



6. *Uncharted: Walking and Writing Off the Map*

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When I made a spontaneous decision to move to Rome it was a city I knew almost nothing about. I had passed through only once, a decade earlier, on the heels of a family tragedy that had left me reeling. I documented nothing and remembered still less, but for impressionistic flashes: drinking from one of Rome's ubiquitous marble fountains, walking in patches of now shade, then dappled sunlight filtering through the leaves of the enormous plane trees that create a canopy alongside the Tiber's deep green surface, the immensity of a then unknown castle on the river's opposite bank. I had not selected Rome for its ruins or its layered history, hadn't chosen Italy for its musical language. I told anyone who asked me that I'd moved to Rome to write, but what I had really done was run away—away from the novel I claimed I was finishing—and to put as much distance between myself and the events that both inspired and obliterated it.

In my twenties, the death of one of my older brothers gave me permission I'd never before allowed myself. Permission to leave a career in media I'd felt pressured into, permission to return to school and study photography. And afterward, while I worked in a busy commercial photography studio, I dreamed of becoming a writer, a desire I'd been stifling since winning a prize for my first short story at seven. But at the time I was also living in my brother's former apartment—sipping from his blue glass tumblers, stretching across his sleek black sofa in the tall windows of the Chicago brownstone where he had lived—continually rubbing up against the absence of him until I was raw with it.

Not long after, I made that first trip to Italy on holiday with friends, landing in Rome, and although we marveled at the city, the journey quickly grew tense, fraught with personality conflicts. By the time we arrived in

Florence I felt the need to break away, even if just for a single day. Claiming I wanted to make photographs, I strayed off from our pensione in Piazza dell'Indipendenza, my Pentax K1000 hanging from its thin black strap around my neck. And while I did shoot several rolls of film that day, what I was actually seeking was the necessary solitude to grieve in private.

That afternoon was the first time I'd ever explored a foreign city alone. And that day my personal topography shifted. I spent many hours, if not blissfully immersed in the city, then lost enough that I forgot myself. Or forgot the self I was weary of being. I made my way into and out of cool, dark chapels and along winding streets, occasionally slipping inside the large portone of noble Florentine palazzi or taking tentative steps through arched entryways, catching glimpses of concealed courtyards with sparkling fountains and moss-covered statues beneath towering magnolias with lush shiny leaves and wide white flowers the size of bouquets. Sometimes the roads I walked seemed to lead no place at all. Other times it felt as if they continually looped back to the river, arriving at some unknown section or bridge I didn't recognize. As I traversed the historic waters of the Arno, trying to find my way back to any place at all familiar, something inside me softened, unfurling with the realization that it didn't matter if I was lost or not. In fact, more than anything else, I needed to lose my way.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit tells us, "Lost really has two disparate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing" (Solnit 2005, 22). Nothing could have been more true for me that day. By choosing not to use a map it was inevitable that I would get lost. But in getting lost, I also got found. Writers have taken to the streets for centuries, long before Guy Debord's 1955 essay described psychogeography as the "effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord 2013). I didn't know it yet, but I was throwing myself down the path of so many writers who'd come before me, in particular women writers, like George Sand (in men's clothing), Virginia Woolf, and Patti Smith who, each in her way, embraced perambulating.

In that renaissance city, the mysterious future began to unfold. Pathways began to appear. And like a map that has areas blotted or torn out, or even one so large that you simply don't have room enough to spread it flat on the table before you, I had to content myself with only being able to visualize the small section where I then stood. In that moment, I intuitively understood that it wasn't photography that would bring me back to this place, to Italy, but writing. I needed to write my brother's story, as much as my own. My subject, of course, was loss. It had always been loss, even before my brother's

death. I just needed to get lost—in Italy—to find my way back to writing, a path I'd stepped off of during high school. Years spent contending with depression had convinced me of the notion I would never see thirty; I never allowed myself to make plans. The further I sunk, the less I wrote. Then, as I approached twenty-seven, the age my brother had been when I lost him, it was as if he had taken the suicide option away from me. Even so, my course of direction remained unclear.

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Writing your way into a story is like walking in an unknown city, tangled with wrong turns and unknown routes, ones that may lead to the surprise of an unexpected vista over rooftops, others running smack into insurmountable walls and locked gates. After returning from Italy, it still took a couple years for me to begin writing. I bought my first Apple laptop, what then seemed a strange gray contraption with a round ball in place of the mouse. I sat at it and typed. But I didn't write, the blinking cursor akin to a warning sign flashing along the road at night. And it did feel dangerous. I fell back into the same state of panic a creative writing workshop had triggered in me years before. I would put down notes and ideas, then quickly erase them. The imaginative escape that had come so easily as a child now felt forced. Worse, fiction felt like crafting lies that I would never tell. I didn't yet understand that even when you are making something up, you still have to tell the truth. Or it falls apart on the page. So instead of writing, I returned to my first love—reading—making a pact with myself to read at least a book a week. And I did, spending an entire year losing myself in reading. Then one night I dreamt about my brother and me when we were children, the two of us slipping over a snowy mountain in a toboggan, the crystalized cold shimmering everywhere around us, and me leaning back against him. The feel of his protective arms holding me as we plummeted downward, into the unknown. When I woke up I began to write freely, producing a short story that would become my first publication.

I returned to Florence a few years later during graduate school, committed to both writing and wandering. In the intervening period, I'd gotten sober, written the early draft of a novel, finished my first master's degree, and begun a second. It was a summer when everything seemed possible. During my stay, I lived in a dreamy apartment in a baroque palazzo that spanned an entire block. A Latina writer friend had torn the advertisement from the "NY Review of Books," telling me the description sounded "muy romántico." When I inquired, the architect owner had sent a sprawling fax, smeared with indecipherable black blobs of ink in place of photographs. But I took the

place anyway, remembering the lesson that city had taught me about setting forth and stepping into the unknown.

Upon arrival, the narrow low ceilinged entryway did not bode well, but it soon opened into an enormous room, revealing frescoed ceilings some six meters high. The windows were as tall as any I'd ever seen, draped with heavy green velvet curtains. An open air loft bedroom also had dense drapes enclosing it that, once drawn, made you feel as if you were swaddled in an air-born cradle, close enough to the ceiling to contemplate its Madonna and Child floating on a wisp of a cloud held aloft by cherubs. At night, I stared up into those frescoes while waiting for sleep to pull me under. But the images weren't only of the Virgin. One large panel portrayed Judith clutching Holofernes by his hair, allowing his head to dangle from her fingers. Another depicted a blindfolded Medusa, snakes braiding themselves into her long locks. I spent the summer immersed in art, in myths and stories.

Mornings I would write at the glass-topped table, my afternoons blurring into evenings spent walking. I continued to make photographs with my Pentax, this time as research for my photographer protagonist. I walked through my novel, a tourist without a guidebook, without a plan. I also scouted locations the way a filmmaker might, steeping myself in the Florence that each outing allowed me to discover. I put myself in my character's shoes, roaming where she might have, looking through her lens—noticing any details or images that might help me pick up the breadcrumb trail into the novel I wanted to write. The story had an autobiographical underpinning, but as I began to write, I discovered that mapping things out—outlining scenes or projecting a narrative arc—didn't work for me. I needed to get completely lost in the story, move away from the known, from autobiography, and trust that my characters would show me the way back out.

In this fashion, my days and evenings fell into a kind of rhythm as I became familiar with both the story I was telling and the city I was exploring. Sometimes I'd come home at night and consult the map, trying to locate the pathways I'd traveled, preferring to work out my route after the fact, rather than chart it beforehand. Philosopher Alain de Botton writes, "The pleasure of contemplating the world on a map might be likened to that of reading certain novels" (De Botton n.d.). And it was a pleasure. The wandering. The writing. In Italy I felt alive. Or maybe as if I were coming to life. Slowly. I loved the freedom of living alone in a foreign city and sauntering through its streets, the delicious reprieve of being without a language to communicate in that unexpectedly slows time, expanding it, while also curtailing interactions. Language may offer a kind of liberation, but that summer silence taught me so much more.

From Florence I headed to Calabria where I spent the August holidays with an Italian family. They didn't like the idea of me losing my way among their medieval passageways. The village was entirely safe. That wasn't it. They simply took great pride in hosting a foreigner and felt it their duty never to leave me on my own. When I could manage it, though, I'd duck out among the white-washed homes, drifting beneath low archways, or climbing the steep steps that wound toward the 15th century castle with its plunging view over the Gulf of Sant' Euphemia. During long afternoons at the seaside, I sat writing in the shade of a bamboo awning while my hosts sunbathed. My Italian was limited to a few phrases and there were only three people in town who could speak English, yet it soothed me to be uncharacteristically quiet. Everything about Southern Italy had been a revelation. Its lack of tourism. Its intertwining dialect with roots in Greek, Albanian, French, and Spanish. And the unforgiving landscape. The South is a strange mix of abandoned buildings with rebar jutting heavenward, roadside shrines to the victims of mafia killings, and pristine rocky coastlines with abandoned forts presiding over the mythic straits where the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis had tormented Odysseus and his crew.

It is difficult to say how, but living in tandem with myths and rituals as one does in Italy, helped me realize the limitations of my novel and spurred me to redefine its structure. Perhaps it was simply the glorious light that bathes the regions of Magna Grecia that inspired me as it had so many others. But what seemed haphazard at the outset—the house-of-cards feel of that village perched precariously over the sea—revealed itself to have a narrative component, each church, corner, or crossroad linked to deeper historical layers. The closer I looked, the more I saw that the wildness of that place better suited my rebellious character; after tragedy struck, she would need a more primitive setting to flee to. Calabria's austere geography aligned itself with the story I was trying to tell. By altering the setting, I would alleviate my protagonist from being a tourist in Tuscany, as had already happened in so many novels before mine, and transform her into more of an explorer (albeit one who had lost her way). I cut drastically and began again, energized and focused.

In retrospect, I should have paid closer attention to how so many of the myths play out. Whatever progress I believed I had made was canceled out upon my return home at summer's end, crumbling beneath me in a matter of months. The two years I'd spent earning my MA had been a brilliant immersion, a period where I met my mentor and built a small, but important, community of writers who continue to sustain me today. My MFA turned out to be the opposite. It was a battlefield that quickly undermined any confidence I had in my writing. I left graduate school more adrift than ever, spending the

next six months waitressing and shuffling scenes around in my novel rather than finishing it. The following winter, I decided to pack two bags and move to the largely unknown city of Rome. Once I was settled, staying indoors only reminded me that I wasn't writing. Museums felt claustrophobic, cafes alienating. Meandering was really all I could muster. I was pretty broken.

Walking, it turned out, was easy. Stories were everywhere and as much a foundation of Rome as the travertine marble and sandstone that so much of it is built upon. I took to the streets in the evenings when the throng of tourists thinned or settled inside the cafes and restaurants. I ambled, hour after hour, without any objective destination, making my way through the various neighborhoods of the city and feeling a complete outsider in each of them. It wasn't just the linguistic barrier that kept me at a distance. Now that I had chosen to live in Italy everything felt different than it had two summers earlier when my sojourn had been temporary, bookended by a return flight. Somehow, I'd never felt alone that summer. But in Rome everyone traveled in packs, Romans and tourists alike. I was neither of those things. And the distinction glared.

Even so, I found a kind of ecstatic melancholy in an evening's stroll, alone, in the Eternal City. *Straniero*—or *straniera* in my case—is the Italian word for a foreigner and the equivalent of “stranger.” No term could more aptly have described my situation. Those early days and nights were steeped in an unexpected sense of estrangement and, counterintuitive though it may seem, only the feeling of being lost in the labyrinth that is Rome seemed to alleviate it. In *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit also reflects on the notion of observing while walking alone in cities, deeming it the “starkest of luxuries” and recommending it for “anybody who needs to reflect or create” (Solnit 2014, 186).

My own peripatetic jaunts lead me into unexpected encounters with vestiges of the city's storied history. A Corinthian column here, Roman graffiti there. The surprise of a pair of pregnant caryatids flanking the villa gates on the Caelian hill. Discovering staircases to be traipsed up and down, and tiny piazzas scattered like jigsaw pieces I might never again locate. Roving along alleyways that lead me to the sparkle and splash of a fountain running full-bore in mid-winter. Crisscrossing the Tiber, each bridge offering a slightly different glimpse of the river, high embankments giving rise to the city in silhouette against the evening sky, first pink, then darkest blue, a pastiche of monuments, domes, and rooftops glowing against the horizon.

Over time, I learned to speak Italian, but Italian had nothing to do with my writer's voice. I had left that behind in the States, it seemed, and it would take over a decade of being “lost” and wandering in the dark before I'd find

it again. Solnit advises: “Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That’s where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go” (Solnit 2005, 4). I didn’t know how to get back to my novel. I really didn’t even know why I’d moved to Italy, much less what I was doing, so I had even less of an idea why I was compelled to take night walks around the city, whether it was restlessness or intuition that guided me. But living alongside ruins became a kind of tutorial for my writing. I wasn’t able to come at writing straight on, but worked on it in pieces, then layers, with an obscure chronology.

Unlike American cities that conform to a grid or a numeric system, European cities are a bit like stories themselves, nonlinear, with unexpected twists and turns. In Italy the street names often change with every block. Numeric order is meaningless. You cannot rely upon even or odd numbers to adhere to one side of the road versus another, or for number 22 to turn up between 21 and 23. It is just as likely to be found beside 153. And these systems, such as they are, differ from city to city. Some are color coded like Florence, where the two sets of numbers, red and black, differentiate a residence from a business. And even though “piazza” means “square,” the piazzas of Italy are almost certainly misshapen, echoing the layers beneath the city—and all its narrative variations—making up its original footprint. This makes sense to me, and as a writer, it comforts me. The allure isn’t the working out of historical dates, but the way a city can be read like a book you open, seemingly by accident, to the page or passage you most need to read in that moment.

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Walking in cities has become a means for world building in my stories. Not just in Italy, but in many places. However, there is never a guarantee the effect will be immediate. Or even enjoyable. One summer I decided Paris would be the perfect place to get some writing done. I could not have been more mistaken, nor could I count the hours that became entire days, or the days that turned into the weeks spent walking through Paris. A summer of tormented, somehow satisfying, hours getting drenched in a long black raincoat in the June cold. It rained and I walked and when I couldn’t walk any longer, I sat in cafes with fogged windows, my sense of displacement a force swirling around me. By then I’d become accustomed to living abroad and being surrounded by conversations I couldn’t understand. But the years I’d spent studying French were maddeningly stuck somewhere in my throat that couldn’t clear itself to speak, just as the book I’d hoped to work on seemed to have routed into some strange bottleneck or tunnel never to come back

out the other side. Each morning, I would sit at the table staring out through the dormer window at the gray Paris sky before giving up, pushing the door open, heading down the creaking wooden stairs, and back out into the street, carrying a notebook full of unwritten pages in a tote bag, perched like a voiceless bird on my shoulder.

I wrote a single paragraph that summer.

One afternoon, after seeing an article about Verona in the newspaper, I was transported back to that first trip to Italy with my friends. A few weeks after that fateful afternoon getting lost in Florence, I'd broken away from them a second time, catching a lift down to Verona and planning to connect a few days later by the fountain in the main square. I was excited to explore a new city, but Verona was a puzzle I was unprepared for. It was opening night of the opera season and the hotels were all booked. I searched street after street looking for a place to stay, unable to find one, and unable to truly see the city of Verona as a result. As the sky darkened and the crowds made their way to the Arena to listen to Verdi, I hitchhiked to a hostel in the hills on the outskirts of town. In the intervening years, I'd forgotten all about that interlude, but once conjured, I felt the need to finally record that feeling of displacement. However, it wasn't Verona, but Paris, that I began to document. And, as sometimes happens, I could hear the opening paragraph of the story. Hear it as if it were music. After weeks of silence, weeks of walking, it sang out of me onto the page. But almost on cue, circumstances that occurred the next day, kept me from returning to the story. The proprietor of the flat I'd rented changed her mind about the timeframe and I was left scrambling for a place to live, the end of summer looming and catching me at odds. I lost the tune of that narrative I'd had in my head.

This wasn't the only time prose has arrived in such a way, nearly audible, as if I were listening to a recording and transcribing it to the page. I believe the subconscious operates a lot like the mechanism of getting lost in cities. The mind makes a sensory map of the places we've visited, ascribing emotions to the topography and landmarks, to the physical details that can later become the blueprint for a story, once recalled or triggered. But in the case of the Paris story, it took several years before a door opened leading me back inside. While rummaging through a cupboard in Rome, I came upon my mostly blank Paris notebook hidden away amidst the clutter—and there the story was. Or at least the beginning of it. And as I read that first description of a flower stall, its metal buckets brimming with peonies, I understood what the tale would be—a woman wandering in the rain through a city she had longed to visit for years and as she encountered the different neighborhoods her memories would open like one of those tightly wound buds and unravel

like the spiral-shaped map of Paris itself. I wanted to capture the circularity of the arrondissement, the way the numbered neighborhoods seem misaligned when viewing them on a map. The 11th sitting beside the 3rd. The 1st edging into the 8th. Over the course of the story, the protagonist recalls an unexpected fling, its resulting pregnancy, and a miscarriage, circumstances that had kept her from visiting Paris to begin with. These elements were all fiction. What interested me, what I wanted to create, was a story playing with the idea of memory, the way certain details grab hold, like a stubborn relic—those fragments that make up the cornices and columns that lie hither thither in the forum of the mind—becoming the ruins we most often remember. So, in this fashion, marginal characters would be named and sharply drawn, while the key figure, the man she'd had the tryst with, remained shadowy in her mind. A ghost of sorts. And yet there his likeness seemed to be, stalking the streets of Paris, carrying a child the age hers might have been on his shoulders. The miscarriage came late into the plot, as I found my way into the writing of it. As a result, the miscarriage also represents what it sounds like: the way we carry—or *mis-carry*—memories, misremember them, ascribing meaning to those fragments that can make up a life. Not the monumental events, but the more subtle elements, the chance encounters and missed connections that stay with us, resonate, echo, finding their way into the landscape of the present.

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I never did finish the novel that brought me to Italy, and it was nearly a dozen years before I recommitted to my writing, but like the longing to walk in cities and the willingness to get lost, living alongside Rome's ruins has become an essential part of my writing practice. These days I write in the mornings and walk, when I can, late in the day. And I still like strolling at night, as I did those first winter months in Rome. It was only recently that I rediscovered Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting" where ostensibly buying a pencil is her "excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner." And only now that I see it took moving abroad for me to truly understand Woolf's claim that "the greatest pleasure of town life in winter, [is] rambling the streets" (Woolf 1974, 20).

Getting lost in Florence during that first excursion as a tourist unearthed the seed of narrative in me, but it took me decades to learn how to tend it. Since then I've failed, again and again, to write the story of my brother's death. Like the Paris story I wrote, the monumental events remain shadowy, difficult to grasp, but flashes of what at the time may have seemed inconsequential—a wrought iron balcony peeking out amidst a riot of vines, a flower

stall beneath a green awning on a busy corner, or the singular sensation of a monarch butterfly alighting on the skin—those inessential details rise. And rise. These glimpses become the slides that slot into the viewfinder of our memories. This doesn't mean painful recollections don't also have their sway. But sometimes those memories remain unspeakable, untellable. The loss of my brother still informs everything, finding its way into stories where it does not belong or essays where he is not the subject. When it comes time to edit, inevitably the scenes he has inspired are the ones I must excise, and with the cutting of those pages, a bit of me suffers the loss of him again. Nobody in my family remembers who taught me to read, only that around age four I was reading. I like to think it was my brother who helped open the path to words, to writing, so that even if I didn't have a map, I'd be able to find my way.

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