

Capella Maggiore, Italy

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To desk

19:39

© A very strange thing the other day. I needed time to reflect on it: Ettsy, my landlord here had invited me to dinner. There were several other lady friends in attendance. Overall, Italians are a social culture. Katya was there as the elder of the gathering. As with all gatherings, an elder is present and respected. There was another gentleman, Mario, with his wife and daughter. There were also two other women. Lydia, a doctor at the Aviano Clinic, and Gabby, a clerk, also from the clinic.

Ettsy appeared quite ebullient to have so many people seated at her table. It was a lovely and gay affair of music, talk and laughter. A wonderful meal was followed by Tiramisu with gelato. Then espresso with biscotti, and then grappa, 'for the digestion.'

It was going on 23:00 and Lydia had to get back to the base. Mario was still there, rather drunk, as the others were. I don't drink. Not in six years. But it was at this point in the waning evening when the alcohol bit hard and the proprieties of social custom and niceties gave way to the ugly that hides underneath.

Ettsy went to a pantry, next to which stood a China cabinet. Upon opening the pantry door, the other side was reflected from the cabinet. It took me a moment to focus on the hanging banner. It held a picture of Mussolini and below it, the Swastika. I figured they were just mementos. Relics of a dead age. She didn't notice I'd seen the banner. She brought out another small bottle of grappa from Bolzano. Lydia had to go. Everyone else continued talking as I glanced at the banner of a dead age.

Lost in thought on the unfolding arc of history. Vittorio Veneto is just minutes away, closing ground of WWI. My reflections were interrupted by a scratchy record. The music started. They all stood, their faces flush from grappa. They seemed to stand a bit taller. I remained seated. I didn't know the words of their song. Something with pomp and nationalistic fervor. Then, as if on cue, right arms raised in Nazi salutes, even Mario's 17-year-old daughter, Francesca. She remembered the words.

All I could make out was something about the 'Glory of Rome.' To them, standing, singing with arm extended, I wasn't even there. Watching them, I'd receded behind the wafting veil of time. It chilled me as a military veteran. They played two songs and stood the same for both. I sat with eyes lowered, watching a

bead of moisture run down a grappa bottle while drifting on the darkness at the bottom of Bas de la Lum. Where fascists had been tossed to their deaths for an idea that destroyed the world. An ideal foisted on the delusion of a greatness that was.

Big lies begin with the word ‘again.’ A promise of a time that was, like Rome. But democracies don’t go backward. Catastrophe awaits the backward. Under the promise of ‘return’ – what lies ahead is mass upheaval. The worst of men take a nation backward – away from the light of democracy.

The song ended, they smiled, hugging each other. The music was clicked off, plates gathered, and Ettsy started a small fire in the fireplace. The night was over. Each went their own way. I took a last glance at the banner they’d saluted and slipped into the night. I crossed the narrow street and walked down a farm road under the stars with the smell of burning leaves on the air.

I thought about what I’d seen balanced against the tally of history. ‘No one really knows anyone.’ If over 100 million dead could not help people discern the folly of such beliefs, what would? They appeared as fervent for that dead vision as I am towards democracy and our grand republic.

It was the raised arm of the teenage girl that will stay with me. That’s what chilled me most. The generations that have shaped her. The ugly will go on. No wonder portraits of dictators hang in kitchens. History is only guidance. Men must want to learn. The price must be higher than our lessons. What will follow?

I still have nights when I sift on the darkness of that cave in the Consiglio. It’s not the cave that summons me with such restlessness. It is the heart of all things human. We best pray now. Later, we may not remember the words. From anyone who promises a dead age – expect the worst. Prepare for the end. For I have stood in the death camps when stationed in Germany (USO tours). I needed to see for myself the places where *work* set millions free. I now see the remains of a dead-age regathering itself from scarred landscapes and out of forgetful mouths.

It is said those who don’t learn from history are destined to repeat it. I argue that those who can’t learn have never left that past: their hearts carry the ugliness that lives on forgetfulness and banality for a dead age to recur. We must keep an eye out for that word-of-death to return in other languages. Banality seeds death.

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