

DRINKS WITH MR. MAGIC

NOW, BEFORE we go any further, you must understand that I am not and never have been suicidal.

I am generally, for all intents and purposes, happy...some of the time. I mean, I don't strut around the planet with a great big grin on my face. That's what the crazy drunks do. But for unpredictable periods of any given day, I can acknowledge that I'm not miserable and actually mean it.

At any rate, during that summer of 2005, I only briefly entertained the *thought* of suicide.

Just the thought of it. Methods of self destruction weren't considered and I certainly didn't debate the merits of gunplay versus an overdose. I just wondered what it'd be like if I died. That's all. And would anyone actually care?

"Si, si, comprendo."

The Italian had an easygoing manner that I found refreshing, even charming. Perhaps because he understood some of my English so long as I kept it simple. He said few words himself, but he seemed content to listen to mine. I just felt grateful to be engaged in my first meaningful conversation with an Italian local since the start of my trip. It was my fault really. After all, I'd come to their country and I'd failed to pick up much of their language beyond ordering food. Although to be fair, pointing to menu items that contained familiar words like "spaghetti" and "pizza" entirely helped my verbosity.

He looked about forty-five although his dark olive complexion made pinpointing his age a significant challenge. He was

definitely older than me and more refined, if only because he sat so rigid and upright in his chair. There was nothing particularly distinctive about his appearance; he was neither attractive nor ugly, just well put-together. His face revealed no trace of hair beyond his eyebrows, as if he shaved his cheeks and neck every time he visited the bathroom. He was wiry and wore a dark suit that seemed two sizes too large for him. The suit made me think of a magician with extra pockets to hide his rabbits. Since we never exchanged names, I called him Mr. Magic.

I was on the wrong side of drunk and had been rambling about death. I explained to Mr. Magic that death didn't seem like an oppressive weight on my shoulders anymore. I didn't fear it, although I didn't exactly seek it out either. Death in all its horrific forms had just become everyday conversation for me. Like senior citizens discussing the weather. Lately I'd thought about death a lot, and he kept buying me drinks, so I kept talking about it. I blame my job. I work in television news.

TV news is consumed with death. A murder means a lead story, a formulaic ninety second block of time that writes itself. The parked police cars, the taped-off crime scene, the apathetic investigators scouring for fingerprints and hair follicles. And semen. It's always a good score to get the police spokesperson to say the word "semen" on camera.

Then cut to the suddenly deaf and blind neighbors wondering how this sort of thing could have happened inside their neighborhood. Despite the desperate throes of murder on their doorstep, nobody heard or saw anything out of the ordinary. They were all just "minding their own business."

Then we reveal the tear-stained relatives of the victim eulogizing the deceased with no consideration for their private grief. When the TV cameras parked in front of their manicured lawns, they really couldn't help themselves, could they? The mother changes into a pious pantsuit and holds up the victim's high school photo to imply hope and innocence.

Finally, the earnest reporter with the fabulous hair flatly reports that the police can't release any more information at this time. They'll continue to follow the story, but all they have so far is dumbfounded residents, crying mothers, and a sour-faced cop who said "semen."

Unless there's a suspect. If that's the case, add another thirty seconds to the story. Now the deaf and blind neighbors can add their personal version of simulated shock and horror.

"He was so quiet. He mowed his lawn. He seemed like such a nice neighbor..." Beware of the quiet neighbor with an operational lawn mower! He just might kill you one day.

Reporting death daily toughens your skin and strips your humanity. None of it affects you anymore. Murder means ninety seconds of content, that's all. Ninety seconds closer to the upbeat weather forecaster predicting snow squalls and freezing rain. Ninety seconds closer to your dinner break.

An assistant director once cried at work because she'd just given birth to a baby and the top story that day was about a child killer. As she counted down the show, she burst into tears. "Five...four...sons of bitches...three...two, damn, I hate this business...one..." Instead of sympathy, everybody else rolled their eyes and snickered.

I replaced her. In my job interview the director asked about my organizational skills, my attention to details, and my ability to handle stress. He then wondered if I'd ever cry in the control room. His jaded joke was quickly dismissed and instead we discussed my pointless Communications degree.

I got the job. And I've never cried in the control room. But I do reflectively mourn about the emptiness of my work day, gluing my weary eyes to the ticking clock, counting backwards from ten and ensuring that all murders and fatal accidents finish by 11:59:58. Pain and suffering float by endlessly while my mind numbs.

Now the real TV newsroom orgasm is the large scale natural disaster. Earthquakes are favorites. Buildings crumbling, people ducking for cover, dramatic recoveries and the endless possibility of great shakey video.

Unfortunately, most of these disasters occur in faraway places with hard to pronounce names. And you need good numbers.

“Ten thousand dead? Has anyone heard of this place? Do we care?”

“Thirty thousand dead? We have a new lead story, people. The neighborhood murder will have to go second.”

“Fifty thousand? All right, we should probably send somebody over there. Do we need a visa to enter this country? Could somebody please find it on the map?”

It’s all numbers. It’s not about real, formerly breathing people. A number like “fifty thousand” carries weight and significance and looks great in a graphic. But nobody in a TV newsroom pauses for even one second to consider the tremendous loss of life. Everyone’s too worried about getting the spelling right, finding a horrified witness who will talk on camera, and ordering the right food for dinner. Death is our business and without it, we have apparently little to say.

“*Si, si*, death every day. Terrible but what?” Mr. Magic shrugged.

We sat inside the Bar Francese in the town of Amalfi, the most inviting option for alcohol in the Piazza del Duomo. The café’s patio dominated the square, but I preferred to tuck myself inside the open glass doors and lean against the corner wall. With a cock of my head, I could admire the steps leading to the bronze doors of the tenth century Duomo di Sant’Andrea.

Nevertheless, my eyes mostly concentrated on the shotglasses of *limoncello* we’d been drinking. This sweet yellow liqueur, made from local lemons, had a cough syrup texture that belied its supposed sour nature. The apparent beauty of Amalfi limoncello is that you don’t need a distillery to make it. It can be easily prepared at home with just a few ingredients, including the perfect lemons picked from the perfect trees entrenched in the perfect soil that tumbles down from the town’s stately slopes. This explains the abundance of limoncello shops throughout Amalfi, each one offering distinctive homemade flavors in a dizzying array of glassware shapes and sizes. The brand at Bar Francese

made my lips curl, but Mr. Magic kept ordering them and I kept drinking them.

When I first sat down, the staff in black slacks and open white shirts openly ignored me, even though I was their only customer. Perhaps Italians don't eat alone in restaurants. Perhaps they assumed that somebody would join me. "There's no way he's eating here by himself. It's impossible." Perhaps they were politely waiting for a late missing friend to eventually arrive so we could both order together. But I doubt it.

I shared the interior space with the owner who wore a bright Hawaiian shirt, but he refused to budge from the cash register that separated the gelato display from the espresso and pastry bar. When potential customers wandered inside the café to sample the ice cream, the owner pointed out the flavors, while waving a waiter inside to do the scooping. Espresso bar customers suffered the same fate. Their caffeine fix would have to wait as Hawaiian Shirt wildly gestured for the outside help. I'm sure he noticed me sitting all alone, but he failed to wave the men over to serve me.

Service improved, or shall I say "began" when Mr. Magic joined my corner table.

I'd been "talking" to a young American couple who were painfully deciding which gelato flavor to consume. I overheard their whispers and asked where they were from. The man said "Pittsburgh" and that was it. I had interrupted his gelato decision-making process. End of conversation.

At that moment, Mr. Magic wandered into Bar Francese and joined my table.

"Pittsburgh. I know Pittsburgh." Perhaps he had a riveting story about Pittsburgh and was desperate to finally unburden himself, or perhaps he just felt lonely.

"I'm not from Pittsburgh," I said. "He's from Pittsburgh."

A waiter sporting a bowtie dashed over and asked what we wanted to drink. Mr. Bowtie had likely dismissed the open shirt policy and added the neck accessory to impress Hawaiian Shirt.

Grateful for the long awaited service, I attempted to order a beer. But Mr. Magic shook his head and demanded two limoncellos instead. Bowtie nodded and scurried away.

The sullen Pittsburgh couple left silent and empty-handed. The twenty-four unique gelato flavors had failed to inspire them. Now it was just Mr. Magic and I. And after twelve more limoncellos, it remained Mr. Magic and I.

“Perchè Amalfi? E perchè solo?”

So why travel to Amalfi and why alone? The second part was easier to answer. Because no one wanted to come with me. Most of my friends had already traveled to Europe after university. I couldn't afford it at the time, so I went camping with my dumpy asexual neighbor, Laura Carroll, in the British Columbia interior. And I wasn't allowed to venture over her imaginary line across the canvas floor. It rained every day. Most of my friends returned from the European continent with wild stories of debauchery and sexual conquests. All I had to talk about was a wet tent with missing pegs.

Most of my friends found careers with differing degrees of success; then married partners with differing degrees of compatibility.

Between the ages of twenty-six and twenty-seven, I attended fifteen weddings. I drank heavily at each one because they always signified a goodbye. It's too difficult for a single man to continue a solid friendship with a married one. Wives get in the way. Soon there are prescribed dinner times. And you can't call after ten o'clock. And no one wants to hear about how you got laid.

And then come the babies. Now there are also prescribed nap times, bath times, and story times. And you can't call anymore because the baby might need attention. And nobody wants to hear about how you slept eight hours. Babies are always the final death knell to a friendship. Unless you have them too. And I don't.

So I have new friends now. But they're work friends. And I don't want to travel with work friends after seeing them for eight hours a day, five days a week.

The sad thing is that when you get fired, or quit, or move into another department, your work friends swiftly vanish. You then

realize that everything you had in common with them was work-related. And once you're no longer part of their everyday workday minutia that common thread unravels too...

So I traveled alone.

"Sì, sì. Hai famiglia?" Mr. Magic ordered two more limoncellos. I begged him to stop. He acquiesced and switched my order to *crème di limoncello*, limoncello's evil cousin. It was a cream-based liqueur that reminds one of Bailey's, but still tarts your tongue with a hint of the local lemon.

I couldn't fully explain my family situation to Mr. Magic. The truth is I'm just not close to anyone in my family. It wasn't malicious or anything, just a simple fact of age difference.

My mother gave birth to me at the age of forty-seven. Six months earlier, the doctor told her to abort because she was too old. He said there was a fifty percent chance that I'd be born with a physical or mental affliction. However, my parents were Dutch Catholic and they believed I was a gift from God. They had never adopted any form of birth control and believed that if God wanted them to have a baby, what right did they have to try and stop His divine grace?

I was born one hundred percent healthy with no discernable malady, so my dad hosted a tremendous party with family and friends. Then early the next morning, he visited the hospital pharmacy and bought my mother her first supply of birth control pills.

My special status as the third child of a practicing Catholic family earned me no favors. My parents never read to me, played with me, or told me they loved me. They were too tired.

As a teenager, my parents were already sixty. They seemed more like grandparents, but without the cloying heaps of sentimentality. They'd already gone through the difficult teen years with my brother and sister, so they left me alone to my own devices.

My brother is twenty years older than me, while my sister is two years older than that. By the time I was a teenager, they'd long

left the house and married. I've always treated them like an aunt and uncle, divulging no personal stories or secrets, and just idly chitchatting to fill the moments we have to spend together. To this day, I don't understand them and they don't understand me. In fact, the misunderstanding borders on disappointment. I'm not married, I don't own a house, I don't have children. I'm still their baby brother with the fifty percent chance of a birth handicap.

I didn't mention any of this to Mr. Magic. It was easier to tell him that I had no family. Although there was some underlying, twisted truth to that sentiment, so it didn't feel cruel to say it out loud. And when Mr. Magic toasted me with a sad shake of his head, it felt right.

"E perchè Amalfi? Perchè l'Italia?"

I was turning thirty and obviously unhappy with the way life treated me. I couldn't bear the passing of that monumental milestone surrounded by a tired, disappointed family and a few transient work friends.

A girl I liked at work suggested a trip to take my mind off the stress of my birthday. "Hey, how about Italy? History, culture, romance, you might even come home happy."

She made the suggestion in May 2005 and by the end of June I boarded a plane to Rome. Everything she said made total sense. This trip would be about me. I'd meet people, I'd see history, I'd get laid by a local, I'd experience culture, I'd get laid by another local, and maybe I'd meet a fellow traveler and get laid again.

"You might even come home happy." This was my new mantra and I wanted it permanently tattooed across my chest.

I landed in Rome wearing an unfamiliar grin on my face. I easily figured out the train transfer from Fiumicino airport to Termini train station and arrived in central Rome like I'd been traveling all my life.

And then I was robbed.

I blame Rome. Perhaps the ancient city fosters petty crime by denying its citizens certain inalienable rights. Like chairs. Rome has few public benches for people to sit down. Wait for a bus? Stand. Wait to get inside a museum? Stand. Wait for your train which has no hope of arriving on time? Stand. Only at train stations do Romans rebel. People sit on window sills, railings, bicycle hitching posts, and atop their carefully packaged luggage. The exhausted eventually collapse and sit on the ground like dogs.

Another problem with Rome is that there's no grass. Follow your city guidebook to any park and you'll find an impenetrable gate protecting a lush lawn. Grass is not to be touched, but merely observed through metal bars. Standing up, of course.

I therefore propose that the lack of chairs and exploitable grass creates a mass discontentment. And that discontentment leads to anti-social behavior which manifests itself in hurting innocent victims. Like me.

Exiting Termini station, I faced the smog-churning traffic of Via Giovanni Giolitti. My mind wandered to the faceless people positioned around the train station entrance doing nothing but perfecting their vacant stares.

I didn't bring a backpack as I didn't want to stand out as a budget-minded tourist. I didn't bring conventional luggage either. Only the weak tote their travel possessions on wheels. I opted for a non-descript shoulder bag to blend into the Italian crowd. But my pale complexion obviously blew my cover.

At the first sight of a break in the traffic, I shuffled across the street, with the heaviness of my bag precluding me from being nimble.

My guidebook suggested several hotels near the train station, but I kept walking, staying clear of the street people of Via Gioberti. Like the gypsy woman squatting in the gutter with her baby, her cardboard sign pleading for money in three languages. And the wandering fat man with the CD walkman, one earplug

dangling off his ear, broadcasting the faint strains of Madonna's "Material Girl."

I turned onto Via Principe Amedeo to look for accommodation. Many hotels share the same building with other hotels, at a rate of one hotel per floor, so the search time is minimal. Hotel Hollywood, Hotel Stella Elsa, Hotel Contilla, and Hotel Romantica were full. Hotel Giorgino had a small sign hanging around the neck of its small Caesar statue on the reception desk that read "*completo*/full, don't ring the bell please." Hotels Margot, Gabrielle, Orlanda, Amadeus, Teti, Milo, and Ferrarese had small slips of paper taped under their buzzers that also read "completo/full."

I retreated back on to Via Gioberti and tried both sides of the street. Hotels Bergamo, Max, Gloria, Charter were all two stars and too full. Hotel Scott House advertising "All Comforts" also had no room, but did recommend the Hotel Cortorilla back on Via Principe Amedeo.

Standing near the Banca di Roma ATM machine on Via Gioberti, I decided to withdraw some money first. I was still unfamiliar with the sensation of a money purse nestled against my crotch. Instead of the comfort that my identification was safely sitting astride my penis, I felt vulnerable and subjected myself to frequent hand taps to my groin to ensure that the money belt was still in its place.

I glanced in all directions before approaching the bank machine. Ignored by everyone, I unclipped my belt and rifled through its pockets. Debit card, credit card, passport, and plane ticket home were all safe and sound. I plucked the debit card and withdrew one hundred euros, still unsure of the current exchange rate, but confident that it'd be enough for now.

I rolled up the belt and slipped it inside the side pocket of my shoulder bag. The walk to the recommended hotel was a mere block and a half away and I'd need the passport and credit card within minutes. I zipped shut the side pocket and heaved the bag back onto my shoulder.

I turned left on Via Principe Amedeo and found the sign for

Hotel Cortorilla. The grand exterior doors were propped open inviting me to walk through the hallway tunnel into the cobblestone courtyard. Yucca trees and other hard-to-kill plants were scattered along the walls. Every apartment window was shuttered. All doors leading to private apartments were closed and unmarked. Except for one. A tiny wall plate indicated the Hotel Cortorilla, fifth floor. Other hotels were advertised but my eyes paid no attention. I had found my recommendation.

I pressed the button for the gated lift, finally noticing the patches of sweat soaking my shirt. The elevator, of course, didn't budge. Resigned to the fact that nothing on this trip would be easy, I slowly ascended the staircase.

The fifth floor entrance offered instant hospitality with a reception desk and a vending machine stocked with chips and sodas. A long meal room beckoned around the corner, presumably leading to a hallway with the appointed rooms.

The hotel receptionist sat on a stool behind the desk texting friends on his cell phone. Burly and hairy, his fat fingers clumsily prodded the buttons; a task that required his full concentration.

"You need a room? Yes?"

No Italian was needed here. Out of breath, I nodded and lowered my bag to the floor.

"Passport, please."

I bent down to retrieve my money belt from my bag and my heart stopped beating.

The side pocket was unzipped and gaping open. A tidal wave of disbelief rippled through my body. My fingers felt around the empty side pocket, then reached for my groin. Maybe I was wearing the belt. Nope. I ripped my bag apart. The distinct memory of wrapping up the belt and placing it inside my side pocket haunted my mind, but nevertheless I checked every fold of every compartment. Seven or eight times my hands returned to the side pocket hoping for discovery. Nope. No money belt, no passport, no debit card, no credit card, no money, no plane ticket home.

“My money belt. I’ll...I’ll be right back. There’s been a mistake. I’ll be right back.”

I left my bag and dashed for the door. Down five flights of stairs, through the courtyard, along Via Principe Amedeo, to the ATM machine on Via Gioberti. The panic had washed away, replaced by a steely resolve to find some remnant of my cache. I’d already accepted the loss of my passport, clearly my most valuable possession. My only hope was that whoever had robbed me had taken the passport and my money and thrown away the rest, knowing that I’d immediately cancel my bank cards.

But how did they do it? No one had jostled me or touched me. Someone, somehow, had mysteriously approached me, correctly guessed which pocket contained my money, unzipped my side pocket, took my money belt and walked away, without me noticing a single solitary step. I would have felt more stupid if I wasn’t also completely amazed.

I walked back to the hotel with my head down, eyeing the sidewalk and the street gutter. I almost tripped over an old beggar lying against a wall, wearing dirty black socks and one shoe. Inside her other shoe, there was a Styrofoam cup which beckoned for money. She nodded at me, searching for recognition for her ingenuity. “Look at me. I got a cup in a shoe!”

By the time I returned to the hotel I had accepted my full financial loss, although it didn’t stop me from looking through my bag three more times.

The hotel receptionist, whose name was Roberto, was now joined by his older sister, Nadia. She had radiant orange hair due to a bad blonde dye job.

Roberto presented me with a wave of his hand as if to say, “This is the dumb ass who lost his money on his first day in Rome.”

Nadia didn’t bother with a greeting or faux sympathy. “Don’t blame Italy! It’s the fucking gypsies!”

She knew exactly what to do. She poked her brother and told him to hand over his cell phone.

I started to make my financial arrangements and half-listened to Nadia's half-Italian/half-English ramble about the sea of gypsies taking over continental Europe one felony at a time.

The Canadian embassy booked me an appointment the following morning to issue me a temporary passport. The unsympathetic woman on the phone congratulated me for mentioning that I had a photocopy of my original. "That helps. But you'll need a police report. Don't be late."

The bank canceled my debit card, but couldn't send a replacement to anywhere in the world apart from my home address in Toronto. Understandable, but screw you anyway. And the gypsies.

The credit card company, more sensitive to my predicament, promised that fifteen hundred Canadian dollars would be sent to a Western Union office within twenty-four hours. "That should be enough to buy a one-way ticket home. Of course you'll need a passport to claim that money. They won't accept photocopies."

I handed the phone back to Roberto just as Nadia wrapped up her theory that the gypsies were the cause of childhood obesity in the United States.

While Roberto wandered off to continue communicating with his text-friendly friends, I explained my financial situation to Nadia. She offered me a room and said I could pay her back when I received my Western Union money. I hugged her so hard that the perspiration patches from my shirt stained her silk blouse.

But there was no room for me on the fifth floor. Roberto led me to a satellite apartment, zigzagging the streets west of Termini. I never noted the street names; the route was memorized visually. A right after the Caribbean flag store, a left after the dumpster that smelled like a dead family of rodents. Then straight down the dark shady lane to the unmarked apartment building with the big door that required a clumsy key and tremendous strength to open and close. Once inside, there was a choice of platform passageways. One led to a dead-end, the other to three apartments. Another large key was needed for the shared bathroom while a tiny one was finally needed for my room.

Roberto left while I considered my underwhelming lodgings. The squeaky, bumpy bed, the cramped desk, the musty smelling dresser, the television set with the bent antenna. I didn't unpack. Seconds later, Rome map in my back pocket, I was back on the street, struggling with the heavy door and its unforgiving key.

My visit to the police station proved to be a test of patience. I waited inside the holding area for two hours while the officer in charge helped all the locals first, in a seemingly random order regardless of who had been waiting the longest. Several times new arrivals pointed to me out of courtesy, but the officer shook his head.

I sat in virtual silence until a woman from Cuba entered the room. She knew some English and we immediately exchanged stories about how our passports had been stolen. Hers was snatched from her open purse while she e-mailed a friend at a dodgy internet café. Hearing that I'd lost everything she graciously offered me one hundred euros then seemed reluctant to give me her address so I could repay her later from my Western Union money.

After helping all the Italians, the police finally helped the Cuban. I was next. Or rather last. Eventually a supervisor summoned me into his office. He spoke a little English and presented me with a form to fill out indicating where the theft took place and what I had lost. As soon as I'd finished, he stamped the bottom of the form with a formidable seal indicating the date, time, and address of the police station. He made a photocopy for me then waved me out of his office with a flourish.

"Do you ever find stolen passports?"

"Impossible."

"So why did I have to file a police report?"

He shrugged and pushed my document underneath the pile of other useless police reports that cluttered his desk.

I wandered the streets for hours, seeing nothing, going nowhere. I just wanted to get out of Rome. In desperate need of a chair, I settled for the Spanish Steps.

Designed by Italians, funded by the French, linking the Spanish embassy to a French church, the great staircase of one hundred and thirty-eight steps connects the Piazza di Spagna below with the Trinita dei Monti church above. But you can be forgiven for not knowing the church is even there with the monstrous Lancome Paris perfume billboard splattered across its base.

I found a spot on the second tier of steps and faced the piazza washed in a warm amber glow from the streetlights. Most people gathered here to rest, meet friends, or make some new ones. I was invisible. A crush of humanity surrounded me and I felt nothing but loneliness.

The American hippie bongo players only added to my gloom. They pounded a relentless, tuneless beat fully believing that they created a transcendent and inspiring, ultra-groovy vibe. I spent the next forty-five minutes creating innovative ways to kill them in my head. Most methods involved fire. Sometimes I ignited their wooden drums. Other times I torched their flammable dreadlocked hair.

I also watched the Italian courtship melodrama unfold. The men were kept busy by whistling, muttering, and clicking their tongues at every woman who paraded within their peripheral vision. In their view, every woman who dares to put one foot in front of another and propels herself forward clearly craves their lustful attention.

And some women did. Some even waited for their own private moment and then slowly rose from their step, monopolizing the eager eyeballs of the men. Then they'd move from one side of the staircase to the other, seductively stepping over the strewn bodies and basking in the whistles of praise that followed.

Many others simply used the site as a flight of stairs to carry them from point A to point B. Like the senior tour groups who ascended the steps with purpose, heads down to navigate each step, not pausing until they reached the top.

Then there were the expat touts, in matching bright yellow T-shirts, advertising their Roman pub crawl, which should be more accurately called, "The No Imagination Tour of Rome's

Worst Bars.” These are always popular among American frat boys who believe they’re getting a grand overview of the city’s nightlife, not realizing that every pub or club they’re led to is full of other tourists on equally delusional tours. Few even realize that there are no actual Roman locals inside the club, despite the glaring clue that some of the bartenders can’t even speak Italian.

I just wanted to get out of Rome. But fifteen hundred dollars on a credit card advance wouldn’t get me very far. Only home.

But I didn’t want to go home. My old friends bragged of a summer of European debauchery and sex. My trip lasted a drink-free, sexless thirty minutes. And my milestone birthday was still five days away. Going home now spelled failure and humiliation. I didn’t want to return to the disappointed family and transient work friends. They were everything I wanted to avoid. I needed my happiness.

I also needed more money, obviously. I could have tried to borrow money from my friends but I didn’t like my chances. They had mortgages and babies now.

But perhaps I didn’t have to ask them for money explicitly. Maybe if I just e-mailed to tell them what had happened, a sensitive soul would kindly offer me a loan.

Then I realized that they also had wives and husbands now. “Well, he’s *your* friend, not mine. And he got drunk at our wedding. And the card that came with his shitty gift said ‘goodbye.’ And he meant it too. He never comes over and he never shows any interest in our kids. Now all of a sudden we get an e-mail from him, right out of the blue, and he needs money. Well, he can forget it...”

I suppose I could have tried to borrow money from my family. During a particularly dry freelance period of my career, before my full-time TV news job, before my listless misery of counting backwards while the city raged in neighborhood murders, I once borrowed money from my brother. He gave me cash from his line of credit account, then kept a monthly tabulation of the total

interest he had to pay on the outstanding principal balance *plus* calculated the interest he could have generated from his financial institution's best savings account—which was completely unreasonable because my loan money didn't come out of his pocket or his saving account but through the good courtesy of his bank! Nevertheless, every month I received a bill in the mail with both interest amounts added on top of the remaining principal.

After I paid him back in full, including all the accrued interest, he and his wife would still punctuate every subsequent conversation with pointed phrases like “Well, there was that time we helped you out when you needed money.” Or, “Zack can afford a steak dinner now, but a couple of years ago he couldn't even afford canned luncheon meat. Lucky for him, we helped him out.” So yes, I could have tried to borrow money from my family, but then I'd rather die...

“I'd rather die.” The thought bounced around my head for a frightening moment. It was time to leave the Spanish Steps.

I wandered the streets again until I found an internet café. I wrote to the girl I liked at work. Not to obtain her money or her pity, just to tell somebody what had happened to me. To get it off my chest, in English, in detail, without the crackpot theory that rampaging gypsies were conquering Europe by stealing my money belt.

I wrote a three page e-mail oozing with frustration and disappointment. Then without further debate, I swallowed my pride and wrote a short, desperate e-mail to a few old friends. Perhaps the whiff of European nostalgia would soften their hearts. Perhaps, in the future, I'll memorize the names of their kids and show interest in their exhausting stories about the cute little things Little Junior did at daycare.

Customers were nursing their final glass of wine when I finally sat down to eat at the Canova Restaurant. The eatery overlooked the south entrance of the Piazza del Popolo, famous for its three thousand two-hundred year-old obelisk which Caesar Augustus

brought back from Egypt. A dozen white linen outdoor tables spilled onto the cobblestone street that bled into the square. I flashed the Cuban's money and caught the attention of the reluctant waiter.

"Pizza?"

"*No, solo cose freddo.*" He pointed to the cold sandwich section of the menu.

"*Freddo?*"

"*Si.*" He pointed again, insulted that he had to repeat himself.

Hidden among the cold sandwiches I spotted an offering of lasagne. I pointed to it, further annoying the waiter that I had discovered the one secret hot item.

"And beer. That's *freddo* too, *si?*"

The waiter audibly sniffed as he turned his heels.

I sat behind a woman who wore an elegant white jacket over elegant white pants. She held her cigarette behind her shoulder with a bent elbow to keep the smoke away from her face, so it drifted across the plate of my runny but hot lasagne. Normally I would have complained, but she spoke in English as she told her friend about the Amalfi coast.

"Breathtaking coastline, beautiful towns clinging to cliffs, perpendicular paradise." She must have been quoting a guidebook. The words "beautiful" and "charming" were a tad overused but I got the point. It was her favorite place on Earth and she couldn't wait to return.

I was the last customer to leave the restaurant. The Cuban's money served me well as I sucked back my fifth beer. It was time to consider my remaining options.

Fifteen hundred dollars would return to my pocket the following day. I could take that money and ride it as long as possible, at least until my birthday. Maybe the embassy could help me with some cash. Perhaps the credit card company could send me more. And despite the specter of angry spouses, maybe somebody would offer me a loan.

Whatever the case, I refused to go home. That shitty job? Those friends? That family? Maybe I could stay here, work here, not work here, drink here, relax here, get laid here, not get laid here, think about getting laid here, spend every last cent here until there was nothing left. As long as my monumental milestone trip made me happy! Even if it killed me...!

It was the second time that night that ending my life crossed my mind. I shuddered and drained my beer.

“Fuck it, I’m going to Amalfi.”