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Summer Of My Silence

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About Trieste

"And trieste ah trieste ate I my liver" – James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*

Trieste lies near the border with Croatia where the Istrian peninsula ends and the Adriatic Sea coastline takes a sharp westward turn towards Venice.

The fate of Trieste mirros the tormented history of Europe’s recent past. A bustling Austro-Hungarian port up to the First World War and Italian since then, Trieste had experienced political turmoil in the aftermath of WWII. In 1945 Yugoslav freedom fighters fought German troops in and around town. When the war ended, both Italy and Yugoslavia placed a claim on Trieste and its surrounding territory. In 1947, the victors, that is, USA, UK, France and Russia, unable to decide how to resolve the territorial claims by the two countries, in an attempt to cool down the aggression and maintain peace, had the United Nations Security Council establish the Free Territory of Trieste, with UN forces stationed there. The Free Territory included the town of Trieste, a sliver of south Friuli coast and a narrow strip of the northwestern Istrian coast.

The area in contention was split in two, a smaller Zone A with the town of Trieste and a larger Zone B. While the Free Territory was supposed to be an independent country, it never was. Zone A was administered by allied forces and Zone B by the Yugoslav army.

I heard eyewitnesses talk about the events of the early ‘50s while Trieste was under the UN control. They said that on several occasions trainloads of people from Italy disembarked in Trieste during the night. Italy understood the value of social unrest better than the young country of Yugoslavia. The following day the mob that had arrived the previous night marched through the street pretending to be a spontaneous uprising of the locals and demanded the return of Trieste to Italy. With a problem on its hands, the UN searched for a solution.

In 1954, the UN permanently dissolved the Free Territory, with Zone A returning to Italy and Zone B given to Yugoslavia.

The present and the past

“Silence is the pain that writing relieves” – Richard Rhodes, *How to Write*

On the wooded shores about four miles west of the city stands a small luxury hotel. With a red tiled roof, dark brown wooden window frames, green outside shutters and surrounded by large cement flower pots, the tan-colored building is an exquisite example of the distinctly Italian architecture. To the left of a large restaurant’s terrace is a steep narrow footpath. Concealed by the lush coastal vegetation, it leads down to a rocky beach. Pine, oak, cypress and olive trees that envelop the hotel are mirrored in the clear shallow waters.

“How beautiful!” my wife had exclaimed upon our first arrival.

She opens the window to let in the clean air freshened by the summer rain. The cool sea breeze blows softly about the room. I stand with my right shoulder leaning against the frame of the open window, palm resting on the sill. Unable to detach myself from the events of the past twenty-four hours, I reflect on my first day back in Trieste after fifty fast years.

The sunlight is ebbing. The Adriatic Sea lies below me. There are a few far white caps roughed up by the vestiges of the wind that brought an unexpected storm earlier in the afternoon. The Miramare castle is down the cliff and slightly to my left. The city and its docks are beyond the castle. Straight across the bay the distant Istrian peninsula that yesterday dissolved into the horizon now lies distinctly visible through the limpid air. The sun, its rays fighting the breaking clouds, is setting to my right in the direction of Venice.

“Why did your family leave?” my wife had asked last night.

She is in the bathroom now getting ready to go out to have dinner.

Clamor from restaurant guests has increased. I lower my head toward the cacophony of voices rising from the terrace below. Mixed with the voices, I hear wind jostling the pine trees, seagulls cawing and the crashing of distant waves. My mind seems taken up with the view and the sound wafting up through the open window.

Train tracks are up the hill, a few hundred yards behind the hotel. We heard a train pass by earlier. Its regular beat still resonates in my ears.

The Adriatic Sea, a train, the scent of pine trees, I find myself feeling wistful.

*Twelve year olds do not fret about the weather. I do not remember if that August night was balmy or starry other than that it did not rain. My mother, who stayed behind and did not travel with me, had placed me on the Orient Express shortly before midnight. On the way to the train station she urged me to look around. Pointing through the trolley’s window to direct my look toward the passing buildings, she said, “You will never see them again”. I looked out and saw the white French Embassy building. What she said meant nothing to me. Funny what sticks in our minds; I clearly remember that she said it when the trolley passed by the Embassy.*

*Of that night I remember being called “little Italian” by a neighbor who came along with us, of falling asleep soon after the train left the station and of being awakened by the border police. I do not know what time the train stopped at the border other than it was still pitch black outside. I recall the noise made by the military boots, the yelling “Wake up. Passports. Wake up”, the loud banging of the machine-gun butts against the side of the train, the forceful opening of the compartment doors and the sudden glare of lights. I remember looking outside the window and seeing silhouetted against the total darkness, the light from the train revealing a man in handcuffs escorted by police officers.*

*I knew that I was safe. I had a valid passport. The following day I would hand that red passport with a golden star imprinted on its cover over to my grandfather, never to see it again. When the train restarted I went back to sleep. I slept as we crossed into Italy. Italy to anyone born after WWII on that side of the Iron Curtain seemed a faraway place, almost located on a different planet. Shortly after leaving the border town of Trieste the train travels along a sea route with tracks on a cliff overlooking the Adriatic Sea.*

*Sun reflecting from the surface of the sea blinded me when I woke up. I lowered the window. I remember the regular beat of a moving train and the red tiled roofs swiftly passing by, the scent of pine trees and the warmth emanating from the sea below. Sun reflections made a wide arrow that pointed towards me and as the train moved the arrow’s tip stayed aimed at my chest.*

*I have spent summers at the seaside and the Adriatic was not new to me. Nevertheless, the immensely beautiful scene inspired me to think about my future. I was lucky that it was a gorgeous morning. I felt that the world was promising a future as bright as that golden reflection of sunlight. There were no social constraints imposed upon me. I perceived nobody else other than me on that train and a distant but auspicious world. I was palpably aware that I was alone, a sentiment that obstinately persisted for many years while I was growing up.*

*Of all the things from my childhood, I miss the most the marvel and surprise of discoveries, revelations and novel sensations. That morning’s Adriatic Sea, the moving train and the pine trees were the last sight, sound and smell of my youth. Years later, as a spectator to the events of my life, I recognized that after that day I would never be young again.*

*The world I sensed the day I crossed the border was without an arbitrary authority to defy or social orders to dismantle. It was not a world to rebel against; it was a world to be conquered. I realized that I was ready to set out on the conquest.*

*I felt excitement of the unknown and the youthful exhilaration brought on by uncertainty. In place of the wretched anguish one would expect when leaving one’s birthplace knowingly for good, caressed by the wind blowing in from the train’s open window, I felt inebriated by life lust.*

*The fear would come soon enough. Less than a half year later I would find myself in the same border town of Trieste, roaming its streets homeless following my grandfather’s suicide, an undocumented and foreign kid who did not speak the local language. My mother, who had to resort to blackmailing a party official to obtain the passport, would find me there a few months later.*

We hide from the rain under the long eaves of the columns that flank the large iron gate of the cemetery entrance. The downhill boulevard on my right is busy. People are rushing, seeking cover under the doorways. No umbrellas are in sight. Cars begin to slow down, windshield wipers set to high speed. I shift my gaze to the valley in front of us, its view obscured by the rain. There are more buildings today than the last time I was here. We stand at the entrance of the small Orthodox-Christian cemetery. Below it, the much bigger Catholic one extends over the entire hill slope.

People and cars to my right and gravestones and monuments as far as the eye can see on my left remind me of the last paragraph of “The Dead” by James Joyce: “*snow falling faintly*” - rain falling vigorously, in this case – “*through the universe…..upon all the living and the dead”.*

The rain starts the moment we leave my grandfather’s grave, even before the clouds arrive. One moment we are in front of the grave with the valley and a blue sky in the background; the next, as we turn around to face the exit, raindrops begin falling upon us. Rain falls as we rush for cover. Big drops, typical of summer showers fall all around.

The sudden downpour makes the cemetery custodian exclaim, “This is a surprise”.

“There was no rain in the weather forecast for today,” he adds.

By the time we stop under the eaves, the clouds have rolled in. Expecting the rainstorm to be short-lived, we opt to wait it out instead of running for the car that was parked half way down the hill.

“Your grandfather is crying,” my wife says.

“What! What did you say?”

I turn to face her. What I hear is unexpected. Her words surprise me. They are uncharacteristic of her.

“These raindrops are his tears. He saw you. He knows that you came to visit him and is grieving now. He regrets not being together with you while you were growing up. He is sorry that he was not there for you. Your grandfather is crying”, she repeats.

I turn sideways and extend my right arm and a barrage of raindrops falls on my sleeve. I watch the rain falling around us; on the mute stones behind us; on the leaves of the poplar trees in front.

From under the covers of the eaves, I watch my grandfather’s tears collecting in the cupped palm of my outstretched arm, each big drop lifting and falling back and spilling off my hand onto the wet ground and running off downhill as a fast moving ever-growing stream.

*My grandmother and I arrived in Trieste on an early afternoon in mid-October. We saw my grandfather standing on the platform as the train approached the station. After the obligatory hugs and kisses, he told us that he did not have a place for us to stay. My grandmother was flabbergasted and crushed. He wanted us to remain at the station while he looked for a place to spend the night and with that, he left.*

*Laden with all of our material possessions, mine in a grocery bag, we moved toward the station main hall and stopped at a bench near the beginning of the tracks. I looked at my grandmother. She sat with a lost expression on her face and endlessly repeated under her breath, “He has lost his mind”. Over and over she muttered sometimes indistinctly and sometimes loud enough for me to hear words about my grandfather that hurt deeply.*

*I adored my grandfather. He was like a father to me. We take for granted our parent’s love. Their love is assumed and as such it goes unnoticed. My grandfather’s love did not escape my notice because I knew that he was not my real grandfather. He was my grandmother’s second husband.*

*Shortly after obtaining a divorce from her loveless pre-arranged first marriage, my grandmother married the person who I came to know as grandfather. He was a scion of a wealthy family of winemakers. Before the war their blissful life was a string of dinner parties and social galas. Then the war came and everything changed. But you heard that about the war before.*

*Within a few months of the occupation, my real grandfather was executed as retaliation for the death of German soldiers. The Nazis had threatened that for each German soldier killed ten Jews would die. During the first skirmish with freedom fighters 10 German soldiers died. One hundred Jews were picked up immediately and executed. My grandfather was among them.*

*Upon realizing the severity of the danger to the Jewish population, my grandmother’s new husband hid his wife and her daughter, my mother, in the basement of his building. Basements in those days were intended to store coal for the winter. Each apartment had its own small cubicle of dirt floor and brick walls with a window large enough to let the coal chute pass through it. The floor and the walls and the air one breaths in those basements are black from the coal stored in them for decades.*

*After spending two years hidden in the basement, my mother and grandmother were taken to the vineyards owned by my grandfather’s family. There they remained in hiding among the peasants for two more years. After spending the four key formative years of one’s emotional intelligence in isolation, my mother emerged from the war at age 20 with social skills deeply crippled.*

*My mother has a pathological fear of rodents. When I was a kid I used to joke about it. She replied that I would understand it if I had been forced to go to sleep with rats lurking in the rafters. Later in life I asked questions about her war experience. I do not care that my mother does not have the writing skills of Anne Frank. She escaped the war alive.*

*The new government formed after the war marginalized and denied work to my grandfather because of his prior wealth, a symbol of the exploitation. In order to legitimately kill and rob, the government adopted a populist emotion-stirring face. Immediately after the war, accusations of having collaborated with the Nazis were an easily believable charge. Of the many stories I heard the one that impressed on my memory the most is about my grandfather’s seven poker buddies. They were all well off because it is a natural tendency to mingle with people of the same socioeconomic class. All seven were accused of collaborating with the enemy during the war, killed and their properties confiscated.*

*It was well known that my grandfather saved the life of two Jewish women. That act alone saved his life because the government could not accuse him of being a Nazi collaborator.  He was not killed but he was robbed. His winemaking business and his vineyards were seized. He was left with an apartment and a vacant residential lot where during the war a bomb had destroyed a building.*

*On that vacant lot he built a distillery and made an egg based liquor from a recipe that his family owned. He sold the liquor to local restaurants. Many years later I searched for the recipe of the egg based liquor but I could not find it; it is one of the many of my family heirlooms that are lost forever.*

*In the mid-1950s the lack of apartments became a populist outcry. People demanded action from the government. The crisis gave the authorities a new legitimate reason to take away from my grandfather the last of his personal properties. His distillery was destroyed and the lot appropriated to erect an apartment building. With no prospects to make a living, he had no choice but to leave the country. His passport was quickly granted. My grandmother refused to accompany him. She did not want to leave the security of home and comfort of family and friends. He left most of his savings to her and departed for Germany. The underlying unfairness of their marriage shaped my opinion about the gender roles of that era.*

*Freed from the burden of her husband’ presence, my grandmother mingled and partied with those in power. To a casual observer it may have appeared that she sympathized with the regime’s ideology. Far from that! She was driven by a self-preservation instinct to assimilate with her environment. She was a social creature. After the war she complained that my grandfather was not a good provider. Her main dissatisfaction with him was his perceived unwillingness to adapt to the new regime.*

*My grandmother was a profligate spender. My grandfather’s savings lasted less than a year. She was forced to face reality when the money ran out. To obtain a passport she bribed a communist party official and transferred the ownership of her apartment to him. She refused to join my grandfather in Germany due to the wounds of war still fresh in her memory. They settled on Italy.*

*In Italy my grandfather requested political refugee asylum. At the time the Italian immigration law was strict. While waiting for the paperwork immigrants were obligated to spend the night at a refugee camp. My grandfather was sent to a refugee camp located in Trieste. He had to check in after dinner and sleep in a dorm-like building. He was free during the day and allowed to roam the city. That is when he met the owners of the two specialty shops that catered to the Slav clientele, saw an opportunity and sunk the last of his savings into his store. When we arrived in Trieste he was still spending the night at the camp.*

*Beaten by life, bitter about her circumstances and utterly unhappy, my grandmother sat hunched down on the bench. That day I hated her hurtful words about a person whom I adored. Today I sympathize with her.*

*Just as we began the preparation to spend the night on the bench my grandfather returned with the news that he had found a room to rent in an apartment located conveniently in front of the station. We collected our suitcases, boxes and bags and walked across the train station square.*

By the time we reach the top of the hill we wish that we wore the standard uniform of American tourists and had sneakers instead of the pretty and elegant Italian leather shoes. The walk up the steep narrow streets, flanked by stone buildings and paved with round uneven cobblestones is interesting but far from pleasant. To make matters worse, it is an unseasonably hot day.

The façade of the medieval church of San Giusto dominates the small hilltop square. I must admit that we entered the church to rest and to seek protection from the sun and not to worship or to satisfy our cultural interest in its history. The cool temperature in the nave is exactly what we needed.

Upon leaving San Giusto we walk across the street to the adjacent Roman temple. Made a Roman colony in the 2nd century B.C.E., the current name of Trieste derives from the old Roman Tergeste. Of the old building only the stone floor and three to four feet tall stumps of columns remain today. Probably the church of San Giusto was built using the materials from the temple. Most Italian Renaissance palaces and churches were constructed with limestone and marble scavenged from Roman temples and monuments leaving us bare brick ruins.

A short distance beyond the temple opposite the church the hill ends abruptly with a precipice several hundred feet tall. We stand at the iron handrail and take in the impressive view that goes on for miles. The old town is directly below us. To the left the sea shimmers under a cloudless sky. On our right deep green colored mountains rise behind the town. I point half way up the mountains.

“The border is up there.”

With my hand waving in the air and following an imaginary line along the hills that ends down at the train station, I add, “After crossing the border trains descend to the shore before looping back to town.”

Our eyes scan the view, going from one salient point to the next, the Roman amphitheater, Piazza d’Unitá d’Italia, the Orthodox Church, Miramare and finally stop behind the castle at the hotel where we are staying.

Realizing that we are both looking in the same direction, I confide,

“A fisherman found my grandfather’s bloated body in the water off the cliffs about a mile north of the hotel.” After a brief pause I add, “His car, parked off the road, was found a couple of days after he disappeared. His body resurfaced thirty days later. By that time my mother was here.”

From where we stand we can see steps winding down along the hillside. We turn away from the handrail and begin walking slowly towards the steps that we figure must lead to the bottom of the hill.

“Why was your mother not with you?” my wife asks.

“She could not obtain the passport to leave the country.”

The steps are four to five feet wide. We walk shoulder to shoulder, I by the retaining wall, my wife’s right hand brushing the railing.

“Was she in some kind of trouble?”

“Oh, no; nothing like that. “ I reply

I tell her that not all the members of a family unit could have a valid passport at the same time.

“For example,” I say, “my mother and I made a family unit.”

I tell her the communist party feared that once an entire family had left the country, it would never come back. In that respect, they were right. Many people who could leave never returned. Not returning is bad publicity for a country that professed to be a workers’ paradise.

I pause briefly to collect my thoughts. Indistinct noise from distant traffic and the echoes of our shoes hitting cobble-stones fill the silence. We veer to the right and are now in an alley encased by a high wall on one side and old apartment buildings on the other.

“My mother knew that she faced a daunting task.”

“Tell me.”

Carefully choosing my words, I continue in measured tones:

“I must explain. Each neighborhood had an official, a communist party cadre who was in charge of the movement of the people under his jurisdiction. He handled all applications for a passport. He would give the approval to one spouse and never to both, to a parent and a child and never to a parent and all the children. You see, two people could be officially married, but live separately with someone else. This arrangement of a local official existed because only someone familiar with the neighborhood’s gossip could do the job well. The party official in charge of my mother’s passport knew that I was abroad with my grandparents.”

The alley, going straight downhill has buildings on both sides and is wider now, although still not wide enough for a car. I stop. My wife looks at me with interest.

“Could she leave without the passport?” she asks.

“She considered crossing the border illegally. Everyone advised her against it. Escaping on foot was very dangerous, especially for a female. The entire border was fenced with barbed wire and well patrolled. Then one day my mother heard about my grandfather’s disappearance. She went crazy.”

The alley has morphed into a well-paved street with cars parked on one side. We walk downhill at a brisk pace. The conversation is now one way. I talk non-stop, my words having acquired new energy.

“My mother returned one last time to the office of the party official and told him that she knew of a group of men, him and my father among them, who took underage girls to the park down along the Danube River. She named witnesses and told him that she was going to report him to the authorities.”

“I remember this story well because my mother had recounted it several times over the years. She said that the party official became enraged. He stood up red faced, veins bulging from his neck, grabbed the sides of the desk, and tried to lift it while yelling at her. She left a bit scared.”

“A couple of days later my mother’s passport was approved.”

“She came immediately to Trieste to find the store in disarray, an alcoholic mother and a filthy twelve year old. She was now in a country whose language she did not speak, without any income or any residency papers and without any friends or family for support. However, returning to a country that was under a totalitarian regime was the last thing on her mind.”

We reach the bottom of the hill. The downhill street ends on a busy and sunny square, with shops on two sides and restaurants with outdoor seating.

“Time for lunch,” I say pointing to a restaurant across the square.

*My grandfather locked the store, grabbed my hand, as he usually did when we walked together, and said that on the way home he wanted to buy a couple of lottery tickets. We stopped at the nearest café bar. He drank a couple of shots of grappa before purchasing the lottery tickets. When at the next corner the lights from another ubiquitous Italian café bar beckoned us, he said that we ought to get two more lottery tickets. After buying the tickets he had another shot or two of grappa. Upon leaving the café I noticed that his hand held mine a bit tighter and that his walk was slightly more harried than before.*

*Two blocks later we stopped at a third bar. From there we zigzagged our way home, going from café bar to café bar. At each he purchased a pair of lottery tickets and had one or two shots of grappa.*

*By the time we were a couple of blocks away from home my hand hurt and our pace was close to running. In trying to free my hand, I looked at my grandfather’s face. His eyes were glassy. The expression that I saw on his face was unforgettable. It stayed with me as a permanent reminder of the reason behind my life-long determination to never be in a similar position, no matter how high the price, pride and dignity be damned. On my grandfather’s face I saw etched a frightful mask of true desperation.*

*That night while we prepared to go to bed my grandmother began spewing her venom at my grandfather. By then I was accustomed and immune to her tirades. I had never opened my mouth during those sorry moments. As was my usual behavior, I sat on the couch and listened to her vitriolic language. I never interrupted nor interfered. I never said anything. My grandfather sat on his side of the bed with his shoulder slumped and said, “There is no life for me”. I distinctly heard him say it.*

*He disappeared two days later.*

*I never had any doubts that he committed suicide. On the other hand, my grandmother, whether to maintain proper social appearances or because she wanted to believe it, kept finding excuses for his absence. One day she said that he was in Venice gambling and winning; another day that he was in Austria working in the wine business with an acquaintance.*

*It was all a façade. She knew that he had committed suicide and was tortured by guilt. My grandmother entered an emotional state that was well described by Shakespeare in Macbeth and by Akira Kurosawa in his movie Throne of Blood.*

*She felt responsible for my grandfather disappearance and the remorse drove her to drinking. One night, maybe a week into my grandfather’s absence, I heard her yell my grandfather’s name in the middle of the night. I woke up, sat up in bed and looked around thinking that my grandfather might have returned. I did not see anything. Did she see his ghost? Now I was really scared. The tone of her voice sounded like an invocation when she called his name again. She went on calling him and talking to him and supplicating to be forgiven. Then I heard a thud. She had fallen off the bed. That woke her up. I realized that she was drunk. In her drunken stupor she was a dead weight and too heavy for me. I struggled for long time to lift her body back up to bed.*

*In the morning she had no recollection of talking in her sleep. A couple of nights later it happened again. She cried his name repeatedly and asked for forgiveness, followed by the customary falling off the bed. It was demoralizing and scary to listen to her. Also, it was difficult to go back to sleep afterwards.*

*One day I had a revelation: she spoke in her sleep only when she was drunk. That afternoon I sat on a bench located in the small park in the middle of the train station square that faced the house where we lived. The bench was positioned such that I could see the entrance to a local drinking hole situated across the street from the house and at the same time the sidewalk leading to our entrance. I knew that drinking establishment was her favorite spot. I had decided to spend the night on the bench if she staggered across the street drunk. That is when I stopped coming home regularly at night.*

During the day hours a town’s c*orso* is bustling with people and cars. The pedestrian zone ends at *corso* Italia. Upon reaching it, we turn left. The plan is to make a large circle around downtown.

I turn my head away from my wife and look ahead. Passersby crowd the sidewalk. Absentmindedly I notice people walking towards me. A few are men of my approximate age. Had I broken my silence and had my family stayed here I could be any one of them going about my business down this street, on this same sidewalk. My body would be the same, but shaped by entirely different life experiences, I would not be the same person.

A few words uttered at an appropriate time or, as it turns out, not uttered. A negligible event, one of the many brief and trivial moments that has changed the course of my life. A backward glance not given and I would have never met my wife.

I may have looked with a bit too much intensity because a few of the people on the sidewalk return my stare.

“What’s across the street?” my wife asks

“I do not know. I have never been there.”

“Oh, c’mon, you lived here and you never crossed this street?” she insists

“Right! I never did.”

“Why?”

“It was not my territory.” I added dismissively.

I could probably explain it if the same music from that summer blared from the juke-boxes through the open doors of the many café bars. I recall an American song, “A Summer Place”, and “Marina”, an Italian one. Old music is the best memory-enhancing drug. There is nothing like it to transport you back in time.

Our instinct takes over when our needs are whittled down to the primordial basic of food, clothing and shelter. Driven by the primeval impulses, we revert to our origins. I had a territory where I freely roamed. I never ventured outside its self-imposed borders. Were food, clothing and shelter my main preoccupation? That one room with a shared kitchen and bathroom was adequate for me. I did not fret about clothing. Twelve year old boys do not, but I should not generalize. I do not remember much about what I ate other than that a family friend, an older gentleman took us to the local *trattorias* occasionally. Why did I mention that I had a territory?

My wife has an inquiring look on her face. I owe her an explanation.

“I do not know…..I do not know why I never crossed the street,” I finally say, pointing over the two lines of slow moving cars. “Anyway, there was nothing interesting,” I add brusquely.

We continue down the busy *corso* Italia. The morning is pleasant but the temperature is rising fast. The forecast calls for a hot and humid afternoon.

"This place is still here!" I exclaim when we reach a small cafe bar with standing room only for its clientele of coffee drinkers.

"My mother had an espresso here almost every day."

Lost in thought, I slow down. Noticing that my wife is looking at me, I decide that I must continue.

"She was in her mid-thirties, a radiant olive-skinned beauty. The person with whom she had coffee was a good family friend who knew my grandfather. He was in his early sixties, short and stocky and very kind to my grandmother and me. He was well off when we lived here. He owned a wine distributorship. I remember his store and the smell of wine left to linger by an occasional broken bottle. That is the same person who I mentioned earlier, the one took us to the *trattorias*. I forgot his name. What should I call him? For your sake I will call him a Friend of the family”.

“About a year after we left town the man from the Questura came over to pay a social visit. Among the news from Trieste he told us that this family Friend had lost his business and his house and that now was shuffling around the Orthodox Church as its custodian, his only income.”

“Looking back at the first few months after we left Trieste I remember that the family Friend had called us on the phone many, many times. I remember seeing the many envelopes from him addressed to my mother.”

“The night of the visit I heard my mother cry. I heard her confide to my grandmother that she knew neither what had happened to him nor had suspected anything. She added that family Friend’s secretary was right when she said that she was afraid of his friendship with my mother.”

I expect my wife to ask questions. She does not. Her mind appears absorbed in thought. She does not ask any direct questions or any nuanced questions. Her face remains expressionless. Averting eye contact with me, her gaze is fixed on a distant point straight ahead. For the first time today we walk in silence.

We do not break the silence until we reach the end of the *corso* where we turn left and proceed in the direction of the train station. Three blocks later we are standing in front of the building where my grandfather had rented a room. The building occupies an entire city block and has separate entrances and stairwells on each of its four sides. I take our camera out and begin taking pictures for no other reason than that I have a camera with me. I take pictures of the side where our window was located. Passersby must be wondering why anyone would be taking pictures of such an old, run-down, non-descript building.

After putting the camera away, we walk along the waterfront. The plan is to turn left by the old Roman amphitheater and hike up the hill toward San Giusto.

*The small square located smack in the middle of the old residential area was not a real piazza. It resembled an undigested mouse half way down the body of a snake. A section of the street widened where a long corner building was demolished years earlier. The parcel of land was paved over and beautified. Single-window shops and a café bar that encircled it kept their doors open and welcoming during the business hours. With a raised concrete bed for grass and flowers and with benches around it, the small open area had the look of a square and the feel of a neighborhood oasis.*

*The café bar had a television side room. The television room featured several rows of chairs placed in front of a set mounted high up on the wall. For the price of a soft drink or two, the patrons could spend the evening watching whatever was showing on the single channel.*

*I used to watch television for as long as I could, which was typically for no more than ten minutes. I would scamper noiselessly away doing my best not to be seen when the waiter came around to collect orders. After my short-lived television adventures I used to sit on one of the benches around the flower bed and wait for my mother to pass by on her way home from the store.*

*One evening she sat next to me and we spoke briefly. I remained seated on the bench after she had left. I noticed that the guy next to me kept looking in my direction. When I half turned to face him he brusquely asked why my mother and I did not converse in Italian. My extremities tingled upon hearing his question and I bolted from the bench without answering. I do not know for how long I ran.*

*The recent tumultuous history of Trieste was a common topic between the adults who were around me. I was familiar with the animosity between the two countries and their territorial claims after the Second World War. I interpreted the question about the language as pertinent to the hostilities still fresh in the minds of the locals: he was sending me a pointed message that my mother and I were not welcome.*

*A random encounter with profound effects; a short and insignificant question that changed my personality! Was the guy a predator who had waited for a mother to leave a young boy alone on the bench? Was I too young and unsophisticated to understand his motives? Had he attacked me I knew how to defend myself. Had he yelled at me I knew how to act defiant. I had no doubts that my initial intuitive assumption about his intentions was correct. Until that day I was a mere outsider who did not belong in this town. What he told me I clearly understood: I was the enemy. Stories about the conflicts reverberated in my young mind: of my grandfather’s nights in the refugee barracks and of my father fighting during the war in this region and then avoiding the area for fear of being recognized. I felt trapped under the unbearable weight of history; I could neither fight it nor find a way out of it.*

*With eyes averted and avoiding any contact, I walked the streets of my territory with my shoulder next to the buildings and fingernails of my hand scraping the walls. That one question “Why didn’t you speak in Italian?” made me cautious to the point of appearing standoffish, reserved to the point of being shy and untrusting of others to the point of being cynical.*

*Before being hardened by the surprises of life we experience defining moments that shape our future behavior. Each and every one of these moments affects our personality and character in a diverse and unique way. They are all random, unexpected and perceived as one of a kind. Nevertheless, they have one thing in common: they are gone like a flash and behind us in seconds.*

*One or many years or perhaps several decades later we suddenly have an epiphany, a term popularized by James Joyce: a deep and unexpected revelation that when examined with sufficient detachment allows us to connect the dots between our early experiences and who we are as adults. Most of us, I imagine, have one or more of these revelations, but I cannot speak for others.*

We park in the public lot close to the Piazza D’Unitá d’Italia where we had left the car the night before. Our goal is to begin the stroll through the downtown by passing by my grandfather’s store.

After crossing the busy waterfront street we walk along a canal with small fishing boats tethered to both sides. The mid-morning is sunny and windless. Boats float lazily, their ropes hanging limply. During the winter months when the local wind *Bora* blows the boats are probably stowed away to safety. I spent an entire winter here without remembering any of it. Has my memory succumbed to time or was it instinctively repressed? More likely we recollect summer days better than the winter ones.

According to the Orthodox calendar, St. George day, the patron saint of my grandfather’s family and the holiest day for people of his religious persuasion falls in late November. An icon of St. George, the dragon-slayer, hung on the wall of our rented room. We must have celebrated it and closed the store for that one day. I wish I could remember.

In the old country the festivities for the patron saint day were almost week-long. My grandmother would start cooking days ahead and the entire family, including distant relatives would gather for supper on the saint’s day. The night before, with only the closet relatives present, it was customary for my grandfather to perform the traditional cake cutting celebration.

He cut the cake, gave a slice to everyone present and then searched for a coin inside the slice that he placed on his own plate. The coin, owned by the family for I do not know how many generations, was used once a year and only for this occasion. Finding the coin in his slice, that is, in the slice of the family patriarch meant that family prosperity was assured for one more year.

Where is that gold coin now? Did we bring it with us? If we did, it was in all likelihood sold to buy food.

I remember sitting in the kitchen and watching my grandmother place the coin in the dough and keep a constant eye on the cake while baking it. Then she would fret over positioning the cake while serving it uncut to my superstitious grandfather to ensure that the coin would end up in his slice.

I cannot help but smile now thinking about it, about my grandparents and about the little secrets of married lives.

A few short blocks inland beyond the canal we turn right.

“This is where James Joyce lived during his first stay in Trieste”. I say, pointing to the house across the street.

“After his first child was born the family moved a few blocks away to via San Nicolò. His first landlord did not want any newborns in his buildings.”

“The store is roughly in the middle of the two apartments.” I continue

My wife turns her head and flashes a glance in my direction. Her look begs for an explanation.

“My grandfather chose the location of the store because it’s next to the church.” I say with a smile as if replying to a question.

“The church?”

“Yes, the Orthodox church. We will be there in a minute”

While on the one hand my grandfather was very religious, on the other he was not a churchgoer and could not stand the clergy. Upon encountering a priest on the street, something that was bound to happen often when the store is next to a church, he would cross the street while crossing himself. He was a product of Enlightenment. He was against the Church, not against his religious faith.

I choose not to go into any details so I only add:

“He had counted on that location near the church to be a favorable omen, he was extremely superstitious.”

We reach the heart of the downtown. The entire area is now a pedestrian island. The streets are dotted with restaurants and bars with table seating in the open air. A short block later we find ourselves facing the Orthodox Church. A group of young people, probably art students are painting the domes blue creating an interesting contrast with the gray of the stone walls and the gold of the outdoor icons. I have heard that this church is the most beautiful monument of Serbian-Orthodox architecture outside of Serbia.

The store is behind the next corner, one building over. Today the small single-window shop sells jewelry.

“What did your grandfather’s store sell?” asks my wife

I take my wife’s question as a clue to explain.

“See, to tell you about it I must go into the history of this place.” I reply.

We slow down; for the next several minutes I describe what I remember of the store. I tell her that the store was exclusively intended for a Yugoslav clientele and that locals never walked in…..that the store shelves were stocked with all kinds of fabrics, jeans and light rain coats, besides nylon stockings and a few other garments…..that it had what Yugoslav shoppers wanted to buy, items that they could not find back home.

For her sake, I do my best to retrieve the past. I tell her that by the mid-fifties the first whiffs of freedom had arrived. At last people could get a temporary passport to leave the country. Of those who received a passport a few never returned, but most only went abroad to shop. Those who went shopping came mainly here, to Trieste. The phenomenon lasted for several years and continued well after our store had closed.

“It is a long story. Do you want to hear more?” I ask.

With no hesitation my wife replies, “Yes.”

“Well, then, here it is: a shopping trip was a neighborhood event. Three, four or five friends, relatives and neighbors would band together. Orders for goods would fly in from those who did not have a passport. The lucky ones knew that their trip and probably all their purchases would be paid off when they resold the extra stuff. However, they could not bring in more than the allowed allotment. There was a limit of foreign currency to export and goods to import. The stop at the border lasted several hours. Everyone was carefully inspected. Nevertheless, people smuggled in as much as they could bring in. They wrapped fabric around themselves. Women wore several skirts and bought large bras and stuffed them with garments or with whatever they were bringing in.”

“What did fat people and big breasted women do?” asks my wife

I chuckle at my wife’s humor or practicality and continue with a descriptive tone

“People do foolish things in new and dangerous situations. Items were confiscated and people were detained. I will refrain from making any trite comments about us today and things we take for granted.”

“The store could not be officially owned by my grandfather because he had no residency papers. The store was owned by a man from Questura with whom my grandfather dealt with for his residency papers and was named after the man’s wife. Although I was not privy to the details, I can guess that the profits were shared. The best that I can explain it, Questura is a branch of the Italian police. I know that the man from Questura had helped because a few weeks after my arrival my grandfather had stopped reporting nightly to the refugee camp. In order to advertise his store my grandfather had hired a helper, also a Slav refugee whose name I do not remember. What should I call him?”

“What did he do besides helping in the store? Can you remember?”

“His job was to wait at the train station for trains coming from the other side of the border and hand out flyers advertising the store. He walked the streets looking for group of shoppers to persuade to visit the store. His main duty was to gather customers and bring them to the store.”

“Call him the Gatherer.” My wife suggests.

“I will do that. The Gatherer was very good at what he did and the store prospered thanks to him.”

A minute later we reach *corso* Italia and the end of the pedestrian zone.

*On my 13th birthday, a family friend, an older gentleman whose name escapes me, gave me a book. He found me at the store, handed me the book and took me across the street for ice cream. Then he asked me if I wanted any other presents. I said that I would like a chess set. He told me that he was proud of me for asking for such a serious and sensible gift and said that he had a set at home that he wanted to give me.*

*After ice cream we walked a few blocks to his apartment. The building conveyed affluence. I was impressed by the many rooms and opulent furniture and thought that he lived in a very nice place. For the first time I met his wife. She was a pleasant lady with hair almost all white.*

*He gave me his chess-set. I do not know why I had asked for it. I enjoy chess; however the game is for two people and I did not know anyone with whom to play. That chess set was not used for many years.*

*The book that he had given me was written in an easy prose and was intended for adolescents of my age bracket. I finished reading it in a few days. For several weeks afterwards I carried it with me everywhere I went. In the morning I would leave home with the book under my arm. In the evening the book was still under my arm. I was leery of direct contact with children my age and yet I longed for assimilation. I wanted to blend in with other kids who I saw carrying their books as they walked through town. Thinking about it now makes me smile. The children I observed were most likely going back and forth to school. My birthday is in the summer when school is out and children do not carry books with them.*

*Eventually I concluded that such attempts at assimilation are an unattainable goal, at best a self-delusion. From time to time I kick myself to make sure that I do not forget it. How curious the world is when you are young: an outsider wants in; an insider wants to challenge the prevailing social norms. A feeling of rebellion can only be born out of a sense of belonging. It was no surprise then that I never shared the existentialist angst of the European youth that violently exploded in 1968.*

Living in a desert climate where days are dry, nights are cold and the ocean is anything but pacific, I associate in my mind humidity, hot nights and warm seas with memories of travel and vacation. Sitting on the terrace of the restaurant, we sipped coffee and enjoyed a very pleasant morning; not a dash of wind; not a cloud in the sky; mist that rises up from the sea in the early hours was still visible; sea surface mirror-like, azure here and indigo blue out in the open.

We have left the hotel immediately after breakfast and are now on the road. Sensitive to the importance that the Europeans and especially the Italians place on outer appearance, both of us are dressed smartly. We have on light cotton knit pants, I have an elegant shirt and my wife is wearing a stylish summer top coordinated with a necklace and a crimson leather purse. Our first destination is *castello di* *Miramare*, less than a mile away.

It is so early in the morning when we cross the gate of the Miramare’s grounds that the parking attendant is not yet in the gatehouse to collect the entrance fee.

Built on the edge of the sea on top of coastal rocks, the 19th century castle was the summer residence of the royal Vienna court. The city thrived benefiting from being the only sea outlet of the powerful Austrian empire. Today the castle is a museum and its many-acred grounds are a well-maintained public park.

After visiting a couple of ground-floor rooms my wife observes that I am behaving as if I had never seen the interior of the Miramare.

“That's true,” I say. “This is my first time.”

“You told me that you spent days out there on the beach, only a few hundred yards away.”

“True.”

“Was it lack of money for the entrance ticket that stopped you from coming in here?” She must have remembered what I told her last night about my standing outside the café bar.

“No, I was a kid, I could have snuck in; I was not interested”

“Why not? Boys like to check out castles.” she exclaims.

“Do not interpret not visiting Miramare as lack of curiosity or indolence on my part.”

I tell her that she should not feel sorry for me.

I had previously considered why I never went to Miramare and reached a conclusion that is probably amateurish but that seemed plausible and reasonable to me. I figured that my intuitive behavior was a natural response to my particular situation. I was safe in my own cocoon. I ignored my surroundings and anything taking place around me. I was detached from the world. Without access to any news sources I lead an isolated life. When one is poor any task beyond satisfying one’s immediate daily needs is either an unaffordable luxury or an exhausting burden. The world of the poor is a small world.

Having difficulty articulating on the spot an explanation of the reason I never visited Miramare I point out:

“James Joyce was penniless when he lived here. He wrote dozen upon dozen of letters to his brother Stanislaus. Not even once had Joyce mentioned Miramare in his letters.”

“Is there anything else that you have in common with Joyce?” asks my wife.

Her pointed humor does not go unnoticed. I mumble some gibberish in reply. It is time to move on to a different topic.

“The summer I lived here they held the aptly named ‘Shadow and Candle-light’ shows. Chairs were placed in front of the large windows on the ground-floor balconies the surround the castle. Light curtains were drawn on the windows. Candles were lit in the back of the rooms. Spectators watched actors’ shadows move across the windows behind the curtains and heard their voices through the loudspeakers. The idea was that the spectators would share the experience of attending a soiree with Archduke Maximilian and his wife Charlotte. I cannot imagine anything more boring.”

*My mother had told me that we would leave in a couple of days, heading north. The pang of anxiety that gripped my stomach the moment I heard the news was still with me. I was scared. There was no escape. I realized that I will be integrated into the mainstream society, compelled to interact with adolescents my age, obligated to attend school and forced to do who knows what to fit into this bewildering world.*

*Less than a year ago I had welcomed change but after being yanked away and cut adrift from my birthplace and after my grandfather’s disappearance I had changed to a life of fear of an unknown tomorrow. I was terrified that something else would happen to me, something terrible, something catastrophic, again, perhaps tomorrow; I did not know what to do about an inner voice I kept hearing.*

*I should be happy to leave this wretched place. When I climb on that train I want to leave any memory of it behind like a forgotten suitcase left on the station’s platform. Is there anything that I want to keep with me? Are there any sweet memories that I ought to cherish? I began counting on the fingers of my hand: the days spent on the beach, the day I accompanied my grandfather to the bank where he deposited a considerable amount of cash, the day my mother gave me 15 liras instead of the usual 10 for my daily Popsicle and with it I bought a chocolate covered frozen banana, and the day we all went to watch “Some Like It Hot”, the last time I heard my grandfather laugh.*

*I did not want to include in my count the days when the store was full of customers. Thinking about the store made my mind drift to that fateful day that marked its end. Nevertheless, I could not avoid thinking about it. The last time the store was full of customers has not left my mind.*

*There were three groups of shoppers who were busily spending their precious foreign currency. My grandfather and his helper were in front, doing their best to satisfy the crowd. I was in the back of the store because I had nothing better to do. So much was purchased that day that the store had run out of one of the key items, I do not remember which one. A person from one of the groups of shoppers wanted to buy it and had asked where he could find it. My grandfather told him that probably one of the other two shops that sold to the Slavs must have what he wanted. He added that his helper would give him directions. The owners of the three specialty shops were competitors only on the surface. In reality they were good acquaintances who helped each other.*

*When the person who wanted that one unavailable item finished with his shopping, the helper walked out with him and his companions. I followed behind and saw my grandmother approaching. The helper stood at the curb and gestured with his arms to direct the group to the other store. My grandmother had stopped a few feet away and watched the scene without saying anything. I noticed that she carefully listened to the conversation.*

*The attack came soon after dinner. My grandmother picked the bottom edge of the apron up with her hands, tilted her head and began a hurtful and loud tirade. While staring at my grandfather, she moved her apron up and down and slowly shook her head left and right with the rhythm of her words in an almost mocking fashion.*

*My memory does not grant me the ability to transcribe word by word her litany. I remember her using the word "fool" often. This is a good approximation:*

*"You are a fool. Do you know what your good friend has done today? He sent your customers to the other store. I saw him with my own eyes. Right in front of your store! People were ready to walk in and he sent them away, he sent them to that other guy. You think that you have friends here, do you? You are a fool. I heard him with my own ears send your customers away. Everyone is laughing behind your back. You are an old fool."*

*It was clear that my grandfather had forgotten that one miniscule detail from a busy day. The following morning he sent the helper packing. He screamed and cursed. Knowing my grandfather, I can imagine the many colorful eastern European swear words and phrases that he sent in the direction of his helper. He must have offended the helper, his immediate family, his parents and probably five generations of his ancestors.*

*The helper was outraged. On leaving, he yelled back that he would make sure that no other Slavs would ever work for my grandfather. Indeed, there were no takers when my grandfather tried to recruit a new helper. Ours was a small community. My grandfather ended up isolated.*

*With no one to recruit customers, the store suffered. My grandmother attempted to get involved. Edgy and short tempered, she gave up quickly. The educational curriculum of young ladies of her generation included learning how to play piano and not how to be a train station hustler. My grandfather tried and failed to keep up the store and gather customers at the same time. I was too young to help. The store languished. Three months later my grandfather committed suicide.*

*Had I interrupted my grandmother, had I said a few words, only a few words, perhaps mine and their lives would have followed a very different path.*

*I have never imagined how our lives would have unfolded. I never thought of my grandparents in their old age. I never had any escapist fantasies. Any daydreaming about a happy ending meant that I was seeking atonement for my sin. There should be no atonement or forgiveness. I should have opened my mouth and uttered a few words. I had not; I knew that I was guilty.*

*I walked to my rocky beach where I simmered under the sun every day, shoulders peeling off. That summer my body changed in ways beyond my understanding. New curiosities captured my mind beyond my control. With fear and guilt swirling in my head I walked two miles to the beach, ate a Popsicle and swam in the warm waters of the Adriatic. I had hoped that with time fear would dissipate. Not the sense of guilt! No separation in time and space, no matter how large will ever cleanse the guilt off my conscience.*

*Two days after my mother spoke to me I boarded the same train that brought me to Trieste eleven months earlier.*

*Time, that best healer, has eased the burden of guilt off my conscience. As my perspective has expanded thanks to experience and education, I acknowledged that my grandparents were victims of history and not of my silence.*

Due to the customary late Italian dinners, it is almost 10 o’clock at night when we leave the hotel. Earlier in the day when we checked in, with downtown no more than 15 minutes away by car, we decided to drive to town after dinner for a nightcap at a local bar.

We consider ourselves lucky for the hotel selection. One never knows when making reservations over the internet. With marble bathrooms and antique-filled rooms, our hotel is probably one of the finer ones in the area.

I had not shared with my wife the reason for choosing a hotel in this particular location. It was unnecessary to add a blemish to her vacation. I did not want to associate it with anything morbid and morose.

Less than a half a mile beyond the hotel the road descends to the sea. We drive along a rocky shore that is very familiar to me. My mind drifts to the times spent on that beach of large boulders and warm water. We have a day and a half ahead of us. I wonder if I should tell my wife about my days in Trieste. Is my memory reliable enough to reminisce with accuracy about events that happened half a century earlier? Will I end up inventing any incidents to keep her interest stimulated and in the process believe in my own fabrications? Should I limit my narrative to dull events? Whatever I say I must say it with a dash of humor to affirm that I have come to terms with my past.

She is, as most our acquaintances and friends are, a child of “The Catcher in the Rye”. I am its antithesis. What am I seeking out? Am I seeking her understanding? Is the desire to talk about me a mere self-indulgence? Should I keep Trieste to myself?

Two miles later we reach the train station. City topography has not faded from my memory. We take a sharp right and proceed along the waterfront. We continue along a well-lit broad street with the downtown on our left and the Adriatic Sea on our right. Upon reaching Piazza d'Unitá d'Italia, the city's main square, we park in a public lot along the waterfront and cross the street.

Open to the sea and with buildings from the Austrian empire heydays on its three sides, Piazza d'Unitá d’Italia is one of the prettiest squares in Italy. Each window is lit at night with its own up-shining light. If you walk to the middle of the square near the fountain and turn around to face the sea you feel as if standing on the center stage of a large theater.

There are two café bars with outdoor tables on the square. The bar on the left is preparing to close; its waiters are collecting tables and chairs and are bringing them indoors. The other café, a trendy spot, has a young crowd and is still open. We sit at an outdoor table and order two *ramazzotti amaro*, a common Italian after-dinner drink.

With my chin I point to the café bar across the square.

“In summer it has a small outdoor orchestra, like those cafés in piazza San Marco in Venice. My mother and I stood there listening to the music”

“Did you say that you stood there? What do you mean?”

“We did not have money to sit at a table. We stayed outside the ropes that surround the outdoor tables”

“You did? For how long?” my wife asks.

I shrug my shoulders. “I do not know. Until the first music break, I guess.”

I look at my wife and smile. She twitches her nose and grimaces with every small sip of the extremely bitter *ramazzotti*.

“Why did your family leave?” she asks.

The night is warm even at this late hour. Though cloudless, the sky is dark. The moon is hiding and the many stars we saw earlier from the hotel are invisible here, their flickering concealed by the light shining up from the surround buildings.

“I will tell you all about it tomorrow; we will have a busy day.”

“What is the plan for tomorrow?”

“All right!” I say, ”Here it is. Let us get up early in the morning and tour *il castello di Miramare*. After the castle we will come back here, stroll through the downtown, check out where my grandfather’s store stood and walk up to *San Giusto*. After lunch let’s visit the cemetery.”

“And in the evening”, I add with conviction in my voice, “In the evening I want to go to the best damn restaurant in all Trieste.”

§