

La Nostra Storia

The sleeper car train arrived in Paris from Germany about 7:30 on a misty Saturday morning in November. I got off the train with my small bag and made my way to a cafe at the Gare de l'est and watched other trains disgorge a steady effluent of bleary-eyed tourists and irritated, fast-walking Parisians. I ordered a café latte and thought about what I would do for the weekend, alone in Paris. I had two women on my mind, both of them beyond my reach. I would catch a glimpse of one of them that day, secure behind bulletproof glass and a flock of Japanese tourists swooping in and out of my view like gulls. Mona Lisa looked back at me from her glass tomb like she knew exactly what I was going through and was glad that all of the color and light and confusion were beyond her now. For her, centuries weren't even minutes. For me, the next seven hours would stretch on forever while I watched lovers kissing and walking arm in arm along the Champs Elysee; while I pined alone for a woman across the border in Italy.

After four hours in the Louvre I left, had lunch in a cafe near the Tuileries and started looking at hotels. The third one I found, the Hotel Londres St. Honore, was only 390 francs per night, or about \$70. The room was up four flights of narrow stairs and I had to duck to get through the little doorway, but I had my own shower and separate bathroom, a minibar and color TV and a view of the rooftops all the way to the Rue Rivoli. The rest of my day was spent wandering around the Champs Elysee killing time until my 3 O'Clock call to Italy. I found myself staring at my watch and looking at every phone booth I passed. I stepped into one finally to run through my short list of Paris contacts, hoping vainly to conjure up a dinner companion. There were four phone booths rotated around a center pole that made me feel like I was resting in the arm of a swastika. Several people came and went while I ran through my calls, but one young woman carried on a long and emotional conversation with someone. I tried not to look at her, but our faces were separated only by inches. Thin glass and language separated us, but I felt we were connected. I had the sensation that she was only rehearsing what I would do soon.

I looked at my watch again and saw the hands sweeping toward the appointed time for my call to Italy. I left the booth to sit on a nearby bench and soak more of the Parisian sun. My mind drifted back to the first time I saw her. I had just assumed a role as the Vice President of Operations for Europe, Middle East and Africa for a small computer software company in Cary. I had engaged the former CEO of Autodesk to introduce me around the European market. I met Volker Kleinn in Geneva, spent the weekend there in January of 1997, then boarded a train for Milan to meet with GRM Studio, our soon to be appointed Italian distributor. I sat in the dining car sharing a typical German breakfast of fruit, bread, coffee and mueslix with Volker watching him butter his bread with frenetic precision as he continued his lecture on proper methods for doing business in various European countries. Each country, he explained, had a different set of rules for pace and decorum while establishing relationships. The American art of the deal didn't play well in Europe, he said, pointing his knife at me. The European conservatism and sense of history favored longer relationships and made them less likely to take a transactional approach to business.

The fairy tale Swiss Alp countryside swept past the windows and began to slowly change to gentler topography, signaling our descent to the Italian plains before Milan. We were boarded soon after we entered Italy. I think this was the last time I ever had my passport stamped crossing into Italy. They seem to have given up the practice.

We were met at the Vicenza station by a handsome bearded man who introduced himself as Renato Guazzo. I began peppering him with questions and slowly realized that he wasn't picking up much of what I was saying. So I slowed the pace of my speech and said a couple of things I had rehearsed in Italian. This brightened him up and he whisked us towards his waiting BMW. We immediately began hurtling through the narrow streets of Vicenza, Renato frequently gesturing at other motorists and people and looking at me with that universal look that said "all of these people are idiots."

The speeds we reached in the city paled in comparison to the new heights Renato urged the BMW to once we hit the Autostrada. Even with our vastly improved progress, he wasn't any more satisfied with the other drivers sharing the road. We weaved through and past them at speeds over 100 miles per hour. I glanced at Volker for a look that mirrored my own, something verging on terror, but he looked non-plussed. This calmed me at first, but then I realized it for what it was: a nationalistic test of wills. Who drives faster, Italians or Germans? Who can handle the car better? Volker was trying hard to be unimpressed.

We slowed as we approached a castle with walls that completely surrounded a small village and ran up a small mountain. This was Marostica, home of GRM Studio and Renato's step daughter, one of the most beautiful and talented women I have ever met. When we walked into the office she was there, right off the runway from some Milan fashion show. She had high cheek bones, full lips, ancient eyes and was dressed impeccably, a small Cartier scarf knotted around her neck. To my great relief she spoke English well and helped me understand everything Renato had been trying to say for the past hour.

We spent three hours there, talking business with Vanessa translating. The time went by all too quickly. Then we jumped back in the car, this time Vanessa accompanied us to translate, and we hurtled back up the autostrada as far as the train station in Vicenza for our trip back to Milan.

It would be almost a year before I saw her again. We talked several times by phone and almost weekly by email in the intervening months. It was always business. We never flirted. I never had any reason to think that we could get involved romantically. But I still had the picture of her, Renato and me that Volker took that day when Europe was so new to me. The thousand year old castle wall ran up the hill behind her. She stood apart from me, looking bored. I looked..American.

The next time I came to Marostica was October of 1997. I was living in Germany full time and was making a swing through all of my distribution partners. I had just spent four days in Israel and was a little dusty from the rough hospitality they offer up there. I landed in Venice and was welcomed by a solitary Italian woman. It was Vanessa. During the drive from Venice to Marostica I could tell that her English had improved greatly and her driving was much more civilized than Renato's. We talked about software and some of the artwork she had done with our products. And we

laughed. I can't remember what we were talking about. But I remember the crinkles around her eyes and unrestrained laughter. Where was the demure unapproachable girl I met before? My mind began opening up to possibilities.

I spent the day going over sales figures and marketing promotions with Renato, then he invited me to their home. I was staying in the small hotel Europa right across the street. The thing that first impressed me about their home was the thickness of the walls. It was a fortress compared to American homes. They were at least two feet thick and made of concrete and stone. In fact, the back wall of the house was the castle wall dating back to 1000 A.D. Inside, the floor was tiled in terra cotta and heavy wooden beams supported the ceiling. The house is tastefully appointed and Vanessa's original art hangs everywhere. The family lives on the second floor and the bottom floor has a small apartment and the other family business, a fabric shop. The whole compound is surrounded by a metal gate and stone walls, including the castle wall in the back. Vanessa's Nonna (Grandmother) and Zio (Uncle) live in another house that also opens out on the same courtyard. The overall impression is one of insulated permanence and quality of workmanship designed to defy the ravages of time.

We went to dinner at a small restaurant called Ottone in Bassano del Grappa, about ten kilometers away on the river. The town is a picture postcard of what you think northern Italy should look like. The ponte vecchio, or old bridge, that crosses the river to the center of town has been in several Hollywood movies and is only open to pedestrians now. I would come to know this town well over the years, but I still feel like Hemingway every time I walk into Nardini's on the bridge for a shot of grappa.

It began to rain and we made our way back to Marostica. Vanessa's Mother and Father went to the house, but Vanessa invited me for a nightcap in town. We walked inside the castle walls to a small coffee bar called La Pergola. We had a few glasses of chianti and continued our conversations from dinner. We had entered some lively debate once I learned that her whole family was vegetarian and she had learned I was a good old boy North Carolina deer hunter. The rain fell heavily outside. The chianti warmed us and flushed our cheeks. That was when the looks started. You know the ones. They are almost the same as those from High School. But now they had a little more intent behind them. She recognized that I wanted to say something, but was holding back. She flashed a mischievous grin and disappeared to the bar. She returned with a short cold glass of wicked smelling grappa.

"Now, what is it you wanted to say?" She said with another grin.

I looked at her and paused, the alcohol working its way into my brain and removing all of the normal defenses (and discretion) I just want you to know that you are amazing.

"How so?" She was definitely encouraging me.

"You are beautiful, talented and really interesting. You make me not want to be professional."

I guess this was more than she was expecting. She looked at me for an eternity. Her face and neck blushed a deep crimson. My mind rushed to calculate every gesture

and crinkle of her eyes to interpret their meaning. I was close enough to hear her shallow breath, and smell the faint mixture of chianti and perfume.

"You know I am still married, don't you"

I'm sure from the look on my face she might as well have said "You have terminal cancer." She rushed to explain.

"I am separating from my husband. He is in the Carabinieri fighting the mafia and never home. Things are not working out."

I still said nothing. I didn't like the verb tense. I honestly can't remember what we talked about after that. I remember the short walk back in the rain. When we reached my hotel, across the street from her house, I leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. She looked surprised. Then she was gone.

The next day Renato offered to accompany me to Venice. Vanessa was coming too. The night before I had asked her to go with me alone, but I guess that wasn't proper. We needed a chaperone.

Vanessa looked tired. I learned later that her husband had been watching us from the shadows across the street when I had kissed her.

It was overcast and cold, but Venice opened her charms to us anyway. We wound our way through the narrow streets and shops and ended the day at the Guggenheim art museum. On the vaporetto Vanessa and I exchanged looks when Renato wasn't looking. My plane was leaving in an hour. We had to get to Mestre. In the car on the way I slipped her some Pablo Neruda poetry in Spanish. (Quiero hacer contigo, lo que la primavera hace con los cerezos) We were just flirting, but it had poignancy to it. I was going back to my lonely flat in Germany. She was going back to her family's house where her separated husband still lived.

At the airport, I stood in line for check-in finishing some post cards to send back to the states. Renato had gone to get us an espresso. I felt a light touch on my arm. I looked up into Vanessa's nervous expression. "You know what you said last night in the bar?"

"Yeah." I said, wondering if she was going to say something about it never working out.

"I feel the same way."

As if on cue, Renato returned with the coffee. But I didn't need it. My heart was already clipping along at a rapid rate. One more look in her eyes before I went through security and I knew that everything would change soon.

That was two months ago. Vanessa and I had talked almost every day, either on the phone or by email from my office in Germany. It was complicated. It just seemed strange that her husband was still living in the house. We decided we would wait until they were physically separate before seeing each other again. It seemed like it

was taking an eternity. When the separation was final a sense of urgency invaded our emails and phone calls.

And now, here I was. Alone in Paris and standing in a phone booth on the Champs Elysee. We had decided to talk at 3 O'clock. I called her on her cell phone.

"Pronto"

"Sono Riccardo"

"Oh, hello Ree-Chard. I'm glad you called. How is Paris?"

"Sunny, but miserable." I replied.

"What is wrong? Are you ill?" She sounded genuinely concerned. For some reason this made me feel lonelier.

"No. I'm fine. This just isn't the kind of place for me to be without you."

There was a pause.

"Vanessa?"

"Yes"

"What are we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Email is getting old. And every fiber of my being is telling me that getting involved with a recently separated woman in another country isn't the smartest thing to do."

There was another pause. A long silence. "What do you want?"

"I want everything". I paused but she didn't say anything. I had practiced this and said it with a certainty that I had felt for weeks. "I want your heart, mind, soul and body." I hesitated; thinking she was going to say something. But there was only silence. "I want to grow old with you. I want to see the world through your eyes and share mine with you until we are fused together, inseparable and complete. I want to shield you from the sadness and pain in the world and to intensify every happy moment that we are allotted by fate. That's what I want - more than anything, more than my next breath." I stopped when I realized I had been gushing. And then I realized, standing under the afternoon sun in Paris, feeling the recognition grow, that I had never really been in love before, that I had only formed short attachments. This was real. This was what the color and light in paintings and poetry was all about.

I sat back and waited. Now that I had finally said everything, I was a little numb. There was a hush in the air. The World paused while she parted her lips to speak; words that would unleash a flurry of dove's wings and a crash of cymbals, or leave

me to stumble through life with searing and lingering regret. The air seemed more still and close as if it had moved in to witness the exchange.

"Okay", she said finally in a very quiet voice.

"Okay?" I asked, needing more than this ambiguity to anchor my whirling emotion. "What does that mean?"

"Say it, Vanessa. Please."

"Say it."

"Okay Richard," She sighed. "There is nothing I can do. I can't escape it. I love you."

Now that we look back on it, it was strange that neither of us remembered smiling as those words hung in the air. But it seemed natural then. Something happened. Something we both felt. The peace; the serenity of those three words was numbing. And we both opened ourselves to the image of them. We could hear giant levers being pulled, great mechanisms shifting and a new order in our lives settling into place.

Richard and Vanessa live in Apex, NC with their two dogs, two cats and a hefty phone bill. They were married in Raleigh on the first day of Spring in 2001. On September 9th, 2001 they invited the whole family from Italy for a ring ceremony in Durham. For most of them it was their first time to America. They spoke no English. September 11th meant that they would stay longer and learn more about America. But that is another story.