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The strange creature you'll see abroad is yourself

"In your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in distant lands will be those you catch of yourself." Margaret Laurence "The Prophets Camel Bell" (1963)

I'm starting to see that: two months - twenty-five hundred miles: Inverness to Florence. I've been moving, hitching, and walking for a long long time. Fog has covered my world from Amsterdam to wherever I am now. I know I'm standing on the autostrade entrance outside of "Firenze", I know that I've been here materially for two days. But where is my head?

It seems to have roosted in some mythic "our house". The C.S.N. & Y. song courses through my head over and over. "once life was oh so hard, now everything is easy cause of you". Oh how I wish for some such haven, it's been so long since I've been encouraged by a friend, since I've been able to rest easy not having to think about the myriad difficulties of travel, since I've been able to lie in the dark with a woman. Maslow in his higher order of means is coming back to me. How right he was.

But my body is on the road. That is where my problems - and solutions rest for the moment. Keep moving. Survive. Maybe the next car will stop to gather me up.

I've not been alone here - ten others have been with me - I was the last in line. They are gone now. Even George, my hitching partner has gone. It was only ten minutes ago but I dimly remember flipping with him for a single seat in a Canadian Tourist Families Volkswagon. I guess I'm glad he won. He seemed pretty depressed. I'm tempted to step off the road and take a leak. But what if I miss my car? Chances are one in six thousand I tell myself, my bladder urgently agrees. But still. Seven cars pass in the space of a minute. I'm about to jump the rail, but I see another Volkswagon, maybe it's a tourist. Italians don't pick male freaks up it seems. I extend my thumb automatically, trying to look undangerous. It's ten yards away from me definitely tourists. It passes. I look over my shoulder ready to curse them. They pull over. I pick up my forty pound pack with one hand, drop my air mattress in the scramble and seemingly float to the car. Canadians, they're going straight to Rome. This one is over. Body stoning relief.

Ten more hours on the road outside Roma. More cold. Will the fucking fog and drizzle ever cease? At least I'm clean. Nice hostel in the city. The Dutch guy and I crash at nine under a bush across the entrance. I hate wine - but we kill a litre to help us sleep against the cold. The police have moved us twice today. Too close to the highway. The second time one of the cops takes a swing at the Dutch guy. He ducks and the other cop pulls him away. Oh how Italians hate hippies! We've been trading obscene gestures with truck drivers and businessmen all day. At first I let the glares hurt my feelings, but then I started playing the game myself. It feels better. A businessman gives us the "go to hell" sign as we cross the entrance to sleep. I give him the "up your's" with feeling. The Dutch freak turns around and points meaningfully at his asshole. The driver shakes his fist eighty yards down the road. We shake our's too.

Sleep comes easily. It's good to be warm. A small triumph over the Country. Is this travelling?

Twelve p.m. the next day after five hours, thoroughly spaced from passing car hypnosis we noted two chicks getting out of a car down the road. We talked.

Denise and Ruth had been having a hard time of it as well - not in getting picked up - they never waited longer than ten minutes for a ride in Italy. But in fending off horny chauvinistic Italians once they had gotten a ride. We decided to join forces. The Dutch guy went up the road with Ruth, and I stayed with Denise. She seemed nice, had some good hash too. We decided to meet Ruth and George in Greece.

The other two got picked up right away. We stayed and toke up for a while - stuck out our thumbs and from there things got much better. She was getting us picked up - and I was keeping us unmolested. Never waited twenty minutes for a ride - just stood beautiful Denise out front and picked our cars.

It was beautiful - being able to talk spontaneously - watching her eyes light up, long brown hair floating around her happy pretty face, smoking that good brown afghan. It was good.

After our first lift we pulled in three cars and a truck all at once. We picked a white Maserati. The driver looked quite respectable. He even had a wedding ring. She got in front, I got in back with our gear.

The man insisted that Denise light his cigarette. He started grabbing her hand - before she

could light it asking in sign language if we were married. She flashed a bad vibes look at me and ignored him. He asked her to light another smoke - she passed it to me. I lit it and gave it to him with a conciliatory smile. He wasn't touched I guess. He started weaving back and forth on the road, grabbing at her hand again. I tapped his shoulder. He stopped the car. I quickly got the equipment out, tried to shake his hand but instead blocked him as he turned away and made a grab for Denise. He was so animatedly over apologetic that I thought he was tripping. We moved away. He laid rubber sixty feet up the road.

We decided to be married for hitching purposes - it worked fairly well. We had heard that Italian had a great respect for married women. Most drivers expressed disbelief, but treated us well anyway. One gentleman bought us a really nice dinner a few days later and gave Denise an expensive pen - she refused a tooled leather satchel that he offered in addition.

The air was getting tangibly warmer by the hour heading south towards Naples. The fog thinned - and disappeared. The stars were bright, we were safely packed into a little truck with a kindly old man, feeling warmer inside as the miles went beneath us. I rolled another J. We told the old guy that it was strong English tobacco - he declined to try it. He couldn't understand why we didn't like his cigarettes.

Moonlight graced the lakes as we droned along and shone into me like firelight on cold hands. She fell asleep on my chest.

We passed Naples. The truck pulled into a gas station. I tried to explain to the little man that we

were going to Brindisi on the east coast of Italy to catch the boat to Corfu and that we should be turning east soon. He didn't understand. I showed him my map of Europe - tracing a line from where he picked us up south of Rome to where we were going. Unfortunately my map was too small to show the turn-off east. I tried to explain but he looked confused and started studying Yugoslavia. He didn't seem to recognize Italy. I kept saying "Brindisi" - making boat signals and saying "Grecia! Corfu!" he looked as if he understood. I thought he must be a truck driver. Another fifty miles. We had dinner - steaks, spaghetti, and wine. He refused to accept our money. Sixty miles more - we figured that we must have missed the turn and would have to go around the heel through Taranto to Lecce and up to Brindisi. We were so content that it didn't seem to matter too much. Another gas station. The attendant understood maps and laughed at us. We definitely missed the turn he said. Twelve-thirty a.m. Our driver wished us luck - shook our hands and went into the station hotel. We fled the neon-spotlights.

Warm drizzle. Denise half-asleep. We started rapping and we both awoke. First car picked us up. Nice man, middle-aged, fancy Renault. Seventy miles at a hundred miles an hour. Autostrade stops. Quieter, more natural curving secondary road. A lot like the T.C. around Sussex, N.B. They silently bid us good-bye at their turn; we can see that they wonder what we're doing.

Language barrier. Forty miles from Taranto above the heel of Italia. Two businessmen stopped after a light warm night rain has

started. They both get out to look us over, "hashisha? cocaina? harowina?". "No, no" we say gravely. "O.K." We get in - another fast car. They ask us questions - we manage to answer a few simple ones in simple English and Spanish. They tell us we should go to Sicily. "Sun! hota - Sicilia very good!" We pass Taranto. They let us out at their turn towards Sicily.

The road is shiny black wet - but the rain has stopped. Two big garage guys stop - due to the hour and almost non-existent amount of traffic - we get in with them, reading their faces and gestures very carefully. I always get in first now - less likelihood of Denise getting whisked away. They try to ask us where we will sleep. We motion that we don't know. We are taken to a little railway station. One of the men leaves for his home in the village nearby. The other smiles and motions us to stay - we see him talk to the wireless operator in the station. The station man unlocks the waitingroom and shows us where to get water. Friendly man. We decide to sleep outside anyway. We elect to have a few more tokes. The clouds blow past the stars. The wind is slow and balmy. We find a nice soft spot in big old olive grove near the station. Two-thirty a.m. We settle down: finally, smoke a bit, and wonder at our luck.

I think I know where my center is now. Funny how that is my concern and not "the sights". Winter hitching is a survival trip. I seem to be surviving. Geography of the mind is what I see. The other geography has been left behind. A glimpse of myself. I'm thankful.

N.C.D.



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