excite me—not unless one views recoil as a form of excitement. I suspect that our emotional reaction to colors is more a response to learned associations than to biological hard wiring. For me, the offensive hue of red against which I now rail is a grim reminder of the terrible, unnatural scars that an uncaring humanity inflicts on a luxurious green landscape where roadways and excavations lay open the land and expose its underlying oxidized soil. To dye your hair the color of blood would be sin enough; to dye it the color of tropical Mother Earth is holocaustic.

Red is a popular hair color here in Russia, and a certain minority of the women who have selected it have managed to attract the attention they are after without too severely damaging their natural beauty. Very few have actually enhanced it. For the many who have

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chosen this particularly repulsive hue—the only hue that glows in the gray light—the results are disastrous. It makes beautiful women look violated, ugly women look violent—and older women look simply vile.

I am most astounded at the large number of old ladies who find it fashionable. There is supposed to be a crude correlation between age and wisdom, but this behavior belies it. When your hair is thinning and innately unappealing anyway, it hardly makes sense to draw attention to it. Of course, most women seem to think that an outrageous personal statement is the next best thing to natural beauty, and I don't suppose the sentiment subsides with advancing years. Still, you can imagine the withering effect that this hair color has when an aged woman uses it to crown an over painted face.

Late in the afternoon I find myself at Irina's hotel where we can see the rain begin. The hotel is on a hillside and her third floor location looks out on a weeping sort of spruce tree—with branches close enough to her balcony to reach out and touch—and then beyond nearby tree tops to deep green hills all around the town. As the rain falls ever harder and the deepening gloom gives substance to the gathering mist, and the beating sound drowns out all dissonant ones, we settle comfortably by the window drinking coffee laced with brandy, tasting caviar spread on freshly baked buns, and through the open balcony doorway feeling the cool humidity of a heavy rain. If this is bad weather, bring it on.

Day 29

For me, a vague depression has set in. It has nothing to do with the weather for that has markedly improved, and I conclude that it is the usual temporary downturn that my spirits take whenever I am on the road for an extended period. Carrying on alone but with people all around who speak a strange language actually liberates me. It makes me feel that whatever I do will be tolerated as the eccentric behavior of an outsider. At home I often regret my passivity and detachment but in a foreign land where involvement is problematic anyway, neither remorse nor guilt can assail me and I am free to indulge my innate reclusiveness. The day usually comes, however, when this isolation bears down, and I can hardly escape its oppressive weight by going off to the movies, or calling a friend, or finding work to do. This morose introspection usually passes quickly, though, so depression is for me nothing more than a temporary nuisance that soon will be gone, rather like the pain between the eyes when you eat ice cream too fast. While it has you in its grip, though, it is hard to think of other

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things, and my mind inevitably starts to contemplate what might be causing it.

The most likely possibility is that it is time to move on. Since Irina and I have agreed to spend the better part of three weeks here together, this is not a reasonable option. Still, nothing does more to keep me from feeling discouraged than the prospect of being elsewhere tomorrow, so I presume that my disheartened state is brought on by the realization that tomorrow will be like today. Since the trip around Corsica was physically demanding, my first week here in Kislovodsk was a good form of R & R to recover from the stresses of the open road. But now it is well into the second week, and enough is enough.

I probably would not realize my need to get moving if Irina had turned out to be the love of my life, but that clearly is not the case. This new relationship is very satisfying, for Irina and I are as comfortable together as wine and cheese. We are highly compatible and yet we seem to give each other the perfect amount of personal independence. We respect each other and enjoy each other and never have to work at being together. Doesn't that suggest I should stop my searching and get serious? Maybe so, maybe so, but I just can't bring myself to leap off that cliff.

We spend time together every day—three to six hours, typically—and use the rest of each day for our own preferred activities. I like this arrangement and I think she does too, but if she were the captor of my heart I should think that a heightened sense of excitement would possess me whenever we are about to get together. Since it doesn't, I conclude that she is not the one. It is

no use analyzing this; let's just accept the finality of it all and not worry about how to come to terms with it until the end of our stay together. I hope Somerset Maugham is not correct in his appraisal of what passes for love in the female mind because if he is then I will have a problem to deal with.

In the afternoon, Irina and I go swimming in the hotel pool. It is indoors, unfortunately, but the hall is filled with natural light and there are few people using the facilities. When I change in the men's dressing room, I am confronted with one of those puzzles that foreign travelers sooner or later find themselves trying to solve. There are three changing booths with keyed doors, but no keys. All three are empty. The area next to the changing rooms is unfurnished except for a padded bench with a tilted head suggesting that it is a place to lie down, and this whole area affords access to no discernable storage bins or closets save a small water closet with a toilet in it. There are three shower stalls located next to the entranceway to the pool, but it is possible to step around them and enter the pool hall completely dry.

The puzzles are these. Do I change in one of the changing rooms which are unlit and completely dark when their doors are closed? What will men think if they catch me doing this? I could change in the area with the bench, but if someone opens the locker room door I would be exposed to passersby in the hall. I use a changing room with a door left open and two young boys walk by looking at me curiously.

Now, where do I leave my clothes? A changing booth is a logical choice, but it doesn't seem very neighborly to clutter up one when there are only three. Besides, there

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are no clothes in any of them so this does not seem to be the appropriate course of action. There is the further awkward possibility that someone could come along with a key and lock the door. Finally, am I supposed to take a shower before heading off to the pool? If so, do I hold my clothes at arms length while a driblet of water makes me look decently moist?

I set my clothes down on the bench and go use the water closet to buy time. Urinating eases the tension a little and I am able to decide on a course of action. There is the possibility that people bypass the shower and take their clothes and towel with them into the pool hall where they can keep an eye on them and where there even may be small storage cubbies. Then on the way back they set their clothes down on the bench and retreat into a shower before toweling off and dressing. Using this as my theory, I enter the pool hall dry and laden with personal belongings. Of course the pool hall has no loose items lying around in it at all, not even towels. I put my belongings in a tidy pile in the corner of the hall and enter the water as quickly as possible. The swim was worth the mental stress, but even now I do not have an inkling about the protocol. Sometimes when you are traveling you just cope.

Day 30

Following my 6:30 AM wake-up call for an enema—a regular part of the treatment program—I decide to make a change. The sky outside is cloudless and it suddenly occurs to me that the extra pounds I carry around are really not so burdensome. I could go for a bike ride today instead of being treated in the Narzan mineral waters and toned by electrodes in the doctor's office. I could skip my dietary lunch at 1:00 PM sharp with the aging opera singer whose reptile eyes and dyed red hair make lunch seem like a visit to the zoo. I could substitute a couple draft beers at the end of my outing. I could be free again. The prospect thrills me and kills the depression dead. I decide to forgo what already I have agreed to pay for.

Tatiana is working the front desk when I go down for breakfast, and so I let her know about my change of plans. What the customer wants the customer gets, of course, so she does everything she can to adjust the scheduling of my various commitments and even arranges that I will not be charged for the unused days of the program. She is, nonetheless, anguished and

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distressed by my unpredictability. I explain to her that I have been very satisfied with the treatment program but that the weather is simply too nice to spend time indoors. She understands the logic but has trouble adjusting to the new state of affairs. I try to give her a stronger basis upon which to rest a new arrangement: "I find it hard to adhere to a fixed schedule," I say with an apologetic smile. She reacts as if she definitely believes me, but yearningly observes that the Germans who stay here insist upon such regimentation. When people from all around the world and from many different cultures stereotype a particular group in the same way, does that not lend credibility to the notion that making such generalizations is not entirely inappropriate?

When shortly after breakfast I find myself smiling as I start the same ride that I did last week, it is a sign that I have taken the right decision. The air is wonderfully cool and the freshness I feel both inside and out makes the long ascent much easier this time. The terrain is neither precipitous nor rugged, but the length and the pitch of the climb are the equal of anything I encountered on Corsica. Only in the last kilometer do I begin to labor a little, but then the summit takes me by the hand and leads me to its crest. The vista opens up before me and the broad plateau sweeps away to the south, green in its grassy splendor and green in the wide coulees that serrate this perimeter area. On the distant horizon, where the flowing green of earth meets the glazed blue of sky, stands a great white volcano. Isolated, twin-peaked, and symmetrical, it is adorned in snow from base to summit. Mt. Elbrus looks too large to be a part of this world. The ridges and gullies coursing down its snowy flanks are easy

to see from this vantage tens of kilometers away. Like the moon, such visible irregularities within the confines of a perfect geometry seen from such distance give a sense of supernatural size.

As I continue on, the road turns to gravel and after a few kilometers there is a long descent into a coulee where a bedraggled village has sprawled itself across the broad, gravelly bed of an undersized stream and up the coulee flanks. Calves lie in the main street; the occasional battered vehicle negotiates the rough roadbed at the pace of a jog; old men lounge in the shade and every so often a group of two or three women passes by purposefully. All is in disrepair and life in the village seems stunned by its own poverty. Beyond the limits of the town, the emerald plateau lies unsullied and unconcerned, with Mt. Elbrus in the distance.

The people in the village—but especially the men—are narrow-faced and hawk-like, and have spare, wiry bodies to match. They do not look like the well-fed, fleshed-out stream of humanity walking the streets of Kislovodsk, and I conclude that that city is the Russian center of political and cultural control whereas this vast countryside is the uncontested domain of the indigenous Karachai people.

Imperial Russia is not a thing of the past. Although now stripped of the larger and more peripherally located fruits of its earlier conquests, the country remains an assembly of different cultures and different peoples bound together by Russian dominance. Whether in the longer term Russia will be able to maintain this union is an oft debated issue, and it is here in the Caucasus that Russia will face the greatest challenges to its authority—

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not just in Chechnya but throughout the Caucasus where sporadic resistance to Russian control has wracked the region ever since Russia moved in a couple hundred years ago.

When I get back to town, I settle in at the same café that treated me so well after last week's ride. Once again, I lounge in the umbrella shade and watch the passing flow of humanity on the sunny walkway. It is an opportunity to repeat my experiment, and so I do. It is a different day of the week and a different hour, but in other respects the conditions of the experiment are the same—same location, same fine weather, same experimental design. I am even careful to order the same kind of beer. The results this time are: 23 men, 48 women, and 11 children. This time I do not adjust the figures—although I was sorely tempted by two young women who crossed the line a split second after the five minute time limit. To not count them seemed almost sacrilegious, but science is a cruel taskmaster.

The hard part of any experiment is to draw reasonable conclusions, and I am not sure that I can in this instance. The original hypothesis has been confirmed, of course—women greatly outnumber men on the streets of Kislovodsk—but why that should be so is a matter for a dedicated social scientist, not a dilettante like me. Perhaps a (male) graduate student would like to learn Russian, study regional history, and come here to do proper field investigation.

Late in the day I head on over to the Internet café to establish contact with the outside world. It seems that I am extraordinarily popular: I get 60-80 messages every day and most of them express such deep concern

about my wellbeing that they spend their whole time encouraging me to buy something that will help me with a problem that I didn't know I had. Buried in the list are a couple messages from Lilia and Marta, two contacts I have established in Moscow. I am hoping that one of them will be willing to show me around the city when I arrive there, but things have not progressed that far yet—although Lilia has given me her phone number and asked me to call when I get there. I am a little skeptical about this easy familiarity, however, since I don't really believe Lilia can carry on a conversation in English.

The most extraordinary message, though, is from Nancy who emanates her usual exuberance and in the process writes something that shows a level of subtlety that I would have thought beyond her capabilities. In my last letter to her, I found a pretext to invite her to the opera when the season starts in September. I wondered how she would handle this. She certainly would shy away from anything that smacks of commitment and I imagine she would avoid any situation that has the potential to expose her secret life. Going to the opera with me would not precipitate either of these eventualities, but it insinuates both. I wondered if she would commit herself one way or the other, or simply ignore the question. She actually found a way to answer it without putting herself at risk. Here are her words: "You remind me of the high school junior who asks his girlfriend to the prom in February. Daring, but intriguing. On that note, I tentatively accept." Ah, the subtlety of it! Maugham would be impressed. She has said just the right thing to make me feel special, and she has done it without violating truth. But what has she really said? "Maybe."

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But in saying it the way she did she permits me a sense of hopefulness that is at least as intense as the opposite feeling of hopelessness that a young child gets whenever a parent says “We’ll see.”

Day 31

Whenever I am about to take a flight to some distant location, I suffer from an irrational anxiety that I will miss the flight. I know that this is unlikely, I know that the airline will accommodate me if it happens, but the anxiety lingers nonetheless. In a similar fashion, I have become anxious about my hotel bill. What will happen if I cannot convert my traveler's checks? What if getting that kind of cash against a credit card proves impossible? What if the value of the dollar suddenly drops off the radar screen? What if there is some secret but substantial charge that I have yet to find out about? I keep forgetting that everybody wants money and will do everything they can to help me give them mine. I keep forgetting that there are so many more interesting things to think about. The anxiety has begun to eat away at me, though, so I resolve that today I will pay my hotel bill up through Saturday morning when Irina and I plan to take an overnight excursion to Mt. Elbrus.

The first task is to get traveler's checks converted to cash, and it should be a straightforward process. There is an exchange office in the hotel that offers this service

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during regularly scheduled hours that begin sometime between ten and eleven in the morning, depending on when the operant arrives for work. Passport and traveler's checks are all I need to effect the transaction, but when I hand them over it initiates a process that involves magnifying lenses and a minute examination that lasts for just under half an hour. I go take a shower during the interlude. I don't, actually, but I could have since the attendant informed me that he would need twenty minutes and would call me when he was ready for us to move on to the next stage. When my moment arrives, I return to the window and the attendant passes through the traveler's checks for me to sign. I begin to sign and date them, but as I complete the very first one he draws my attention to the fact that I have failed to fill out the date in the precise manner asked. I wrote 26/6/03 when he had clearly requested that I write 26.06.2003. I take note of this profound difference and proceed to date the subsequent checks in the proper manner.

The whole time, he is standing up with his head against the glass, carefully watching each move of the pen. I tend to write small and secretively and slowly, so the poor man must have had a neck cramp by the time I was done. Still, I am having problems of my own: what with the very close examination of every letter I write and the unfortunate initial experience with improper dating, I become nervous that I will fail to write my signature properly and that a crisis will ensue in which the full weight of the Russian state falls upon my head.

When I finish, he tells me that the money will be forthcoming shortly and that I should take a seat. By now, this is something I know how to do. I see him

examining my signature and then scurrying over to the hotel front desk, evidently to obtain the cash that I hope shortly to return to the front desk when I pay my bill. After a further twenty minutes, the final, irrevocable step is taken: he gives me my money and we part amicably.

It is my experience that this incident is different in degree but not in kind from that which will occur in most overseas countries when a person attempts a banking transaction. The degree of paperwork, the number of steps required, and the amount of time consumed would be sufficient to drive any reputable business into bankruptcy. For more reasons than I care to list, I view American banks as an abomination, but at least they know how to complete a transaction. This alone must contribute mightily to America's continuing ability to compete in the global marketplace.

Paying the hotel bill is complicated as well, but by comparison it is a cakewalk. The real difficulties start when I try to purchase excursion tickets for Irina and me to go to Mt. Elbrus. The excursions are single day affairs that require departure from Kislovodsk at 6:00 AM, a four hour drive to reach the destination, a four hour period for on-site enjoyment (including lunch), and a four hour ride back home.

This is uncivilized, so I design an alternate plan. The excursions go only on Saturdays and Sundays, but there are hotels there at the base of the mountain. I figure we can go on Saturday morning, stay at a hotel that night and return the following afternoon. The cost for the excursion is only about \$9 per person, so I propose to the excursion agent that I buy two round trip tickets for

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each of us and we just use half of each one. What could be more reasonable?

“Impossible!” the agent tells me, and a long period of cross examination ensues in which I extract bits and pieces of half-understood information that when synthesized (in true intelligence agency fashion) suggest that the impossibility rests on two insurmountable problems. The first is that no tour company exists—only a battery of independently owned tour vans that have no identifying marks on them. Since large numbers of these vans go on each of the tour days, it would be unlikely that Irina and I could locate the van in which we are expected to return on Sunday. This does sound like a problem, but not of the impossible variety. Then, however, he effectively slams the door with his second objection: as a foreigner I would need a permit to stay in a hotel there, and you can’t get a permit in Kislovodsk. Hours later, I bring Irina to the scene to see if she can sort this all out, and she does make an animated effort to put the case—not to the tour agent who is away on break but to the hotel manager who with the assistance of a secretary eventually confirms to a reluctantly acquiescent Irina that an overnight stay indeed is impossible. The permit problem revolves around the fact that Mt. Elbrus is located in the newly created autonomous republic of Kabardino-Balkaria which, indeed, does have independent authority to demand such a permit. We are left with no choice but the one day sprint, but at least the excursion price will be half.

Irina is disappointed that our trip to Mt. Elbrus must be so brief, but the pleasures of the moment are far more compelling for her than the storm clouds of the future

or the rain puddles of the past. In this respect, she is refreshingly different from most people—and certainly most women. The plan for us today turns out to be the ideal distraction from the frustrations associated with Mt. Elbrus. I propose that we go out and wander around the town, but with me walking and her on the little green bicycle. She immediately understands what I am saying and the effect is comparable to what one might expect if I were to give her a diamond necklace. Her face is transformed, she emits a squeal of delight, and before the possibility of any second thoughts she rushes off to select the right attire for the occasion. In this particular department no one can be more competent, and in less time than it would take a man she appears, ready to go. She has on running shoes, thin black tights, a bright, flower print blouse, and her yellow tennis visor. The remarkable thing, though, is not her careful attention to appearances; other women have been known to indulge a similar vanity. The remarkable thing is her eagerness to get back on the machine that unceremoniously dumped her a week ago. Most women are not particularly open-minded about this sort of thing; one bad experience usually is enough to convince them that a second try would be equivalent to putting your hand on the hot electric coil of a range for a second time just to make sure that the first experience was representative. Irina is at heart an adventurer, and this is a rare, rare thing in a woman. She might not be a bad boat mate after all.

I try to make sure that this time she gets proper instruction on the bicycle, but she will have none of it. Her impatience is palpable, and in no time at all, she is rolling up and down side streets while I adhere

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to the main avenue. Eventually, we make our way to the central pedestrian mall where the broad walkway is ideal for cycling (as long as you don't run anyone over). Eventually we stop for a drink at a street café, and when Irina finishes before me I suggest she go off on her own while I finish my beer (and keep an eye on the sex imbalance among pedestrians). No persuasion is necessary; she is up and pedaling before you can say "that woman's blouse must have shrunk." She discreetly leaves me enough time to down a second beer—or was she really having that much fun?

Day 32

The streets of Kislovodsk are clean and presentable. There are small signs of neglect and abandoned repairs scattered around—things like crumbling steps and missing manhole covers and sagging second story porches—but overall the city leaves you feeling that things function reasonably smoothly here and that conditions are steadily improving. There are few residuals from the suffocating uniformity that so characterized the Soviet era. Poverty does not expose itself in any sort of raw form. In short, the place has the look of a middle class town that went through hard times but is rebounding quite nicely. It looks like it has a future.

There are all sorts of reasons to think that Kislovodsk is not representative of conditions in the rest of the country and the fact that it is a resort town located on the national periphery are but two. Even so, I suspect that it *is* representative. It may be more affluent than is typical, but my guess is that other places in Russia also are showing similar signs of attention to cleanliness, upgrading of facilities, and improvement of services.

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I hold this view because I think it likely that the Russian people will not be victims. Victims do not think of the future—only the past—and their minds are busy calculating losses rather than evaluating prospects. But the people I have met here have an aim in mind. They are purposeful and they are motivated and they carry with them none of the passive lethargy associated with unbearable psychic oppression. Their aims may not be admirable—their pursuits often unlawful or unethical—but the point is that they have a direction and they are on the move. This is a sophisticated society, well educated and not at all uncomfortable with the notion of individualism. Unlike during the latter stages of the Soviet era, there is now a willingness to work. In short, Russia has not been overwhelmed by her past. It is recreating itself and the only question is what will result from this unleashed ambition.

For a few years after the collapse of Communism the West was mostly concerned that the new Russia might spiral down into unearthly chaos, raising the specter of political disintegration, ethnic conflict, and nuclear terrorism. Chaos continues to be a concern, but if it happens now it will be precipitated by the release of too much energy in too short a period of time, not the negative fallout from nihilism. Of course the cause of chaos does not alter the unpleasant nature of its consequences, but this new cause does at least raise the hope that an alternative could arise. In a nihilistic world it is hard to think of any alternative to chaos, but in a world of competing ambitions there are at least historical examples of chaos averted. What will help in this regard is that the Russian people now appreciate the worldly

power that accrues to a society bent on effectuating commonly held ideals.

Few people remember that for over fifty years the Leninist vision for the country was unbelievably successful. When the Communists seized power in the early 1920's Russia was a backward place and by European standards had been for centuries. For all its evils, this revolutionary Marxist movement transformed the country by educating the populace and forcing industrialization. In but a part of a single lifetime, the Communist Party turned a country of ignorant peasants into an industrial powerhouse. The conversion was so miraculously rapid that it gave the Russian people the confidence to believe in themselves, and scared the Capitalist West half to death.

Think of it: a country that in 1920 was the unwanted stepchild of Europe had by 1960 become the second most powerful in the world. In the process, it avoided the Great Depression, beat the Germans, developed nuclear weapons, and led the way into space. These are not trivial accomplishments and a society without substance never would have achieved them.

The sudden collapse of the Communist regime has led many Americans to the facile conclusion that the wicked witch is dead and that no ghost shall haunt her passing. The premise here is that Communism was an unmitigated evil and that the Russian people finally came to realize it. The Russian people did in fact eventually conclude that the evils of Communism were too great to any longer command their belief in its ideals, but we should not forget that this perverted system is what finally, after centuries of struggle, gave the Russian people

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a respected place in the world. Russians will not forget this, and what is likely to survive in their minds is not the brutal reality of state power forcing conformity but the precious ideal that all people deserve a place in the sun. No earthly system has ever been faithful to the ideals that spawned it and the Communist betrayal was just a little more sudden and a little more total than most others.

The Russian people know that were it not for Communism there would be no sitting at the table with the Americans. They never will return to this discredited system, but its ideals will haunt them as a ghost and it is perfectly sensible for them to believe that their dogged adherence to the principle of social equity is what gave them the moral force to become a global leader. They know what that position felt like, and they believe they know what got them there. As the trauma of the Soviet collapse dissipates they will rebuild—using different blueprints, perhaps, but employing the skills and techniques that served them so well the first time around.

Global capitalism is a dynamo, the driving force of which few can any longer deny. But will it share its benefits with the dispossessed of the world, with the majority of the earth's population that lives on the margin of survival and has no future? If it cannot do so—and do so quickly—the obscene injustice that this cleavage represents will inevitably resurrect the search for a more equitable system and a new movement will be born, different in name and appearance but still true to the principles of its ghostly mother.

Day 33

No sooner have I finished breakfast and settled into a lobby sofa with my notebook for an hour or two than I hear a voice from across the room saying, “What are you writing?” I look up and a short distance away is seated a woman of modest attractiveness, sporting an acceptable hue of red hair and exuding a sense of poised control. My mind is incapable of quickly embracing many alternatives at once, and the first two that come along are that (1) she is trying to pick me up or (2) she wants to practice her English. From the looks of her it is not the latter.

I suppose it is a sign of my tawdry character that I cannot accept her entrée as nothing more than a casual attempt to enter into a diverting conversation. When I was young I was too painfully shy to initiate a conversation without a compelling reason. Although I am now well beyond that phase, the habit of only talking for a reason has remained and so I expect a similar behavior from others. Every day I hear countless people all around me for whom talk is an end in itself, but in spite of all this evidence I persist in my illusion that all people who talk

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with me have an objective in mind. I admit that mine is a misguided mentality, but it does have a pleasing consequence: all conversations are meaningful, even if for many the meaning never reveals itself to me.

When I answer the query by telling her that I am writing a book, she wants to know what kind of book, and this I find hard to explain in terms that she can understand. Since we are an inconvenient distance apart and I am obviously struggling to hear, she evicts the young lady from the adjacent seat and invites me to join her. The girl-woman goes to the couch that I have just abandoned and I take my place beside Svetlana, whose daughter Alina has just given it to me.

We engage in the usual sort of preliminary talk in which the answers to questions reveal more about how a person thinks than who she is or what she does. Eventually, Svetlana suggests we have a cup of coffee together and the three of us go into the hotel dining room that I have so recently left. At this point I begin to sense a certain disturbing dynamic that at first resides in a kind of twilight between the conscious and the subconscious, but eventually takes clear hold of me and becomes expressible: the mother and daughter are a partnership equally as much as they are a family—and I am more attracted to the daughter than I am to the mother.

Svetlana is not unappealing, but I know from experience that my interest is a reaction to her having targeted me, and that it will quickly wane. Why I should find myself becoming fixated on Alina is an altogether different matter, and it calls into question my presumption that pornography merely titillates

and does not have the power to lure me into fascinated entrapment.

Alina is physically developed and the process appears to have pretty much run its course, but it is also clear that the process has been a very recent one. Naturally, she is tall for her age, although still substantially shorter than her mother whose height surpasses my own. She is pixie-like in her features and her limbs are suggestively long. She understands much of what I say to her mother, but she will not—or does not—speak any English. Whenever I occasionally direct a question at her or make a statement to her, her mother translates the response.

All three of us order coffee and while we are sitting there Svetlana finds a way to tell me that Alina likes champagne. It is also clear that Alina has learned the art of womanly dress for her simple clothes do the most for her budding assets. When I ask her age, I discover that she is twelve.

Let me at this point divert to a recent e-mail exchange between Nancy and me. The age difference between us is simply scandalous, and when I write to her telling her that I had started writing a book about the trip and that she might not be completely pleased to learn that she was in it, the following exchange took place:

Nancy: "It's not another Lolita is it?"

Spike: "Nabokov is a great writer and Lolita is high literature, so why not something along those lines? By the way, you're not *that* young are you?"

Nancy: "You're right. I'm not twelve. Would it make a difference?"

I considered a number of retorts but finally decided to allow her question to stand as the last word on the

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subject. Events transpiring right now are leading me to conclude that life may leave fewer questions unanswered than I have always supposed.

I told Svetlana about my bicycle trip around Corsica, but to say that she was unimpressed is like saying stones can't swim. When I suggested that Alina might like taking a ride on the bike, however, the response was highly positive. When we finished our coffee, Svetlana made motions suggestive of paying the bill, but I picked it up. We went out and gave the bicycle a spin, and in the process Svetlana insisted on the first turn; Alina had to wait for her mother to finish. After the novelty of it all had become a little less acute, we put the bicycle away and Svetlana invited me to walk around town with them. I agreed, naturally, and as we left the hotel Alina—through her mother as interpreter—proposed that we all go swimming together. Sadly, the pool already was closed for I would have been receptive to such a diverting hour or two.

My understanding was that we were going for a walk in the town center, but Svetlana immediately proposed we take a cab to get there. We took the cab. En route, a discussion with the driver ended with our changing plans and going to a film developing lab instead. I paid the taxi driver and we went in to leave a roll of film for one-hour developing. Svetlana asked me to pay and I did. We walked down the hill to a market square of temporary shops where a singing bird and a growling gorilla, powered by Eveready, caught the attention of daughter and mother. I was successfully appealed to once again. Only a few stalls farther on, Svetlana saw a towel she wanted and made the standard plea. This time

I said no, and we moved on until just around the corner a purse caught her eye and she asked once more. Once again, I said no. Finally, we left the market and I insisted we walk along the street for a while before picking up the photos. They took this slight and temporary loss of control with reasonable grace, and during one of our sidewalk conversations it transpired that Alina likes to sing Karaoke and does it many nights in a nearby bar—and left hanging is the unasked question: “Wouldn’t I like to come listen to her?”

We returned for the photos and headed back to the hotel. En route, Svetlana revealed that she had in mind a stop at the post office, where, she informed me, she hoped to get money wired from her Moscow account because she is all out. Just before we got there, I happened to tell them I would be in Moscow next weekend. Alina spoke to her mother and this was translated to me as a suggestion that they give me their Moscow phone number, even though only Alina would be there; she will return while Svetlana continues to holiday. The post office gambit yielded no money for Svetlana, but while in the building I stopped by at the Internet café to check on a Moscow hotel booking that I had made. Svetlana at this point suggested I stay with her sister and family; they have a spare room and Svetlana offered to call them. I declined the hospitality. As we left the post office, Svetlana touched me for 200 rubles so that they could eat lunch before going back later on to try again for money. Alina said something, and Svetlana translated it as “That won’t be much of a lunch.” I said goodbye and we went our separate ways.

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How can material things on this small scale mean so much to anybody? Wouldn't it be more satisfying to work out one big sting rather than engaging in the demeaning practice of constantly effecting small touches? Whatever they are up to, I get the distinct feeling that Svetlana knows that I am more interested in her daughter than in her. It is almost as if that is part of the plan.

Day 34

The excursion to Mt. Elbrus was classic tour group stuff: a Germanic schedule, endless interpretive commentary through a corrupt sound system, refreshment breaks at inferior eateries that are understaffed by somebody's relatives. I don't half mind these sorts of arrangements, as long as they don't happen more than once a year. They do give you a break from planning your own entertainment and they are (for very good reasons) surprisingly cheap. Furthermore, as long as you only resort to them occasionally they provide an excellent opportunity to feel superior to your fellow travelers who most likely do this sort of thing regularly. The world is inhabited by two sorts of people, is it not?—the great majority who regularly rely on tours for their travel experience and the select few who wouldn't dream of it. To belong to the second group is of course a blessing and to occasionally find yourself thrown in with that other class confirms you in your feeling of superiority.

Last year (due to unavoidable circumstances, of course) I signed up for a week-long tour through Yunnan province in southwestern China. This turned out to

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actually be more adventurous than if I had done the trip on my own. I spoke no Chinese and there was nobody in the group who spoke English (I thought, until a man revealed himself on the last day). I did not know our schedule, not even what towns we would be staying in each night, and I hadn't the slightest idea when we would stop to eat—or indeed stop at all. It was necessary to avoid all liquids during the day because there was no way of knowing how many hours it would be until the next toilet break, and I have reached the age where this sort of information is essential to the avoidance of social embarrassment. During those brief periods when we were allowed to escape from the bus there was no way for me to know the prearranged reboarding time and so I had to keep a fellow traveler in view at all times. If I were miraculously able to find a toilet during these brief periods of release, I had to hurry the process along so as not to lose my contact and risk having the bus leave without me.

Tour excursions by and large are far more exhausting than bicycling alone around Corsica because the organizers want you to have no reason to think you did not get your money's worth. You are driven to the brink of collapse, and I can confidently assert that that brink is located somewhere in China. We would start each day around six in the morning and rarely would we reach our hotel for the night until after ten in the evening. There was one particularly memorable occasion when we arrived after midnight (not yet having eaten dinner) and were marshaled to breakfast at 5:00 AM. When it comes to tour grouping, the Chinese are world class.

This single day excursion to Mt. Elbrus was, by comparison, a walk in the park, and its fifteen hour duration is hardly worth mentioning. Nobody seems to know what ever happened to the two passengers who got left behind at Mt. Elbrus. We waited an hour for them, but eventually the tour guide decided to cut his losses and get on with it. At that point, the couple probably hadn't the courage to face the angry mob anyway, so better to leave them to their own devices.

A trip to the mountains is always an uplifting experience and, to put it simply, the bigger the mountains the more uplifting it is. From base to peak, the Caucasus Range has a rather grand scale to it, and so being exposed to them gives you a pretty good high.

Much has been written about the glorious nature of mountain travel and I would prefer to avoid adding to its repetitiveness. There is, however, one way in which my experience with the Caucasus differs noticeably from all other mountain ranges that I have ever encountered: they are hidden from view until you are actually in among them. Most mountain ranges rise so abruptly that you can see them from afar, giving a certain ragged distinctiveness to the horizon's profile against the sky, but the Caucasus always seems to be just beyond the next hill until, to your surprise, the hills have become mountains. This incorrectly suggests that the main peaks are simply the hills at a larger scale when in fact the string of core peaks is a jagged eruption of rock and ice that no one would ever mistake for hills. As you progress up a river valley towards this region, the landscape is an undulating but gently rising bedding of nearly horizontal sedimentary rocks that have become notched and excavated by the

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fluvial downcutting of the small stream running through your valley. The valley sides obstruct more distant vistas and gradually become ever more imposing fortresses until the final approach when you break through to the core and the whole scene changes. There, tectonic creativity and glacial destructiveness have collaborated to write an alpine symphony.

Whereas the main range of the Caucasus is a jumble of overthrust faults and folds that form a backbone of very rugged and irregular peaks rising to around 13,000', Mt. Elbrus has the classic simplicity of a volcano and occupies a position slightly to the north of the cordillera, but connected to it. Its twin peaks tower over the others, haughtily looking down on them from their more distinguished elevation of 18,000'.

We were passengers on ramshackle trams that run up the southwest apron of this colossus (Kislovodsk is almost three miles lower), and our ascent topped out in a world of glaciers and snow at an elevation of about 11,000'. From there on up, the world is white.

There was a short ski lift operating up here, and it provided access to a rather unappealing, rock hemmed, poorly pitched run littered with dirty snow. On this feeble excuse for glacier skiing, snowboarders were behaving in their usual fashion. All around was a sweeping continuance of snow and ice that offered an abundance of clean and attractive alternatives, but to get there would require work. I suppose that even pigs in a mud wallow often get to look out on captivating scenery.

Day 35

Last night Irina asked if we could go out with the bicycle again today, which of course means that she would like to ride the bicycle while I walk. I am happy to accommodate her desire because there have been few times I can remember when a woman I was with was able to enjoy herself so utterly as Irina does when she is pedaling around. She does not cycle fast, but she wanders up and down side streets, treating each as a miniature exploratory expedition that ends with a return to the main route that I am following. The pleasure she takes from this does not seem less than that of a dog out for a walk with its master, and off the leash.

I think I can understand her joy. There is something liberating about silently rolling along much faster than you can walk and yet having to do so little work. As I was cycling around Corsica, I often discovered that I was smiling at the freedom of it all. It got me to thinking that I should spend more time planning and executing bicycle trips since they so evidently make me happy. How fine it would be, for example, to cycle around Lake Titicaca with stops to explore Tihuanaco and to motor

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across the lake. Or perhaps I should take a trip around Jamaica to see its emerald hills and tropical sands. Here is another possibility: with an open jaw airline ticket, one could fly to Munich and follow the route of the Danube all the way to the Black Sea, and then return home from Bucharest or Istanbul.

The idea of following a river downstream is appealing because there are almost always roads that run next to the water, that bridge it frequently, and that minimize the need to deal with hills. I do like the challenge and grandeur of rugged terrain, but after Corsica perhaps it is time for something a little less confrontational.

The most relaxing bicycle tour I ever took was a spin through the Greek Isles. The trip occurred in early fall when the tourists had already left and the winter rains had not yet arrived. The routine works something like this. From Piraeus (the port for Athens) you and your bike take a ferry to any island that strikes your fancy. The islands are so close together that the ferry ride will not be more than an hour or two. As soon as you arrive, pedal around the port town until you find reasonable lodgings, and plan on spending two nights there. Rest up, have a nice dinner, and take an evening stroll. Then, the next morning set off without luggage on a bicycle circuit of the island which because of its small size usually only requires a few hours of pedaling. This leaves you with plenty of time to poke around small villages, relax on isolated beaches, and wander through archeological sites. After the second night, take a ferry to a different island and start the process all over again.

Over the course of about ten days, this routine will cleanse the system of all those toxic thoughts and feelings

that have built up since the last time you were truly free. You can even make the mistake of taking too much luggage along on the trip because the ferries do most of the transporting for you. When you get back home you will have the further satisfaction of knowing that many subsequent Greek Island trips are an option because there are dozens of islands and on a single ten day trip it would be hard to see more than four or five of them.

It is a truism in travel that the less luggage the better, but the wisdom of such a philosophy is never more appropriate than when traveling by bicycle. When you go backpacking you have little choice but to load yourself up—the tent, the sleeping bag, cooking equipment, heavy boots, and so on—but if you take a bicycle trip and plan spending each night in a modest inn, then the need for luggage evaporates. What do you need besides a change of clothes to walk around in at the end of the day? If you take along two or three changes of sox and underwear, that will be ample. A couple shirts, a pair of pants, a bathing suit that can double as shorts and a fleece will about complete the packing task. Throw in a K-way for rain protection (you're not as lucky as I am) and add your toiletries before going out the door.

One final thought. You might consider leaving your spouse or significant other at home. The complications associated with excess baggage are minor in comparison to those brought on by excess people. An extra sweater is dead weight capable of only passive resistance but an extra person is live weight whose resistance will be anything but passive. It may be that the two of you never disagree about anything, but in that case you really do need to spend some time alone developing a separate

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identity. Disagreement is a healthy stimulant that keeps any relationship between two people from collapsing into intolerable boredom, but on vacation you should avoid such drugs. I should have thought that the whole purpose of a vacation is to find respite from the constant compromises of daily life.

Nearly universal agreement coalesces around the myth that “no man is an island,” and that we need to spend our lives depending on each other. I wonder whose hand we will hold as we pass into the next world. When our parents die on us or our best friend betrays us, as is wont to happen, I wonder if our unmet need becomes so great that we wither up and perish. Actually, I don’t wonder; I know very well that we will survive these adversities and find a way to carry on. For me, the image of each person as an island is far more compelling than the specious disputation of its reality. I can concede that we all originate from the same source and that love has the capacity to console and encourage us, but to me the ocean that gives definition to all islands *is* that love, and the islands—no matter how they differ in shape and configuration—are all part of the same parent material. Given this common foundation and the distinctive aspect of each island, it strikes me as perfectly fitting to view each person as a separate piece of land surrounded by the sea, some in isolation and others with neighbors nearby.

Take a trip alone. It will not kill you or make you less human, and it will give you a chance to think about things.

* * *

In the evening, I received a phone call from Svetlana proposing that we get together tomorrow and asking when I would be free. I explained that I was going to be playing tennis at eleven and that Irina and I would be getting together again in the evening. She pressed me to identify a time when I would be available, and I said that I should have some time after three. She wondered if it could not be any earlier and I conceded that I might be free by two. She said she would be waiting for me in the hotel lobby around one thirty. This presented a problem since I was not sure when my tennis engagement with Irina would end and I did not relish the idea of the four of us being together as a cozy little group in the lobby. Oh, well—I'll worry about tomorrow when it gets here.

Day 36

I awoke this morning in the middle of a dream about Beverly, my girlfriend when I went off to college. She was a black haired, Jewish girl with luscious lips, flashing eyes, and a ready smile. In the dream, we met by chance after all these years and as we looked at each other tears of regret began to stream down our aging faces.

Irina and I were supposed to play tennis at eleven, but we were nearly an hour late getting started and this greatly distressed Victor, the tennis pro, not because of scheduling problems but because there had been two Americans playing who he thought I would like to meet. Victor is a talkative, gregarious, aggressive man with a strong voice and a strong will. He is proud of his limited English and uses it on every occasion he can create. Irina seemed to dislike him, but I cannot be sure of that; she hardly reacted when he spoke to her and her face was noncommittal when she finally answered him.

Irina's backhand is stronger and more reliable than her forehand. Her strokes on both sides are good, but if she gets to the ball at slightly the wrong time she is not able to adjust very well. Her tennis is better than

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mine, but by substituting tenacity for technique I am able to stay in the match and exasperate her as much as she exhausts me. Over the course of an hour we manage to bring ourselves to the desired level of depletion and a thoroughly satisfying sense of satiation leaves us enervated on this warm and sunny July day.

The years that I have spent teaching skiing have left me with the absurd notion that even though I know very little about tennis I can detect the flaws in a player's game and design a training program that would help overcome them. I thoroughly believe this, but at least I know better than to make any suggestions to Irina. She was not particularly receptive to good guidance on how to use the bicycle so I don't suppose she would be thrilled to hear tennis suggestions from someone who cannot play as well as she does. It is too bad because I know I could help her.

After tennis, Irina indicates that she will return to her hotel and we make plans to get together in the evening. This happens in plenty of time to avoid the possibility of an awkward meeting with Svetlana, and so my unfortunate tendency to put off dealing with problems is reinforced once again. I am washing up in my room when Svetlana calls to tell me that she and Alina are waiting in the lobby.

The three of us walk into town, and after a nice lunch (that Svetlana talked me into) we stroll along the pedestrian promenade. I have a digital camera with me and Alina becomes fascinated by the way you can take a photo and then immediately look at it. She motions that she wants to take a picture of her mother and me so we organize ourselves looking appropriately friendly—more

or less cheek to cheek, but with me feeling rather small since Svetlana turns out to be a good two or three inches taller than I am. While holding our pose as Alina fiddles with the camera, Irina walks by from behind. When she looks back, her expression is sober and chilling. I am momentarily thunderstruck, but eventually regain my capacity to breathe, talk, and perform other normal functions. I then realize that it would be a really good idea to speak with Irina at this point. We can't speak to each other, actually, but an effort to do so might make our evening meeting a little less intimidating. I eventually manage to catch up with her and gradually, very gradually, slow her forward progress to a stop. I make introductions and Irina and Svetlana begin talking to each other in Russian. Of course I cannot understand a word, but the brief conversation has all the cool formality of an exchange between two medieval knights before they enter into battle. Eventually, Irina says goodbye and walks away.

One good thing finally comes from this rendezvous with Svetlana and Alina: we end up returning to my hotel where an hour of monitoring Alina riding the bicycle finally cures me of the illusion that she is not a child.

* * *

After rejecting the idea of placating Irina with a present because I am not yet willing to admit guilt, I show up at her door in a very timely fashion. When she opens it for me, she allows me entrance with a look on her face that says, "I am only doing this because it is the civilized way to behave," and as I enter I am astonished to

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discover that she has on high heels, a black leather mini-skirt, a low cut, black, filigreed, sleeveless top, and a very fine perfume.

The ensuing discussion—if you can call it that—is quite protracted and involves a movement pattern in which (1) Irina faces Spike and makes her point as best she can, (2) Irina turns away and walks to another part of the room, (3) Spike hesitates for a greater or lesser period of time before approaching her in her new location, (4) Spike uses the translating dictionary to construct a two or three word response—and then the process starts all over again.

The culminating event is when Irina hands me the bracelet I gave her and the photo we had taken together at Mt. Elbrus and stalks off to the other side of the room. I take this literally, of course—I set the items down and head for the door. But before I reach it Irina intercepts me and initiates a new line of argument. Now at last I no longer simply know, but actually believe, that the whole idea here is that I am supposed to seduce her. For someone with so little practice, I think it went quite well. Of course, Irina helped me through it.

The odd thing is that, in somewhat less explicit terms, this is exactly what Svetlana told me was going to happen.

Day 37

Today is Pay-Attention-To-Irina Day and it passes quite smoothly with only the occasional aftershock following yesterday's earthquake. One of Irina's arguments last night was that she has been waiting around for me while I supposedly write or do work on the Internet, when in fact I have been spending my time "taking strolls" with countless other women. This line of attack is always very hard to counter because you can't really say: "No, no. I have been taking strolls with only one other woman." I decide that the best thing to do is fill her day with me so that there are no significant periods of separation to arouse her insecurities.

Although I have no interest in Svetlana, Irina was perfectly justified in her fury. I felt pretty guilty, after all, when she passed us on the street. Still, Irina used a number of outrageous arguments to express her displeasure and, although this is to be expected, one of them left me with an uncomfortable sense that she is by nature overly possessive.

While we were at Mt. Elbrus, a cute young woman who was traveling with her mother made a comment to

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me in English. I responded and the moment passed. Later, as we were waiting to board the bus to move to a new location, Irina ended up talking with this same girl in Russian for a few minutes. In the mid-afternoon when everyone was waiting to ride the tram down a mountainside, I found myself next to this same girl and we started to talk. I learned that she is a university student in Moscow and that she often does these holiday excursions with her mother because her father usually is away on business in the United States. During our exchange, Irina wandered off to the other side of the tram terminal. Eventually, a man came over to me and motioned for me to follow him. I broke off my conversation with the Moscow girl and he led me first to Irina, and then the two of us through a door out onto the loading platform. We were there alone for a few minutes before the door to the loading platform on the other side was opened and our tour group began to pour through and join us in our wait. Since Irina and I were on the platform first we ended up at the head of the line, and when the tram arrived we boarded first. The Moscow girl and her mother, however, were at the back of the crowd and had to wait for a later tram. This whole sequence of events struck me as rather odd, but since such incomprehensible things happen all the time when you are traveling, I quickly dismissed it from my mind.

During our evening of reconciliation, however, Irina contended that my talking with the Moscow girl was humiliating for her and that a Kavkaz man had expressed sympathy to her for the shame I had subjected her to. In retrospect, it seems likely that this is the same man who broke off my conversation, led me to Irina, and escorted

the two of us onto the loading platform. Either I had indeed engaged in a socially unacceptable behavior and a local man had offered to help Irina by removing me from the situation or Irina had been unhappy with my lack of undivided attention and orchestrated the extraction process herself. Given the rather liberal patterns of social interaction that prevail among Russians, I lean toward the latter theory. On the other hand, the Kavkaz man was likely Muslim and that would cast a totally different light on the issue. It is all so confusing that I don't really know what to think.

On second thought, I think I *do* know what to think. In her letters, Irina often teased me by suggesting that I must really want a stable of women and not just one. She has also openly commented that 400 men have responded to her Internet ad and that during the past year she has carried on correspondence with ten of them. Considering we started writing to each other last October, she must have been writing to others at the same time she was writing to me, and this suggests the kind of "liberal" attitude I am talking about. I think it is safe to assume that Irina is not Muslim and only would have accepted an offer of social assistance (isn't this a better use of the phrase?) for distinctly non-Muslim ends.

* * *

An odd thing happens when Irina and I take an afternoon swim in the hotel pool. I pay for us to use the pool and immediately after our swim she comes to my room to take a bath while I go back down to the lobby to talk with a young man about renting a second bicycle for

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a few hours. After I return to the room, Irina heads back to her hotel and I set out for the Internet café. When I arrive there, I discover that all the larger bills are missing from my wallet and I realize that Irina is the only one who could have taken them. I decide to not mention it to her when we get together in the afternoon for another outing and see how she handles the whole thing. We return to the large and lovely city park that we spent a few hours in a couple days ago—once again with me on foot and her on wheels. This is a good time for me to reflect on the situation and I ruefully conclude that when Russian women get angry they don't screw around. I experience a wave of relief because for a relatively minor price I now know I have the freedom to dump Irina without feeling guilty—a course of action that is likely but not certain. A little wave of anxiety occasionally passes over me when I contemplate the slender possibility that she might try to abscond with the bicycle as well, but she seems so happy and so oblivious that I immediately dismiss this idea each time it enters my mind. Only at the end of the walk does it dawn on me that I left my clothes in the changing room during our swim and that someone could have rifled through my wallet at that time. This quickly becomes the more likely scenario in my mind and I no longer have a convenient cover should I decide to end this affair with Irina. Later, I discover that traveler's checks also are missing from the wallet, and that pretty much establishes Irina's innocence—and exposes my excessively suspicious nature.

Day 38

There now is beginning to appear a certain sadness in Irina's demeanor. Her usual gay buoyancy is interrupted by periods of introspection and for the first time she mentioned last night that she will miss me when I leave. I have to confess that I am beginning to equivocate in my earlier judgment of her and that it may not be as easy to dismiss her from my mind as I thought it would be. She is hefty. She is simple-minded. She is aging. She expects to be treated like a princess and she seems susceptible to intense jealousy. But even so, even so . . . She is open and direct. She cannot sustain a bad humor and she likes to give as much as she gets. She physically responds to any touch I give her and she wants to be active all the time. And she is accommodating—easy to get along with. She demands nothing, asks for nothing—except that I not take strolls with other women, which in my less selfish moments I recognize is not entirely unreasonable. If only I felt I could trust women this whole decision making process would be much easier.

A little before breakfast, I settle into my usual lobby sofa and within five minutes Svetlana and Alina appear.

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They invite me to have breakfast with them, which of course means that I would be buying their breakfast for them. Svetlana previously got me to spend more money on them in three hours that I have spent on Irina in three weeks. I suppose that is a testimony to how avaricious Svetlana is—and how stingy I am. Mostly, though, it is a commentary on Irina. I coldly decline the invitation and explain that I want to be fair to Irina. I feel a little like Winnie the Pooh when he got himself stuck in the honey pot.

The last few days of a long trip usually are a time when the present starts to get displaced by the future. Thoughts begin to turn to the things waiting to be done when the journey is over, and this diverts attention from the trip itself. Often I have been afflicted with this syndrome, but this time none of its symptoms have yet appeared. Part of the reason is that a week still remains before I land in Salt Lake City, but most of the explanation must be the dual climax that the final week promises to deliver. I will first spend a weekend in Moscow, where my opportunity to see things for the first time will be enhanced by the prospect of two blind dates. After that, a three day layover in Milan should give me enough time to cycle up around the legendary Lake Como, a character actor in my travel fantasies.

The possible blind dates are the results of an Internet search. A few weeks ago I sent e-mail messages to a number of Moscow women, and three of them responded. One, it turns out, will not be in Moscow when I am, but the other two will be and both have suggested that I call after I arrive. One is named Natalya, the other Lilia. Lilia looks quite attractive in her photo,

but Natalya writes English well and expresses more refined thoughts. Although Natalya's very poor photo makes her look terribly straight-laced, conservative, and out of style, I have higher hopes for getting along with her than with Lilia.

What is the best strategy here? Should I call them both right away and try to make separate arrangements for each of the two days or do I first call Natalya, try to meet with her on Saturday, and only then decide which option to exercise on Sunday? A seasoned womanizer would naturally choose the first plan knowing that the Sunday arrangements could always be cancelled if choice number one turns out to be a hit. I am relatively inexperienced at the sport, however, and doubt that I would have the courage to play my cards this way. A surfeit of choice is not something I am used to, and the situation is complicated by the skittishness I feel after my recent failure to properly coordinate the comings and goings of Irina and Svetlana.

It may be nothing more than rationalization on my part, but this effort to manage a variety of love interests seems a natural consequence of the practical approach to finding a partner that prevails in modern times. If the best method is to objectively evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a given possibility, familiarity with alternative possibilities is essential to a well-informed decision. It is impossible to employ reason without first making observations in the existing world and so a rational approach to choosing a partner inevitably requires the consideration and rejection of other potential partners. Presumably, the more such rejections the more reasonable becomes the final positive choice.

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How good would you be at buying a racehorse if you had not already bought some and put them through their paces? And don't you think you would be even better at the task if you had already purchased many?

This utilitarian approach to choosing a mate brings to an end the age of innocence. In the modern paradigm, innocence has no inherent value and its lack of functionality will drive it to extinction. Only that which is useful can avoid such a fate, and as long as people retain these values the extinctions will not be mourned.

To restrain capitalism is a violation of fundamental principles; its philosophical foundation does not allow for it. It is like referring to a partial death or to being a little pregnant. In the modern world of global economics, beauty serves no purpose—except as a specialty good purchased primarily by the wealthy—and its lack of function relegates it to obscurity. Only when people value beauty for its own sake does it thrive, but then capitalism chafes at the challenge to its dominion. Beauty, after all, is priceless, and what is capitalism to do with such immeasurability? Of course it is possible for capitalism to put a price on beauty—just as insurance companies put a price on human life—but whenever someone collects on the premium the gods weep and the stars begin to wonder whether they might not be next..

Beauty and utility—such incompatible values, each demanding total loyalty and neither capable of real compromise. The inflexibility of absolute values is a threat to their own survival. Nevertheless, I believe in them—at least some of them.

Day 39

Saying goodbye to Irina was a drawn out affair. In the morning we went for a walk in the city park for a couple hours, and when at midday it came time to leave for Mineral'nyye Vody she accompanied me. We sat together in silence as the taxi took us out of town and out across a corner of the vast and empty steppe that leaves nothing unexposed.

When we arrived at the airport, she helped me through the embarkation process. A visitor who stays at a hotel in Russia is supposed to be provided with some sort of document but my hotel failed to do its part and as a result I had to buy one from the airport officials at Mineral'nyye Vody. I would have understood neither the problem nor its solution if Irina had not been there to explain them to me (her English is expanding rapidly). Complications associated with matters of this sort seem to miraculously evaporate when an attractive woman smiles at the officials. In any event, Irina stayed with me until the last minute and our final separation in the middle of the afternoon saw me walk away through a long, narrow waiting room as she stood in the doorway waving. She

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did not cry; she smiled and waved as she retreated from the doorway across the sunny, open courtyard.

* * *

As I am waiting for the flight to load, I hear four different people speaking English—the most profligate use of the language to have come my way since leaving Moscow three weeks ago. Two of the conversers turn out to be Canadian women from Vancouver who have just finished climbing Mt. Elbrus. They depict the process as rather similar to a pilgrimage—steady streams of guided groups wending their way to the summit of a peak that demands a protracted ascent but presents no technical difficulties. They list twelve countries that were represented by their fellow climbers and they offer this as an indicator of the international appeal of Mt. Elbrus.

The long ascent must have been demanding and I respect what these two women have accomplished. The Quixotic nature of their undertaking is what most recommends it. I find it hard to be impressed by human achievements whose motivation is a desire for fame, fortune, power, or social approval—and that eliminates most of the things that get done in this world. But the person who serves an inner god has my respect. It does not matter how absurd or trivial the activity might be; the point is that it is a personal creation and that it has a pure motive. From my point of view, a goal must be irrational to have any meaning. Anything less and a human being is just another animal behaving selfishly.

When first I arrived in Moscow a few weeks ago I underestimated it, anticipating an awkward and clumsy

city with little guile and a surfeit of strength. Instead, I found myself grappling with a wily foe bent upon stripping me of both honor and assets. I had thought I might be treated with disdain, but it did not occur to me that I would be viewed as an adversary. I was unprepared for the match and lost round one in a spectacular fashion. This round begins somewhat better as I have learned a few of the opponent's tricks. In Mineral'nnye Vody, for example, there was a man wrapping suitcases and bags in heavy brown paper tied in place with twine. I had seen pieces of luggage so wrapped and had wondered what it was all about, but now it seems clear that the objective is to discourage breaking and entry. The bicycle arrived in Mineral'nnye Vody unscathed, but I did notice that the combination lock on its suitcase was on the setting that would allow it to be opened. I had remembered spinning the combination dials before checking the case with the airlines, but finally decided that this must have been a faulty recollection. Now, however, I am suspicious that a luggage handler gained entry but could find no individual item worth stealing. I pay forty rubles and get the case wrapped.

Another example of learning from experience is that I now know the two Sheremetievo airports are very close together and that getting into the city is just a matter of identifying the correct bus to take. I have prepared this time by purchasing a large scale map of Moscow that shows not just streets but also metro stops and bus routes. Whereas the first time around transportation between airports cost me seventy dollars, this time I manage to get from one airport to the other and then all the way into the city for twenty five cents.

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But eventually the city catches me with a left hook and I end the round wobbly in the knees. There is no problem locating the metro station nearest the hotel where I have booked a reservation, but my directions from that point on are obscure and it takes me nearly two hours to find the target. When I arrive around nine in the evening, the hotel has no reservation in my name and no available rooms. I get along well with the woman at the desk, and she is doing everything she can to help me, but we seem to be at an impasse until she realizes that she *may* have a room coming free in another hour or two. I am mystified as to why a hotel would have a late evening departure and I am left in awed admiration by the inveterate traveler who might decide at this hour to check out and spend the middle of the night searching for a different hotel room in Moscow.

At this point there appears on the scene a charismatic guest named Igor who takes me in his charge. He is a swarthy, paunchy businessman, gregarious but with a formal and gentlemanly manner. He is an Israeli citizen and looks Palestinian, but is Russian in background. He migrated to Israel as a child but then returned to Russia as an adult more or less permanently in 1995. He turns out to be the General Manager for Carlson Tourism, a major corporation in Russia. He talks with me, translates for me, buys me coffee, explains that a good room *will* be free in an hour or two (but at a slightly higher room rate than my reservation indicated), orders me a Johnny Walker Black Label, explains the problems of doing business in Russia, represents my interests to the front desk clerk, pronounces this an outstanding hotel because it only has twelve rooms and is very secure, buys

me a sandwich, gives me his business card and departs for the taxi that has been waiting for him since the beginning of our hour-long encounter. He has been staying here at the hotel “doing business,” but is now headed home to his apartment (located very nearby) where his dentist wife and dentist-to-be daughter are waiting for him. Could he be the mystery guest whose need for a room is not nocturnal?

The unanswered questions are cycling through my mind as I lie in bed watching the final minutes of a soccer match between Italy and France. Italy is clinging to a 1-0 lead, but France scores in the referee’s stoppage time and then scores again in overtime to win the game. I am disappointed because I had adopted Italy as my team. One more unanswered question to deal with: why should I care which of two unknown teams wins a match, the first 85 minutes of which I never saw?

Day 40

In the morning I call Lilia first, and her English turns out to be far better than expected. She has a soft voice and a noticeable accent, but we have no trouble at all communicating. Since she is very familiar with my hotel, she insists on meeting me here and we settle on eleven as an appropriate time to start the day.

When she appears, she is the kind of Russian tigress one often hears about but never expects to see. Blonde and green eyed, tall and slender with very long legs, she moves with svelte assurance and has about her the suggestion of stored energy. She talks softly and stands close to do it.

On her recommendation, we avoid the usual sights—Red Square, the Kremlin, St. Peters Church—and instead head for Lublyanka Prison which, unknown to most tourists, has been decommissioned and opened to the public. The dank interior hallways and the stark cells in which famous dissidents were hidden away are crushingly real, but Lilia's presence makes it hard for me to feel the full weight of the prison's oppressiveness.

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Lilia is a flight attendant with Aeroflot, and in the afternoon she suggests we go for lunch at the special restaurant operated exclusively for employees. It turns out to be located on the second floor of a large building that fronts on Leningradsky Prospekt. It has red carpets, high ceilings, and intricate gold chandeliers. Light pours in through massive windows. The atmosphere is gay and debonair and the sumptuous surroundings are diminished by neither excessive noise nor crowded conditions.

Lilia suggests that she order for the two of us and I am happy to leave my affairs in her hands. When lunch arrives, a bewildering variety of lewdly colored and oddly textured foods appears, all of which appeal to me in principle and most of which do in fact as well.

As the meal progresses and the wine bottle raises the time worn issue of half-empty vs. half-full, Lilia begins to reveal a curious tale. Her sister, it seems, is married to a wealthy Russian entrepreneur who recently has made his fortune in the fur trade—mink and sable mostly. The key to his success, evidently, has been overseas markets where the prices paid for such peculiarly Russian products are, by local standards, prodigious. But North America, it seems has remained beyond the grasp of Tantalus and he is anxious to have Lilia become the conduit for his version of Russo-American cooperation. Her assets are obvious—family loyalty, adequate English, frequent transatlantic travel, and peerless physical attributes for modeling the product. The problem is, there needs to be an American connection, one in which the business partner is in one way or another irrevocably bound to the family enterprise . . . I am slow to realize where all this

is heading and even when I do I cannot believe it. You shouldn't either because I am making it all up. The truth was simply too limp to stand on its own so I had to prop it up.

* * *

What actually happened is that I called Natalya first, and the woman who answered could speak no English. Then I tried to call Lilia and received a recorded message. My third call was to Hotel Bega which is supposed to be in this same part of the city as my current hotel and promises to have rooms to rent at about a third of the price. I do reach Hotel Bega, but since none of the receptionists on duty speak English it is impossible to find out if there are rooms available. I give up my incompetent attempts to make arrangements and head for the city center. I spend the day wandering aimlessly from sight to sight with no interpreter to muddy my impressions.

Mid-morning I realize that I was using too many digits when I tried to dial Natalya and Lilia, and so I purchase a calling card and try again from a public phone. This time I reach people, but in both instances they do not seem to listen to what I say and after speaking abruptly, hang up. I contemplate this, and only by early afternoon do I discover that on public phones you must press a button on the phone pad before you can speak and be heard, an arrangement evidently intended to activate the timing of the call for the phone card. So once again I try the calls. This time, there is no answer at Natalya's number, but a woman who can speak English

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answers at Lilia's. Lilia, it seems, has left for the day and won't be back until the evening. Finally, my mind is free to think of other things.

After exhausting my feet on the broad expanses of Moscow pavement, I stop for a drink at an outdoor restaurant next to the walls of the Kremlin. I am sitting alone at a table when two retired librarians from Ontario ask to join me and we spend a happy hour discussing politics. We have irreconcilable differences of opinion but manage to keep everything impersonal and intellectual—something that I find easy but is a real challenge for Jennifer who is offended by America's international behavior and simply cannot believe that an intelligent person could defend even a part of it.

After lunch, we go in search of an underground shopping mall that they know exists in the area. We find it almost immediately and spend a little while inspecting the sorts of things that richer Muscovites must buy. Finally, I say goodbye to them and wander off to the Arbat, a pedestrian street that runs for over a mile. It has little innate appeal, but it shelters a colorful collection of portrait artists, fancy restaurants, curio shops, street performers, night clubs, seedy characters, and assorted other attractions. All afternoon and well into the evening I amble from one end to the other, and as time goes by the scene becomes increasingly lively. Late in the day I stop in at a store full of expensive Russian crafts to seek directions to an Internet café and a lively, young, redheaded sales clerk engages me in conversation for over an hour, explaining that she is nineteen and has been doing this job for only a few months, that all Russian women (herself included) are keen to get a visa for

visiting EC countries, that her hair is naturally red, and that there has just been a news report about a suicide bombing at a rock concert in the outskirts of Moscow. Her unaffected insouciance was so enjoyable that I found it hard to leave.

In the evening I try to reach Lilia once again, and this time I am successful. We start to make arrangements for getting together the next day, but the phone connection begins to break up and although I can hear her perfectly well, she often cannot hear me. Finally, we manage an understanding, we think: we will meet tomorrow evening at six on the steps of the Bolshoi theatre. Her English, incidentally, is far better than I expected so—who knows—maybe our blind date will turn out well. Life without hope is a pretty poor thing.

Moscow got in a rabbit punch after the bell when I returned to my hotel late in the evening. In an exhausted state, I located the correct local shuttle for getting from the Dynamo Metro station to the hotel, but I failed to recognize my stop until a second too late when the door was closing and the van already lurching forward towards its next stop. “Oh well, I thought, I can cope with a short walk.” I waited, and waited, and waited, and waited as the van zoomed onward, block after block, turn after turn, until eventually it came to a stop well over a mile from my hotel—a location more distant from the hotel than the Metro station. When I disembarked, the vehicle appeared to be heading back towards the general vicinity of my hotel, but I had been madly memorizing a breadcrumb route back to the last stop and dared not risk being even farther from my destination with a weakening

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recollection of the route home. All things end, however,
and my evening walk did me no harm.

Day 41

My feet are toast. The streets of Moscow are long and wide, and even in younger days beating the pavement was a form of Chinese torture. As long as there are sights to see, it is easy to ignore the pain, but the next morning the price must be paid. Fortunately, the hotel is situated next to a heavily treed city park that is flush with benches and outdoor cafes. It promises to be another warm, sunny day, but the shady groves of the park are cool in the morning air and I decide to recuperate here for a few hours. After all, there will be plenty of time in the afternoon to take on the city once again.

The squirrels of Russia are a domesticated lot with less bounce to their bound than the typical American ones. Their bodies are more weasel-like with perky little ears and tails that are not so bushy. They run around all over the place eating out of people's hands, often while attached to a tree with their heads pointing down and their little legs spread wide apart. Like the Russian women, they go in for red hair, but on them it is a better choice.

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Since I probably will not return to the hotel until late in the evening and will have to check out very early in the morning, I decide to pay the bill before going into the city. My credit card fails to receive authorization, however, and a call to the company in the United States patches me through to a recording that cheerfully encourages me to call back during regular business hours, which do not happen to include Sunday mornings. Since the end of the trip is near, I have remaining neither rubles nor traveler's checks sufficient to cover the hotel bill. The paradoxical thing about not being able to pay for your hotel is that you more or less have to stay there until you can. I wonder if they let you use the same room?

The only solution is to make a trip to the airport where I have a second credit card in one of my stored bags. I explain this to the manager who also happens to be named Igor (could he be an unmentioned son of the helpful Igor who regaled me when I first arrived?) and he apologetically asks me to leave my passport with him. I am happy with that arrangement, but eventually Igor reconsiders as he speculates half to himself that the police might want to see it. I wasn't planning on carrying my passport, but now I think I will.

The expedition starts at two in the afternoon. It requires a long walk, a five-stop Metro ride, and an epic bus trip—in each direction—and I estimate that it will take three hours, leaving me with one hour to shower and change, pay the hotel bill, walk back to the Metro, and make the trip into the city for the meeting with Lilia. The timing is tight, but not impossible.

By the time I reach the airport, I am already running a half-hour late and I decide to call Lilia to postpone

our meeting time. I try four different telephones on two different floors of the airport building, but none work. I give up in frustration and head back out to the bus stop for the return trip, and there off to one side are two more pay phones. While waiting for the bus I again try to call and although the first phone behaves like all the others, the second immediately connects. As Lilia answers, my bus arrives and I have to cut short the call with a vague sense that we have indeed agreed to a one hour postponement of our meeting time.

As soon as I get back to the hotel, I leave the credit card with the front desk clerk and ask her to prepare my bill while I take a shower. When I return, hot to go to town, the bill is not yet ready and I wait an additional fifteen minutes before finally signing my name and slipping out the door. Running late, running late, half way through hour number five and I still don't have this situation under control. This does not feel like a holiday.

But at last, with minutes to spare, I arrive at the steps of the Bolshoi Theatre and start scanning the crowd to see if there is anyone who looks like she is looking; we never had time to tell each other what we would be wearing or what might be our defining features. I cannot spot her, but I do catch sight of a bag lady rifling through a wallet that was left next to the fountain by a young woman sitting on its edge dipping her feet. The bag lady doesn't try to move away. She stands right there two feet from the girl looking for anything that a wallet might contain that could be useful. When the girl turns around, all sorts of excitement ensues, and that pretty much fills up the five minutes I have to wait.

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We spot each other without any problem, and Lilia does a fair job of living up to my unrealistic physical expectations. Tall, slim, and slinky, she is blessed with a luxuriance of pale auburn hair that fades to nearly blond somewhere down below her shoulders. Her hair is striking and her clothes match—auburn, stretchy, leopard skin type stuff for a blouse; tight-fitting, cream colored slacks; elegant spike heels in an auburn and cream diamond pattern. Her spikes make her taller than Spike and one of the first things she says is: “You’re shorter than I expected.” I can live with the truth, but one of the things I have learned from all those years teaching skiing is that it is best to start with some positive truths before moving on to the less palatable ones. But of course I must try to be understanding—Lilia has never been a ski instructor.

We actually get on quite well together, but it is obvious from the beginning that anything more than a casual friendship is not in the cards. It is a good opportunity for her to practice her English, however, and for me to see what it feels like to stroll through Red Square in the golden light of evening with a gorgeous Russian woman on my arm. Lilia likes to walk, it seems, so I expect that tomorrow morning I will be hobbling to the airport.

She claims to have taught herself English, and the way she pronounces certain words leads me to believe she is telling the truth. Here is an example. Imagine you know no English and that you are studying it on your own. Now visualize yourself coming across the word “laugh” and imagine how you would pronounce it. That is exactly how she pronounced it, and it took me a

fair part of the hike alongside one wall of the Kremlin to figure it out.

We walked and talked and stopped at a café to have a drink, but by deep in the evening we cut our losses and headed our separate ways. Since I was hungry, she had been a cheap date, and I still had rubles in my pocket, the only thing to do was to head on over to a nice restaurant next to the Kremlin and thoroughly overeat. I did, too—pork cutlets stuffed with bacon, pan fried potato cubes, mushrooms stuffed with seafood, and lots of beer. Russian chefs seem to like to stuff things, and by the end of the meal that included my belly.

When I returned to the hotel around midnight, the shuttle van that could transport me to the hotel was taking forever to fill—and they always wait until they are full before they depart—so I decided to walk. Half way to the hotel, the van passed me—half full, of course.

Day 42

As I now know from experience, the trip to the airport is long and arduous, so I arrange for a 5:00 AM wake-up call and leave the hotel shortly thereafter. Even with this conservative approach, I am hard pressed to get through all the airport processes on time. I wait through a long line to check my luggage and then the agent tells me it weighs too much and I will have to pay an excess baggage fee. I am used to this because I got charged going to and from Mineral'nyye Vody as well. There was no charge when I flew to Moscow from Milan, but I suppose they want to get you in the country first before they start their shakedown. On each of the Mineral'nyye Vody flights the excess charge was about \$15, irritating but not the sort of banditry that makes you want to become a criminal yourself. This time, however, I get sent out beyond passport control to pay the fee, which suddenly is \$70 instead of \$15. That is for 10 kilograms of extra weight. Suppose you were to try to sneak your slender Russian girlfriend out of the country in a suitcase. She probably weighs about 50 kilograms, so at a total cost of \$350 it probably would be cheaper to buy her a regular

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seat. Don't even think about what it would cost for a sumo wrestler.

After this unsettling experience, I have plenty of time to rediscover my good humor as I wait in long lines again for passport control and to see the agent who sent me off in the first place. This time I make a point of smiling at her in order to lessen the possibility that she will discover some new problem for me to deal with. Once I am past her, there are two more security checks before I arrive at my gate, which I do only minutes before loading begins. It would be nice to have some breakfast, but there's no time for that. Besides, Aeroflot took all my rubles. Moscow, you are the big dog and I have been run out of town with my tail between my legs.

* * *

Como and Maggiore—two of the most famous Italian lakes—are located only a short distance north of Milan and I have been planning to spend the next two days cycling around their shores. But when I arrive at the Milan airport, clearing immigration and filing a baggage damage claim with Aeroflot end up taking a few hours. I still have time to assemble the bicycle and the trailer and pedal to the town of Como, but two blisters on one foot, four on the other, and sleep deprivation have conspired to undermine my resolve. When I discover that a map of the lake region is going to cost twelve dollars my mind snaps; I walk out of the airport shop and take the next bus into the heart of Milan where I know there is a reasonably priced hotel with a room waiting for me.

I certainly made the right decision, for the young woman on duty at the front desk is a work of renaissance art with no apparent mission in life other than to please hotel guests. She fixes me up with a room that I quickly discover has a malfunctioning overhead light. Ordinarily, this would not matter to me since I generally view hotel accommodation as little more than a bed, but in this instance I cannot resist the opportunity to talk once again with such a fine representative of my Italian fantasies. She utters words of dismay and sympathy with a captivating Italian accent and transfers me to a much nicer room with a double bed and a functioning overhead light.

I am too tired to do much of anything, so I decide to buy a cold drink at a neighborhood grocery store, return to my room, and take a nap. The store is closed for the midday hours so I wander off in search of a small restaurant where I might take a meal. The place I come across is electrifying. People dive in the front door and burst out of it every few seconds, and the conversation in the crowded interior is so raucous and out of control that an Anglo-Saxon crowd would have to engage in two or three hours of hard drinking to match it. These people, though, are sober—although sober is a word that fails to describe Italians even when they are. I fit myself into this whirlwind. One pizza and two beers later, the place is empty of customers; they all have abruptly rushed off to energize some other place.

On the way back to the hotel, I happen across a bookstore that only contains volumes having to do with boats and the sea. Although I am so tired that my mind has slowed to the speed of a hesitant faucet

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drip, I spend the next hour perusing classics by such masters as Bernard Montessier, Francis Chichester, and Nathaniel Philbrick—all in Italian—and the occasional volume such as Chapman's Piloting, Seamanship, and Boat Handling in English. Prices are astronomical, but fortunately I cannot read Italian and am not tempted to buy.

By Italian standards, Milan is an inland city with little in the way of access to navigable waterways. And yet, a bookstore of this sort finds it possible to survive here. I have always assumed that my fascination with the sea and its sojourners is an odd quirk that appears only occasionally in the larger population—an esoteric illness with pathogens that rely on coastal vectors. And yet, here is a business that is built on a contrary assumption. I do not know if it is a successful business. It could well be nothing more than a form of treatment for a wealthy Italian afflicted with the nautical disease and prepared to lose buckets of money in his quest for a palliative. In any event, were I to return to Milan at some distant future time I am certain I would find a way to return to this haven from the trials of terrestrial life.

At last I return to the hotel for the nap that I had promised myself and after retrieving the room key from the very person I hoped would hand it to me, I take a rest that degenerates into near comatosity and does not end until fourteen hours later.

Day 43

Awakening from a coma is a disorienting experience and it takes me even longer than usual to order my thoughts, clean my body, and assemble a serviceable plan for the day. I usually find that going to sleep has all the complexity of flicking a switch but that waking up is more like an ocean liner getting under way by casting off and inching from the dock and ever so slowly getting up to speed. Even more than usual I start my day in this classically nautical fashion.

Once out on the street, I begin to see the sorts of peculiar things that so amuse a traveler in a foreign land. The first to catch my notice is a very portly man on a bicycle—a workman to judge by his dress but gentlemanly in his carriage—gliding along a busy pedestrian street at the center of Milan with a ten-rung ladder slung over his right shoulder. His pace is slow, as befits a busy walkway, but he steers confidently with both hands and his implacability infects the crowd through which he is passing. If I were to establish an observation post on the corner of Main and Second South in Salt

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Lake City, I wonder how long I would have to keep watch before seeing such a thing.

Some time later after visiting an Internet café, I am strolling along Via Torino, an upscale shopping street that radiates from the Piazza di Duomo, when a confectionery catches my attention and I move over to see what it has on display. There are a multitude of sweets shaped and colored like various fruits—everything from pears and strawberries to watermelon and kiwi—but most striking of all is a particular creation from marzipan that rests in two duplicative rows on the bottom shelf. The item is a denture for the lower jaw—a set of false teeth with the fleshy part of the gums colored in a convincing pinkish hue and the teeth standing up in an appropriate tint of off white. One of the teeth (but not one that would ruin a smile) is missing and all the others are depicted realistically. At least two dozen of these are on sale suggesting that Italians like to eat false teeth, gums and all. How can something so unappealing ever come to be considered cute? Is there no limit to the interpretive power of culture?

On the way back to the hotel I am confronted by a giant billboard in vertical format that is plastered on the side of a building in a small piazza. It is an advertisement for Gordon's gin and it depicts a stylish woman walking away from the viewer wearing attractive business clothes—a white blouse and a tightly fitting skirt slightly longer than mini. She has a naked male mannequin held under her left arm such that his bald head is gazing blankly at her shapely rear and his right arm is extended with the open and spread fingers of the hand firmly grasping her right buttock. Americans

may view themselves as the masters of promotion but the Europeans have a style all their own, and this is one of those instances in which I think it is fair to say the promotion is better than the product.

So as to extend the range of my sightseeing, in the afternoon I assemble the bicycle and take it out to do a little touring. Although many of the streets are cobble or brick or cut stone and the tracks for the trolley lines are widespread, downtown Milan is actually a pleasant place to bicycle. City traffic is not extreme and if you make a point of using the maze of back streets and alleys you will find them virtually empty of moving vehicles. There is, furthermore, a certain Italian mentality that favors cyclists. People more or less walk, drive, or park wherever they want and as a result cyclists are perfectly free to maneuver themselves on streets or sidewalks or in stalled traffic without regard for convention or protocol. Nobody seems to mind. Many Milanese get around on bicycles and it is easy to see why. As long as you keep a watchful eye on the surface you are traversing there are no real impediments to your movement—not even hills, which are completely absent in this region.

The central area of the city contains street after street of substantial stone buildings that are an inheritance from a different era when such structures could not be considered finished if they did not have an abundance of exterior ornamentation to break the stark severity of purely functional form. Most of the buildings are about six stories high, large enough to give the impression that here is a town of practical, productive, middle class people with their money in the bank and their minds on worldly matters.

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Speaking of worldly matters, I wonder what is going on out there. No news for six weeks has cleansed my system of its unhealthy dependence on virtual reality and I now no longer care about the state of affairs in Iraq or North Korea. It is ironic that so many sensible adults get worked up about the teenage fascination with video games when they in fact are equally obsessed with the news of the world as interpreted by a handful of experts who rarely express divergent interpretations of complex events and never question the universally accepted principle that astute analysis of news is only possible by someone of remarkably good looks. I daresay that most teenagers realize they are only playing a game, but many adults are deadly serious about their news.

In a way, the fascination with what is going on in other places is quite similar to the widespread preoccupation with times past and times future. We all know that for many of us a failure to live in the present diminishes life; what perhaps we don't realize is that it can be equally debilitating when we fail to live in our current location. To feel the full force of life do you not think we need to pay as much attention to the here as we do to the now?

I ate my dinner on the Via Dante next to the muffled footsteps of passing pedestrians and with the Duomo in the distance. The sun was setting, and the staid old buildings had their tops on fire while the street level subsided into a thickening gloom. When I rose to walk back to the hotel, the twilight had turned the sky to blue slate and the Duomo was a black silhouette with its countless gothic spires piercing the sky. Over its left

shoulder a gauzy moon was suspended, mellow and ripe enough to have lost its cusps.

The lights of the city were beginning to steal the show, and I decided to walk through the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, as grandiose and ornate in appearance as it is in name. It is, in effect, a shopping mall dressed as a cathedral. As you walk through it, the ornamented walls tower above you and an arched roof of opaque glass protects you from the weather. Its two pedestrian malls cross in the middle where an enormous dome of the same opaque glass ties the cross together. The floor is a bold pattern of marble tiles and the overall effect is upward spaciousness. It is also cathedral-like in its acoustics, for the slightest sound is amplified and reverberates sonorously.

As I pass through, there is a gathering under the dome, and a small, temporary stage facing a seated audience has on it two men on stools and a third off to one side at a grand piano. The men on stools are conversing, but eventually one of them gets up and, accompanied by the piano (which, as it turns out, also has an electric keyboard on top of it) begins to sing. His voice is like a cannon and he fills the enormous space with his sound and his charisma. He is Sinatra smooth one moment and Ray Charles rough the next. His range is considerable and he sings everything from rock and roll to Italian love songs to reggae to ballads. But most of all, he loves what he is doing. There is no pretense, no affectations, no clever manipulation of the audience. He just does what he loves to do and the audience loves him for it.

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It turns out that his name is Andrea Mingardi and that he has been talking with an interviewer named F. Nisi. I cannot understand Italian, but on this occasion I dearly wish that I could because the entire discussion deals with his craft—not his money, not his ex-wives, not his wonderful vacation on Bali—just his craft. I eventually come to realize that Mr. Mingardi is a very popular professional singer in Italy, at least with the older generation, and that I have happened across a surprising event. To properly understand the effect it had on me, try to imagine yourself knowing no English and wandering into a shopping mall in, say, Chicago and suddenly hearing this woman start to sing whose name, you eventually learn, is Aretha Franklin.

Day 44

I decided to violate my customary procedure and get an early start. Lake Como is near at hand and a short train ride will put me at the water's edge. Bike Friday carries me to the main train station and then collapses into a small bundle for the train trip. Step off onto the platform at Como and—presto—in less than a minute the green machine is reassembled and ready to roll. I buy a map and head on out of town.

Lake Como is long and narrow, a single arm in the north that forks to form two extended arms in the south, each about thirty kilometers in length. It is a classic mountain lake with lofty peaks that plunge to the water as if they had decided to dive in and take a swim. Cliffs abound and wherever they are absent the land is pitched so steeply that direct ascent on foot would be more like climbing than hiking. The mountainsides are richly forested and the lake itself has a languid surface of peaceful waters.

The lake is far too big for me to seriously consider a circumnavigation, so I decide to cycle along the spiny ridge separating the two arms in the south until I reach

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the point where the branching occurs—the isolated and picturesque location of the town of Bellagio. Then I will take the ferry across and return to the town of Como along the other side of the same inlet. This scaled down plan will put me back in Milan by mid-afternoon and given the lake's simple physiognomy should provide enough exposure to satisfy a tourist.

What with the precipitous mountain flanks, impossibly situated villages, and artistically landscaped villas distributed in abundance all along the way, the ride to Bellagio is dramatic and visually rewarding. I thoroughly enjoy it on this clear, calm day, but even before I arrive in Bellagio I have begun to feel a certain vague sadness. In retrospect, I think the problem is too much development. That the towns and gardens and precarious mountain roads are all so pleasing to the eye only seems to emphasize the fact that the land has been too much altered. There is no denying the charming decadence of the Lake Como scene, but for pure inspiration it is a degraded product that in earlier times must have been breathtaking but now is merely beautiful.

Not far from Whitehorse, on the border between British Columbia and the Yukon Territory, Atlin Lake is comparable in size and configuration to Lake Como, but it is wilderness with only a couple crudely formed communities along its shores. There is a wholesome emptiness in the air and you cannot help but feel alert in the presence of such wildness. I would rather be there any day. For the first time I am beginning to feel the sense of paradise lost that must leaden the European

soul and drive its tired people to the ends of the earth in search of what for them no longer exists.

Bellagio turns out to be a sweet little village, just like all the others only more so. It does have a sense of isolated peace going for it that its replication on The Strip in Las Vegas can never hope to completely capture, but as morally repugnant as it may sound, the Las Vegas copy is in many respects superior to the original and even has managed to create a certain aura of peaceful repose in that zone of human madness.

One way in which the copy beats the original is in the food it serves to guests. I have eaten at both places, and in Las Vegas the service is better, the prices cheaper, and the menu more appealing. When I took lunch at the waterside café in the real Bellagio, the pizza that I ordered took over forty minutes to arrive and when it did it was a cold and clammy square of uninteresting bread and cheese. The waiter who delivered it joked that it took so long because the chef had to go to Naples to get it, but this sounded more like a stock phrase than an inspired piece of verbal banter.

On the return to the town of Como, after taking the ferry to the western shore, I have my first traffic accident of the trip. Two teenage boys on scooters are stopped at a side street on the right waiting for a break in the traffic. One boy pulls out and sweeps past me and the other takes off after him without looking. I grab my brake but cannot stop in time, and my front tire smashes into the side of his front wheel, so abruptly stopping my bike that the rear wheel bucks up of the road and I get bucked forward off the saddle. I manage to land on my feet straddling the frame and the two of us stand there

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more or less face to face looking at each other. Without saying anything, I attempt to convey my displeasure at his inattentiveness by means of angry facial expressions. He of course reacts like a typical teenage boy—that is, he doesn't. He stands there for a few seconds looking through me with a blank expression on his face, as if I were some sort of vaguely identifiable object of no significance in his universe, and then drives off. I spend the next few kilometers getting the excess adrenaline out of my system by thinking about what I would do to the pimply faced dork if I had him back in my clutches. I finally come up with an emotionally satisfying course of punitive action, and only then am I able to let the whole thing go.

* * *

Back in Milan, I made all the necessary preparations for a morning departure—breakdown and packing of the bicycle, sorting and repacking personal effects, paying the bill. In spite of the obvious signs that the trip was drawing to a close, I still felt no particular anticipation about the prospect of returning home. I would be happy to carry on for weeks more, but I am out of money and time, and no options remain.

I went out for one last visit to the Internet café, and the walk there took me past the confectionery once again. The sight of those false teeth in the window this time provoked within me a sense of challenge, and by the time I returned from sending e-mails I had resolved that I should muster the courage to eat a set. I have consumed a fair variety of unorthodox food over the years—

including whale blubber, Rocky Mountain oysters, dog meat, and dried fish and seal oil—but nothing ever caused me to hesitate like these perfectly palatable false teeth. This time the store had on display both upper and lower sets so it would have been possible to purchase an entire mouth. I suppose if one does this it is then possible to give it a good long French kiss and gradually lick away the sweet insides before going to work on the teeth, but I decided that merely consuming the lower jaw was more than enough for me. It was embarrassing to ask the kind lady behind the counter for such an obscene product when right there between us were some perfectly respectable bananas and apples, but I was on a mission to overcome my fears and nothing but dentures would do.

Eating them was of course the easy part. The teeth were slightly crunchier than the gums, as well they should be, but everything tasted like marzipan and before long I was taking good, big bites. Half way through I examined my work, and the sight of this partially eaten set of false teeth gave me the feeling that I must have something in common with Andy Warhol, or maybe Magritte. Anyway, it turned out to be one of those things that is a lot easier to do than to think about. I overcame my fears and I will never again hesitate to eat marzipan false teeth. I doubt it will happen, though, since the purchase of just half a mouth set me back seven dollars.

Day 45

Before I left the hotel I took one last look around to make sure I had everything. The room was one of the nicer ones I had stayed in during the trip. It was of the no-bath variety, of course, because I am not willing to pay an extra \$25 for my own private toilet and shower. It is not as if their presence in the room means nobody else has ever used them before. For that kind of money I don't mind stepping down the hall seven or eight paces. I have found, though, that with my advancing years I often am obliged to get up in the middle of the night to relieve myself and sometimes in my groggy state it is hard to remember that it is socially unacceptable to walk down the hall naked—although those who are up and around at that hour probably have a similar problem and would understand my negligence. On this trip, however, I have discovered a solution. As long as I am careful to kneel down first in order to avoid errant spray, I can see no reason not to use the bidet which is fitted into so many French and Italian hotel rooms, usually right beside the sink. I mean, what good is this appliance anyway? I rented it so I might as well get some use out of it. I

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cannot understand why none of the guidebooks has put me onto this effort-saving practice. Of course it is only good etiquette to clean it properly when you're done.

Last night before retiring I purchased a liter of bottled water from the hotel front desk and this morning its residual is the last thing I pack in my knapsack for the plane trip home. You cannot be a proper tourist in Europe if you are not carrying one of these around with you. At a price of almost \$3, this particular water is the most expensive I have purchased on the trip. Even so, a liter bottle often costs \$2 and I have yet to buy one for less than a dollar. The tap water in European countries is potable and usually tastes fine, but no European would dream of ingesting such unhealthy stuff and so water in plastic bottles is sold in just about any commercial establishment that opens its doors to the public. We all know that one should drink a gallon of water a day to stay healthy, so this seems to suggest that the health conscious European is prepared to spend \$5-10 a day to avoid having to consume the free stuff. As it happens, the current price for a liter of gasoline in Italy is roughly one dollar. In other words, gas is cheaper than water.

Europeans would protest, I am sure, that the bottled water is from special springs and has unique qualities, but Europe must have more than its fair share of such healthy springs for there certainly is no physical shortage of this supposedly precious commodity. In any event, it is a commodity that requires no expensive processing and incurs little tax liability—unlike gasoline. When one considers this, it is evident that in Europe gasoline is much, much cheaper than water. Is it really sensible to think that the world is running out of hydrocarbons?

As if the hand wringing about oil shortages is not puzzling enough, there is the even more mysterious concern about running out of clean, fresh water. This is a real issue in the many areas of the world where people are poor, but in the rich countries there seems to be little reason to get so agitated. If Europeans can afford to pay a buck or two per liter already, then surely Americans and Canadians could as well. We would not like it but we could afford it.

Since the technology associated with desalinating seawater already has reached the point where its product can be offered to the public at a price only about double the current one, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that abundant amounts of fresh water extracted from the ocean could be made available to a household in America for, say, \$50-70 per month. Since people willingly pay this much for their satellite television reception, it is absurd to think that they would not do so for something essential.

Well, enough of all this speculation. It is time to go home. The daytime transatlantic crossing is a fair one and occasional glances out the window reassure me that there is more than enough water for us all.

Now that my fate is in the hands of Delta, there is nothing left to do but sleep. There are no decisions to be made, no schedules to keep, no problems to solve. I suppose this is what makes airline flights so boring. The endless hours of sitting in a designated seat waiting for permission to go to the bathroom is enough to turn us into children once again. How much more rewarding it would be if the captain would come on the PA system and ask for volunteers to hand out meals, or offer

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everybody over the age of fifty 10,000 frequent flyer miles if they parachute to their destination, or talk us through the technical aspects of landing, or announce that he is going to depressurize the main cabin for a while in order to check out the oxygen masks, or regale us with stories of his closest calls. The problem we all have is that there is too much certainty in this world. After all, if I had known in advance that Venera would turn out to be such a head case I would not have written to her in the first place and never would have known the thrill of waiting for a strange woman on the steps of La Scala. If I had foreseen the epic struggle to complete that very first bicycle ride around Cap Corse I would have avoided it and never really learned the lessons that it taught me. If I had had fair warning that Moscow was going to maul me I would have ventured there well protected and well prepared, and the chance to detect the true character of the place would have eluded me.

Even now, as Delta whisks me around a fair portion of the globe it is distressing to think about how unlikely it is that anything out of the ordinary will happen. Even the flight delay in Atlanta is really very ordinary. The unknown is all that matters and for that I would give my life—well, my life's savings anyway.

So what is there I can think about that is unknown and unpredictable? Nancy is unpredictable so I end up thinking about her. Will she meet me at the airport or will she not? Probably not, but there is that possibility

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Many will want to know what I have learned from this trip and so I have felt uncharacteristically obliged to seek an answer to the question. The serious reader will

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be pleased to hear that I have absorbed two important lessons from all my travel. The first is that I should never have boasted about my good fortune when it comes to weather during a trip, for the gods punished me with that one day of rain while I was in Kislovodsk. The second lesson I learned is that I prefer youth to women. I may even prefer beer to women—but that's a close call.

About The Author

An aging dreamer who has always yearned for adventure travel, Spike Hampson recently finished building a 21' riverboat. It will be his home for the next couple years as he voyages from Wyoming to Buenos Aires using rivers and protected waterways. You can track his progress by going to his website: www.spikehampson.com.

Stalking Youth and Women in the European Outback is a new approach to writing travel literature. Next up is a book entitled *Kobuk*, a philosophical speculation on why boatbuilding is a quasi-religious experience. In the meantime, watch for *Pura Vida*, a Costa Rican bicycle adventure.

Spike is a geography professor at the University of Utah, and also teaches skiing at Deer Valley in the winter time.

