

The Perfect Circle
by
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Free Sample

In the final scene of an Italian film, a family that's about to emigrate across the sea stops to eat on a beach. It's an ordinary day, with sun and wind. While the adults are chatting, a child climbs up the dune. Turning around when her efforts are over, she suddenly sees before her, as if for the very first time, the green sea, the blue sky, the horizon: life. She spreads her arms as wide as she can. She goes on looking for another moment.

Then tumbles down the slope, laughing, running, flying.

Your suitcase is exceptionally heavy.

"Your suitcase is too heavy," says the airline official.

Your suitcase resembles your life during these past months.

You arrive on a sweltering day. A green liqueur against a dazzling white cloth. Tall chestnut trees, their pink and fragile blossoms about to fall. You're introduced to some people having an aperitif at the bar of the small hotel. He is there, one of them, with his long beard and his amazing eyes, which you don't notice. He's drinking an *amaro* from a narrow glass that he holds cautiously in his square hands. This meeting lasts five minutes. He gets on your nerves because he talks too loud, because he has too much beard, and because of the way that he's slumped in his chair.

The first evening: chestnut honey, its flavour so dark that right away you succumb to your usual anxiety, accentuated by the fear of succumbing to your usual anxiety. Once you are inside your room, you look out the window and see a cat sprawling in the moonlight. You brush your teeth, you sit on your bed, and write: *I came here to transform fear into joy. The greatest fear into an even greater joy.*

The first night: you dream about a blue house that's collapsing. The staircases, the windows give way, and you take shelter in a yellow kitchen where a smiling man crushes sugar and shows you a window through which to escape.

The first morning: not far from the hotel there's a stone wall; behind the wall, a house; on the wall, white flowers in clumps. A woman is singing. Her song rises softly between the flowers and the sound of dishes. Now and then she walks into the house, the song is extinguished, then comes back again. She's still singing when she goes outside and shuts the garden gate.

The same day: he has cut his beard. His face is luminous, like a secret unexpectedly revealed. You're fascinated in spite of yourself by the fact that it's possible to hide such a beautiful face, as if hiding a scar. Its nakedness - more naked still because it had been hidden testifies to a fragility similar to the fragility of birth. It is a reminder that every face is naked. It is the magnificent face of humankind. For two weeks you're careful to avoid it so that you won't be further struck by this fascination.

Two weeks later: you hear him talking with someone, telling about his father's death the year before. "It's tough, death," he says, lowering his green eyes. You don't speak to him, your hands are burning, you don't touch him. He's the kind who expresses himself by subjecting his elastic body to the maximum fatigue, by pruning language to protect what's essential. Later, in your room, you write: Today, the outline of things close at hand was clear. Things close at hand were close at hand.

Two days later: you go to a windy village nearby. A basilica. On the left, a door opens into the crypt. Low, dark, cool. A hexagonal crypt, a series of arches blocked by opaque white windows. Several chairs. You choose one. The wind makes a windowpane clatter, you can't tell which one, it clatters again and again, you listen to it clatter, you do nothing else. Then a strange and invisible phenomenon occurs that you won't mention to anyone.

A presence is making its way in the dark without assuming a shape. It moves along, tangible, inseparable from the wind that spreads apart the walls of the crypt. The crypt persists, turned over on itself like a big soup bowl. In the gloom the arches follow, one after

another. Through one, you can sense the next. The wind is powerful. It pushes its sound along the bones that surround the womb. You wait, you close your eyes, open them, you no longer know what to focus on. The presence circles in and grabs you by the throat, at once imposing and absenting itself. This goes on for a long time, maybe an hour, maybe ten minutes. A man comes in. Points to a staircase. You climb the narrow steps, convinced that you have been there before, a thousand years ago. The banister is low, it's cut into the cold stone of the wall. The ceiling is vaulted. A small bell hangs there, covered with spider webs. At the top, a door. It opens into the church: baroque, oppressive. A little daylight comes in through the cupola. You have trouble breathing, and for several seconds you prepare yourself for the worst for suffocation, for a flash of inspiration. You walk slowly, supernaturally, past a series of mediocre paintings and graceless statues. The circle closes near the door. A baptismal font, with water in it: you make the absurd but necessary gesture of dipping your thumb and tracing a cross on your forehead. Visitors enter and greet everyone, it's the custom. Ashamed of your damp forehead, you rush out.

Outside, the air is hot. It's the end of a sunny afternoon. People are walking along the street. You realize that inside it was cold, that you felt cold. You understand everything then, you understand because of the dark memory of a more ancient cold. The womb, the wind that smashes, that waits. The man who shows you the exit, the narrow tunnel at the end of which you breathe awkwardly. Daylight through the cupola, and the baptismal cross.

You walk. You stop at a wall that's as compact as a slab of stone. Yellow moss covers it. You place your hand on it. You think: my father was a wall. So be it. It was his way of being a father, unshakeable. Of protecting the womb from the wind that smashes. Of protecting the child who emerged from the dark. First meeting. First love. In the womb, love hadn't appeared yet, because the child and the womb were identical. You think about the arms that guard the child's first sleep. After the Fall those arms are absolute, the first place of understanding that is separate from oneself. Though silent themselves, they invite confidence, they promise to resist the wind, the weather, the womb. I will be there, always, I will be like a wall, like your wall, I will be your wall, now sleep. I will be the one who doesn't fall.

The same day: you realize that the walls are made of stone. The same day, you close your eyes and can't think of the word for that which emerges. You have an urge to pray and to cry, you realize that you know nothing about yourself. You're outside, in broad daylight, in a public place, a foreign country, and you look like a madwoman.

It is in spite of yourself that you fall in love. You have to know that through the open window the blossoming chestnut tree enters your room and that water here always tastes of lemon. Above all, it's necessary to know that between their spread petals can be seen something never seen before: the palpable desire of flowers. And that finally you sense inside yourself something you'd never felt before: the power to be a bouquet.

You fall in love with despair, when there's not much time left in this journey that's nearly over, and with the agonizing thought of the life that awaits you on the other continent, known in advance, carefully planned, and the thought of the companion with whom for years you've been sharing your bed, doing the dishes, and speaking a common language, a language slowly constructed and remarkably tender.

He comes for you in the middle of the night and guides you towards extremely violent hot springs. The car's headlights cling to the haze of bodies. Dozens of ghostly shadows pierce the mist. The water is as hot as fever. One man's hand tries to find the buttocks of every woman while he, farther along, walks confidently on the slippery stones. The landscape seems to open up as an extension of his movement. In the middle of the night, in the middle of the cascades: he sits down beside you. You've been expecting what is happening now, and you doubt it in the same way you'd doubt a mirage. Which is to say: not in the least.

Which is to say: absolutely. A single movement is all it takes for your whole life to fall apart - the movement of clinging to his ankle instead of to the face of the rock. Your whole being held in check by this man's ankle under water that's galloping and howling, your life exported towards a dark and wonderful point - far from any available lexicon.

The next day: to your great surprise, you step spontaneously outside the circle before it closes in. You escape by train, as far north as possible. Not knowing that your fascination with this country will be added to that of his face and will merge with it; not knowing that you are enlarging the circle, making it more able to keep you inside it.

Italy is the fact of finding a fountain at the exact moment of thirst.

Women are slim in their tight little dresses, men look at them and the day starts early. The mallet of the sun climbs up the walls and brings out the rough parts in minute detail. Brightness prowls from east to west, it persists from January through December, and one marvels that the months in the year still number twelve. Open doors and closed shutters, restaurants that overflow onto the street. The all-consuming heat of afternoon, the salty leftovers from *pranzo*, and the wind, always the wind, sometimes barely thin, sometimes paunchy, sometimes raging; in one minute transformed into a storm, into hail that falls onto the summer. At dawn, the happy aroma of coffee, at noon, the warm smell of frying, and at sunset, the round perfume of all the flowers together, motionless and invisible under the dust of the sky.

Skins are dark, hands quick to settle on the other, to squeeze an arm, to not listen. Everyone talks at once. While others laugh and concoct little lies, memory accumulates on top of objects, in thick sediments that will become sunflowers, that will become, soon, the dull ochre colour of the bare walls. They know how long history is. They know that they are merely the still-alive stratum of all those memories accumulated by a people. They talk about nothing, but they talk outside. Speech is inflated on public squares, the women go outside in slippers to sweep the street. Memory swells, rises up to a sky that's incendiary at three in the afternoon, healing at midnight.

Italy is the secret voices of vespers in a church that's patched together like a soul. It is the pink, pale sun of a slow Sunday on a *piazza del Duomo*, the sermon that leaks outside and sits at the Communist terrace of the cafe next door. It is the oldest covered theatre in the world, with a *trompe l'oeil* painting of three streets in Thebes. It is the blue humanism of Giotto that beats like a heart, the immortal gazes of men and women on human mortality, the aching eye of Judas as he is betraying Christ, the plunge of Jonah whose robe becomes a fish; it is the circle of water around John the Baptist, and Mary knowing in advance that she will lose everything.

It is the wild capers growing on the outer wall, picked by children from the tops of ladders. It is the *oculus* in the Pantheon, two thousand years of stars, moons, and rain. It is March 28, 1171, in Ferrara, the blood that spurts from the Host, spatters the priest, stains the ceiling, and guarantees the parish a fixed revenue from pilgrims yet to come, world without end. It is, in that same church, the true miracle of the sun making a chair stand out while an old nun sweeps the floor against a background of Beethoven.

And it is the casual way of centuries that are superimposed, the certainty that this country, which has existed from time immemorial, will not disappear. Outward-bound frescoes, three one-armed, decapitated saints, naive faces streaked with grey plaster, garments half torn-off a missing body. Blood-red lines obstinately running onto the fabric of robes, tracing prematurely or belatedly the geography of a colour yet to come, a colour that's leaving. And above the Holy Family in exile, the imprint of the sun has just lain down, its arms outstretched; it accompanies, murmuring, the wreckage of the stone, the retrenchment of images into a memory more and more remote. It is the contemporary sun,

extremely and mathematically precise, that snaps us up in the concrete history of the precise texture of things.

Italy is scattered with places of prayer and revenge, of art and power. Its open churches soliloquize in the ear of the first person who comes along. You don't know anyone, you listen to churches. You observe the sky manufactured by hands and you hear the human heart breathing within the origin of its prayer.

Timidly you touch the characters that are ahead of themselves and they strike you as fragile under the gruelling helmet of humid life, fragile just as we all are. You make your way into the ports of call towards the sure and splendid end of white-shirted encounters around a welcoming table. Crossing Venice without consulting a map, you emerge into the sudden coolness of a small street, and above your shoulders the sky is hardly wider than a fishing line. Your eyes are constantly learning how to see. You walk Italy, won over by age-old patience and already happy because of a word, tossed off among others, red and salty like the first meal, *buon giorno* - welcome to the country of everyone.

Without your knowing it, as you expand the circle of fascination you reduce by the same amount your chances of escaping it.
