

In July of '96, I was stationed at Aviano Air Base, Italy. My car arrived in late August. A blue 1995, 3.6L convertible with the giddy-up of a Vespa with a tailwind. A convertible Mustang in Italy was perfect. On the weekends I roamed the beaches of Lignano, Carole', and Bibione'.

When the weather slipped into autumn, I drove around the local areas. I spent many hours writing near the blue grotto in Gorgazzo, seated at the tables of the cafe'. But on this one late October day when the touch of winter lingered on the wind, I came upon a large cement cross lying in the dirt. I pulled the 'Stang to the side and stepped solemnly toward the scene.

It was a massive cement cross at the edge of a farmer's fallow field. The base was still standing. It had given way about four feet above the base. Thick rusted cables held the severed parts together. The scene saddened me.

I sat on the pedestal, a hand upon the rusted rebar, wondering how a cross in a Catholic nation could be left that way. I went back to the pensione' and spoke to the proprietor, Rolando. It's where I stayed when I rotated in. It was right across from the 31st Medical Group. I lived with six other Air Force guys, some rotating in and others on the way to elsewhere. I became good friends with Rolando, and his sister, Christina. We bonded over Dante's *Paolo and Francesca*. She was studying to attend law school in Milano. She was studying to be a judge.

I asked Rolando to take a drive with me. In his lap was the cool bottle of *Stella Artois*. It seemed a required talisman for men who toiled in the shadow of the Dolomiti. We pulled up to the cross and got out. I stood looking as I did when I was an altar boy, kinda devout, hands folded in front. He drank his beer and farted.

"This is what you wanted to show me?" He took a swig and looked across

the dry fields. Then, he smiled, his dark Italian eyes looking at me in disbelief.

“Damn American always want to fix shit. Cause you guys break so much shit.”

“How do we get it fixed? This is wrong.” I stepped closer to him. He chuckled and began to roll a cigarette with one hand, the bottle in the other.

“You’re just like my mom. All that mumbo jumbo stuff.” He finished rolling and turned toward the end of the dusty road, little eddies forming and dissipating in an odd ground wind.

“Dude, that thing’s been in the dirt since the Nazi’s knocked it over with a tank.” He rubbed his stubbly chin and stepped into the road, scraping his work boots on the gravel.

“Come’ere.”

He pointed to a grand old house with an ornate trellis hidden in the shadows.

“That was Nazi headquarters. They tortured people in there. They knocked that down as a message of terror.” He took a puff, an incredulous grin a constant trait.

“Locals are too afraid to touch it. Say it’s evil. Peasant superstitions.” He told me to write the local *Commune* (seat of government they say). Christina helped write the letters to get it repaired. After six months, I got a letter that read, “Domani.” That’s it.

The following spring, I came upon three men fixing the cross. I pulled the car to the side, slipped on my *Yankees* cap and got out. They were putting a copper sleeve around the broken part as they lifted it with ropes and pulleys. I approached the man who seemed to be leading the repairs. He looked down at me. He wore the oldest hat I’d ever seen, an *Alpini*.

His lined face was bronzed, his nose red, and his eyes a strange shimmering blue. Scattered around were empty *Moretti* bottles. I stood beside him. My Italian sucked. I tried my English.

“You got my letters?” He nodded, smiling, and handed me his empty. I set it at the base of the cross. I could see I was in the way. I went to get Rolando. I was so darn excited. Gleeful. On the way back he kept asking me if I was high. Then, we turned onto the farm road, passing the Nazi headquarters. I didn’t see the cross standing. My head spun. We got out. Dazed, I stood staring at the parts.

Rolando was snickering, drinking his *Stella*. The cross laid as it had been since 1943. “Crazy American,” he began, laughing. “Better not repeat this. Air Force will drug test your ass. Seven stripes or not.” He was gleeful over it.

“I’m telling you! I saw’em. Spoke to’em. Smelled his sweat. Man, I looked in his eyes.” I pointed emphatically to where the copper band had been secured. He wasn’t buying it. I drove him back. I returned and sat, leaning against the sad stone remains, struggling with the echoes of history, logic, and reality. I picked up the *Moretti* that the smiling mason had handed me. I swirled it. A gulp or two left. I drank. It tasted like beer mixed with honey. I drove home grinning, lost in ecstatic reveries of wonder, exactly who were those three guys?