

The Debt

THE AFTERNOON SUN reflecting off the sea turned color into gradations of black and gray. But with the changing light, as day crept toward evening, color started to take form, taking on depth and richness. I watched over the seaside from my table on the veranda. Two little boys walked from the beach, climbed the stairs, and made their way to the snack bar, for, I presumed, some ice cream. The smaller of the two tugged on the bigger boy's red shirt, trying to get his attention. The bigger boy, probably his brother, gave him a shove, releasing the smaller boy's hand from his shirt, and motioned that there were other people waiting to order before them. Too short to reach the snack bar counter, the smaller boy moved up and down on his toes, trying to see over the top. His restlessness turned to pure joy when his brother handed him the ice cream cone. I watched the boy bring the cone up to his mouth. Like a smell which sparks a lost memory, I had a flash of my summers at the beach as a little boy. With their cones in their fists, they moved to a table directly across from mine and sat down. The

smaller boy swung his legs back and forth beneath the table as he ate his ice cream.

Looking up, I saw Tom walk up the steps of the veranda. I noticed him because he stuck out. He wasn't dressed for the beach—or for the heat. He was wearing slacks and a deep purple button-down shirt. Observing his face, I instantly recognized him, even though more than twenty-five years had passed since I'd last seen him, at his mother's funeral. He was now gray and white, but still had a full head of hair. He had a goatee, too, which gave him a hip kind of look. I stood up and walked in his direction, and when we met, we first shook hands and then embraced in a warm hug. As we hugged, I saw the little boy with the cone staring up at us. His mouth hung open. The chocolate ice cream dripped down his fist. Tom and I turned and made our way back to the table and sat down on our perch overlooking the sea.

The beach was starting to empty. People were packing up umbrellas and chairs, leaving open expanses of fine white sand in both directions. We motioned to the waiter and ordered a few beers. While we waited, we caught up on our families and work.

I don't know what prompted him to tell his strange story, but at a certain point he referred to unknowingly repaying a debt for something that had happened to him in the late seventies when he was moving around quite a bit for work. He explained that he would often find himself alone in towns and small villages for up to a couple of weeks at a time. On one of his trips, he was in a village that was so small, it didn't even have a hotel—so he stayed at the one pension, not too far from the central train station.

During the day, he would hunker down in the archives and would stop only for a short lunch break, to wolf down a sandwich with a glass of water, or a beer. The other breaks were to go to the bathroom, or for a cigarette, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Since smoking was prohibited in the archives, he would leave the building and would circle the block, sometimes clockwise, other times counterclockwise.

"I was in a routine. And I was on a mission."

These short breaks were enough to clear his head from the musty archive stacks, and since he was young and resilient, and still passionate about the work, it did not weigh upon him.

"Well, maybe just a little. I had a baby at home. But I would call Susanna each evening to check in, at one of the pay phones at the train station. In fact, it was always a task to try to get enough change for the pay phone, and usually the call just dropped in the middle of the conversation when I ran out of change."

He continued and explained that during this particular trip, which he believed to be about ten days total, he would eat dinner every evening in the only restaurant in town—a little hole in the wall, also quite close to the train station. After returning to the pension in the afternoon, he would take a warm shower to remove the dust from the day's work. He specified that the shower was only *warm*—he would have preferred a hot shower after a cold day in the archives, but back then in this cheap pension, luxuries such as steaming hot showers were scarce. He added, again, that since he was "young and vibrant," the tepid shower was inconsequential. Somehow, he felt the need to remind

me of this.

There was a shriek, followed by crying, shifting our attention to the beach below. A young boy, about four or five years old, was face down in the sand. His father was standing over him, coaxing him to get up and continue playing ball. Beyond them, the fiery sun was beginning to set, gaining size and volume as it moved toward the horizon. Dusk would be upon us soon.

Returning to the story, he explained that he would leave the pension about six thirty each evening and walk over to the station to make his nightly call home. On the way, he would stop by the newsstand and the tobacconist for a newspaper and cigarettes and to get change for the pay phone. After a short call with Susanna, he would head over to the restaurant. Once the sun set, the evenings became brisk and chilly. So he wrapped an Indian scarf around his neck and buttoned his jean jacket up to the collar.

"Remember my jean jacket?"

"Of course," I replied, "your signature look. You were easy to find at protests ... with the red peace sign painted on your back."

My interest was piqued by Tom's original premise of repaying a debt, but I was starting to wonder, why all the detail? I quickly shrugged off the thought—he was an old friend from my teens and twenties, and being with him gave me a sense of family, of warmth, of all the time we spent together. His story brought me right back to those days.

Tom explained that when he opened the door to the restaurant, a shrill bell would ring out. This alerted the cook, back in the kitchen—she was also the

owner of the restaurant—that a customer had entered. The space was small and plain, with hooks along one wall to hang your coat. There were two long wooden tables, and unadorned lamps hanging from the ceiling, spaced at intervals above the tables, each emitting light, a little too bright, from their naked bulbs. The tables seated about ten or twelve people—family style. He always took a seat in the corner, the farthest point from the entrance and settled down to a newspaper as he waited to order.

He soon learned that the waiter was the cook's son. "He would bring over a menu to each new guest, especially the out-of-towners—I guess it was just pro forma, as the menu was useless. Dinner was whatever the cook found at the local market that morning—basically meat and seasonal vegetables ... and, somehow, she would conjure up a hearty meal."

On that first night, Tom asked for the works. He was hungry and tired from traveling and a long day of work. Only a few other people came in—couples, but also three or four single men. Each person carefully chose a seat to allow for as much space as possible between diners. Some knew each other, and, as he later learned, they all knew he was "the visitor from the big city, working in the archives." But the general atmosphere was quiet.

"Although I nodded a congenial hello to those people closest to me, I basically kept to myself and spent my meals combing through the newspaper. I drank quite a bit of wine and ate very well. The owner was an excellent cook. When it came time for the check, I was told that it was already paid for, by a man who had been sitting at the other table. I looked up and

around at the diners, but was told that he had already left. I thanked the waiter and went on my way back to the pension.”

Tom further explained that on each subsequent night at the restaurant, he would receive the same answer when he asked for the check—that the dinner was already paid for. Naturally, he was curious as to the identity of this generous patron, so he would casually look around and would take took furtive glances at the other customers as he turned the pages of the newspaper and ate his dinner.

I asked him if he figured out who had paid for his meals. He thought that it was a man at the other end of his long table, who was sometimes there in company, but other times was alone. He said that he remembered seeing him talk with the waiter, and with the cook, when she came out of the kitchen with steaming trays of food. But he was unsure and quickly forgot about it until something strange happened almost one year later, in the summer of 1980.

Susanna and the baby were away at the beach to escape the heat of the city. They were with her parents. Tom sometimes went out to stay with them for a long weekend but often remained in the city and worked. This particular weekend, he stayed home and took it easy. It was a Saturday afternoon. In the apartment, the windows were closed and the shades were drawn in an attempt to keep the hot air outside. He remembered that he was in the living room, reading *The Siren*, by Tomasi di Lampedusa. At a certain point, the phone rang.

“I picked up the phone and the person on the other end asked for me. I responded by asking who was

calling? He referred to himself as Rick. He said that we had met about one year before in a small town in the south. Since I traveled frequently, I asked for more details. There were pauses and awkward moments of silence on the line while I tried to figure out who he was, and what he wanted, and then he mentioned the hole-in-the-wall restaurant—we had met there, he said—and he had bought me dinner. He got to the point quickly and told me that he needed a favor, a place to stay for the night, and stressed that since my wife and child were away, he'd like me to repay the debt and allow him to stay with me."

I looked closely at Tom. This was spooky. Even though more than thirty years had passed, I wondered if Tom still felt the strangeness of the request. What possible business could this Rick have been up to? My thoughts quickly traveled back to the terror of the seventies—political and social unrest, assassinations and bombings. I asked him how he responded, what did he do? He told me that he said yes, and the guy came over. He added that he already knew where he lived.

I pressed Tom for more information about who the guy was, what he looked like, and what happened in the summer of 1980, after that strange visit. But his only response was that the guy came to his house about eight p.m. They talked for only a few minutes when he asked where he would be sleeping. "I didn't ask any questions. I just showed him the bedroom."

Tom told me that Rick excused himself and added that he would be leaving early the next morning, and he thanked Tom for his hospitality. He went into the bedroom, closed the door, and Tom didn't see him

again. The next morning, Tom heard the front door close. It was very early. He got up and looked around the apartment. Rick was gone. All seemed to be in place. Tom locked the front door and went back to bed.

So I asked Tom why he didn't call the police, make up an excuse, or even just leave, and, most importantly, why he had agreed to let Rick come to his apartment. He shifted in his seat. He uncrossed and recrossed his legs, and took a deep breath. Then he turned away and looked out to the sea. The sun had set, leaving long wisps of orange and red on the horizon. Overhead, the sky was a steely-blue, just settling into night. Tom looked back at me, we locked eyes, and then he looked down at his watch to check the time.