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Cultured

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Abstract

This memoir piece comprises three parts, each of which tells a humorous and perhaps slightly embarrassing story of interpersonal upsets the narrator experienced while studying abroad in Europe. Their telling exposes the narrator as a naïve American tourist, despite her conscious attempts to be culturally sensitive and respectful. The intent of this piece was neither to make a political statement about being American in Europe, nor to present yet another trite account “the best four months of [my] life.” While my primary goal was to share these stories for their entertainment value (if self-effacing), my hope was to transform the piece from a fact-driven personal essay into a compelling piece of memoir in which the narrator’s character drives the reader to stick with it. Nevertheless, readers in workshop noted that the piece does grapple with the misguided belief that merely travelling abroad accomplishes some ideal of cultural immersion and enlightenment. The experiences are enriching, yes, but hard won. Further, their meaning may not be realized until long after they've passed and are subjected to workshop scrutiny! In any case, the piece was fun to write, is riddled with irony, and I hope the reader derives some pleasure from it.

Keywords

Creative Writing, English, Writing, Memoir, Non-fiction

Disciplines

Creative Writing | European Languages and Societies | Nonfiction

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It was November and I was wearing khaki shorts. I shivered as we walked through the Duomo's monstrous shade cast by the mid-morning sun. In the dark haze of last night it had been a meaningless mass of marble. This morning it was a menacing mass of religion and history I was unfamiliar with to appreciate.

In the morning light, I noticed the rows of specialty shops and cafés lining the walkway around its perimeter. Apartments were stacked like colorful blocks on top of them, with full floor-to-ceiling glass doors opening onto small balconies. A handsome olive-skinned man sat above us on a wrought-iron chair, drinking what was surely espresso, reading his morning newspaper. Or perhaps I imagined he sat there, and myself beside him, dipping an almond biscotti in my Americano and planning a day of sightseeing for us in the Tuscan countryside. But I was, after all, in khaki shorts; and Italian men aren't interested in American girls wearing boat shoes the way fraternity boys are back in the States.

It became clear as we made our way around the piazza that we were entering a marketplace just beginning to bustle. Stalls had sprung up overnight, filled with leather briefcases and Murano glass ornaments on one side, and novelty apparel screen-printed with the genitals of *The David* on the other. As American students spending a semester in Europe, my girlfriends and I took advantage of nearly every opportunity to shop. It was a welcomed diversion from our otherwise hectic itineraries, which amounted to laundry lists of important attractions—fountains here, sculptures there—we had vowed to find and take pictures of. But we had become accustomed to European retail chains in Copenhagen and had little experience souvenir hunting in flea markets like the once we encountered in Florence.

We arrived first at a card table swathed with all types of silver-toned jewelry. I stepped up to it and leaned forward, hands at my sides, and combed the bracelets over with my eyes.

“What do you like?” the middle-aged man behind the table asked me. He was overweight, with a sun-beaten, leathery face.

“I like that one,” I answered, pointing at a thin metal band with a turquoise-colored stone attached to the middle.

“Try it.”

I felt only slightly more at ease now that he had given me permission. I picked the bracelet up and placed it around my wrist with obvious care. It was too big. Prospective customers flanked me now, asking questions, nodding, pointing. I returned the bracelet to its place and picked up another, purposefully within his view.

“How much?” I asked.

“25 euro.”

We had only arrived in Florence the night before, and it was the first of five cities we planned to visit on our two week break from classes. The over-the-shoulder bag I clutched cautiously held 300 euros in cash. I turned my wrist over and looked at the bracelet longingly. I hate to say no to anyone.

Instead I said, “It’s pretty...”

He detected my hesitancy.

“20 euro,” he counteroffered.

“Ah, I can’t do it.”

“Why not?” he pursued me.

“It’s too much.”

I began to take the bracelet off. He placed his hand on my wrist to stop me.

“How much you want to pay?”

“I don’t want to buy it.”

The weathered jewelry peddler did not appreciate my honesty.

“How much you pay for this? How much? 15? 17?”

I stalled awkwardly until I sensed his growing impatience. Finally, I uttered an insignificant number.

The man sneered. He cursed me in fast, hard Italian as he ripped the jewelry from my wrist. He smacked my hand, then flung it away from him. I was being punished—in a strange place, by a strange and angry man—for my ignorance.

I retreated from the table, stunned. My travelling companion, Duyen, ushered me further into the crowded marketplace. But with each step my indignation rose, until my ears and forehead blazed and I no longer shivered. I was embarrassed: that others had seen the exchange, or that I hadn’t known better, or that I was going to allow this crude man to hit me like he would a disobedient child. I turned rebelliously and gave him the middle finger—in true Yankee form—emboldened by the cutting awareness that I had been disrespected.

I never got good at haggling, especially over things I never intended to buy. But I did get better at saying “no.”

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I turned my face to the side as if to say, “Stop trying to kiss me,” though I did it rather sheepishly to avoid seeming rude. We were dancing together in one of the nicer clubs in Copenhagen, Rust—pronounced “Roost,” which always made me think of chickens. When I say

it was a nicer club, I mean to say that it wasn't overrun by American college students spilling cheap beer on the floor. It had a Plexiglas bar lit by neon. It only carried mid-to-top shelf liquor. Rust was tucked away in Nørrebro, one of the few ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods in an otherwise purely-Danish city. To reach it required a cab or bus ride, so it remained largely off the study-abroaders' nightlife radar.

Middle-eastern immigrants, largely Turks, had made Nørrebro theirs over the past few decades, to the displeasure of the Danish nationalists.

"They just don't want to be a part of us," my host mother's best friend, Lone, had explained to me months earlier over dinner. "They don't want to be part of our culture. They won't learn the Danish language."

Lone was an archetypal Danish woman: nearly 5' 10" with a strong frame and curly platinum blonde hair. She had recently divorced her husband of 25 years, after their three daughters had grown, because she tired of him doing nothing to help around the house.

Lone tried to explain to me why relations with the Turks were strained. When her youngest daughter was in grade school, the Turkish boys would make particularly demeaning remarks about the Danish girls and treat them with much contempt. Apparently their Middle-Eastern misogyny jarred with Scandinavia's emphatic egalitarianism.

"Now, Lone, what would you say if you were one of them?" my liberal host mother had argued. Lone offered up a number of instances in which Turks had abused the Danish welfare system, or the Danes themselves, to defend her position. Indeed, it seems I had been fairly warned about these types of men; though none of Lone's history lesson came to mind until afterward my encounter with him.

At Rust, this particular young man had approached me directly, beckoning me away from my small group of girlfriends with a finger. I shook my head politely when he grabbed my hand. He tugged and I sipped the drink I held in the other. I rolled my eyes playfully and conceded silently. *One song couldn't hurt.*

He led me to the edge of the dance floor and removed my drink from my hand. He began to dance behind me, pushing himself closer into my backside with each step. I turned around to face him. I wanted to interrupt whatever seduction tactic he was trying to initiate. In return, he spun me back into him and placed his lips on my neck. I swung my head away, like a horse swatting a fly from its mane. I thought we might go on as if we had an understanding: *this is just a dance.*

Instead, he tried my cheek. Flanked on one side by a dark corner, I craned my neck toward the other side, hoping to make eye contact with someone on the dance floor. When he finally grabbed my chin and pushed his thin pink lips toward mine, I pushed him back.

I hadn't the time to register the reaction on his face, so much as I had to feel his spite, in the form of a spilt drink saturating the back of my dress. I had been a waste of his time. The first drink a man ever spilled on me purposely felt akin to getting spat on, or to some other vulgar act a man might perform on a woman out of brazen disdain. I clutched my handbag tightly and looked around. He had gone. I was alone and unfettered.

And ironically, I felt victorious. At \$20 a drink, asserting myself had cost him more than it had cost me.

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"I might be drunk, but I can still count," I said to the cabby moments after he slapped the change into my hand. I've got to admit that by this point in the night, my tone was less than

pleasant. I had diplomatically volunteered to cover the group's cab fare back to our hotel, as I was the least intoxicated and accordingly the least willing to wander Edinburgh at 2:30 in the morning. My graciousness was not rewarded.

The five of us had begun the night many hours earlier, at an upscale pub called The Conan Doyle. At some point while there, I had been standing to face the table at which my friends sat, when I noticed a dim flash behind me. When I turned to locate its source, an older man tipped his cap at me and exited the bar, noticeably a few paces behind his wife. A camera hung around his neck.

"Did he just..." I asked no one in particular.

"Pretty sure he did," David confirmed.

To respond with, "What a creep!" was my only defense to this strange and unnerving violation. To be a stranger's non-consenting model is not flattering.

We then moved on to a dive pub called The World's End. The story goes that the gates of the city had once stood opposite the small bar, and outside those gates the world ceased to exist in the minds of sixteenth century Scotsmen. To young tourists in the twenty-first century, The World's End led to a club further across town, called The Hive. There, the bouncer refused to admit me after spying a mini wine bottle in my saddlebag purse which I had stowed there hours earlier and forgotten.

"Well can I just drink it right here?"

We were standing on public property.

"No. Trash."

Once inside, I headed straight for the loo, where I unwittingly stole from the bathroom attendant. Some American clubs offer complimentary breath mints in their restrooms, and I

reasoned that The Hive was catering to its patrons' sweet teeth. I swiped a blue lollipop from the sink counter on my way out, and the dark skinned woman threw herself between me and the exit. How could I have known it wasn't included in the cover charge? *I might have even considered it payment for my squandered wine.* I opened my mouth to respond, but no useful defense came forth. She didn't believe that I hadn't known better, and berated me accordingly, holding me and the rest of the women there captive to her tirade. One of them distracted her to plead on my behalf, and I skulked out as inconspicuously as possible. I believe the lollipop was thrown in the trash.

When I rejoined my group on the dance floor, my eyes were blurred from the tears I had been trying to suppress. The club was hot and crowded now. I chose to climb a bass-pumping speaker for fresh air rather than confront the pushy bouncer outside or the incensed bathroom attendant. From that vantage point, I noticed a girl picking around a pile of coats across the room. She found a black blazer she liked, size small, and started for the door.

I hurdled down the side of the speaker like a child jumping from her high chair. I pursued the girl through the crowd, eyes trained on the back of her dark head. When I got close, I lunged, with a harried tapping on her shoulder and a chagrined "Hey, that's my jacket." When I grabbed it from her hand, she only smiled knowingly.

I knew then that my Scottish adventure was over. With my jacket in hand and my resolve worn, I was ready to leave. My friends followed me out into the street, where we took turns calculating how many blocks we would have to walk to get back to our hotel. I was sufficiently sober now, and knew that hailing a taxi was the only way we would make it to bed that night. I made an executive decision.

As my four companions filed out of the cab's double doors in front of the Holiday Inn Express, I looked at the fare on the dashboard: 14 pounds.

I held my hand out toward the front seat, reviewing the bills and coins.

"I gave you 20, right?"

If I hadn't proven it already, I would show him I couldn't be taken advantage of. "I might be drunk, but I can still count."

"Yes, yes you did. And perhaps you don't like it but here in Scotland we give a bloody ol' tip to the people who do us a good service. It's a customary fifteen percent." He returned the coins in dispute to my stingy hand. Even if it was customary, it seemed a bit presumptuous. Regardless, I managed a humble tone.

"Well sir, if that's custom I'm not trying to cheat you. Please have the tip."

"No thank-you, you can keep your money if you need it so much." He didn't turn to look at me when he spoke.

"No, really, I'm happy to, we study in Copenhagen where they don't tip and in America we tip after we..."

"Get out of my cab." He wasn't running the meter on my excuse-making.

"Please have it, it's yours," I responded sincerely. After all, I'm one of the best tipplers I know.

"Get out of my cab!" he shouted. Now my friends on the sidewalk urged me to do the same.

The moment I slammed the back door, the cab tires squealed. He peeled out down Picardy Place, headed for the roundabout up the road. The five of us stood, dazed, watching until the car was out of sight. They looked at me. I shrugged. The sound of a honking horn waylaid

our attention, as the cab tore up Leith Walk, back in our direction. But the obnoxious noise stopped momentarily—long enough for us to hear the honking coming from the Scottish cab driver’s snout. It’s the kind of honking he makes when he’s snorting like a pig at the girl who could count her change.