

## Pino Di Lenne

On the eighteenth of August, I crossed a long bridge that spanned a marsh, the air smelling like earth. Ahead, the road expanded into a long stretch, where a highway sign lingered in the distance.

Metapontum: 70 km, it said. I could see the yellow centerline of the road wavering in the midday heat several kilometers ahead, and the road deviated only once or twice for the next hour. I looked up to see a large cascade of mountains in the distance. It seemed to me that I had seen the same landscape before.

The sign along the roadside read Potenza: 106 km. Looking down at the odometer, I had already ridden 75 km. On the boat to Brindisi I had figured on riding at least 120 miles each day in order to reach Rome. I could cash my money and make it back to Madrid, where I would have to....

"Shut up." I said.

Putting my map back into the front pouch, I clicked my cleats back into the pedals, hoping that soon I would find a shower, some food, and a soft place to sleep.

I arrived at the only form of lodging within fifty kilometers: a sign reading "Pino Di Lenne" pointing down a dirt driveway.

I rode into the area and passed several bends along the grapevined lane. At the entrance I stopped before a tent structure that I assumed was the officina.

"Hello!" I yelled.

A short, moustached Italian man came out onto the small wooden porch. He had a leather hat on, and by the looks of his weathered boots and belt, he seemed more like a Texan than anything European.

"Camera?" I asked.

He looked at me, squinting--his hands in his pockets, pinkies sticking out the sides.

"You're not American, are you?" He asked in a Latin voice.

"Sure am."

"Mi Madonna!" He said, breaking into a smile and walking out from the shade to greet me.

"How are you?"

"Fine, thank you." I replied. He stared at the bike in his conversation.

"Suzy!" He beckoned.

I looked up at the doorway and saw Suzy. She stood in the doorway, her face flushed from the sun. She was wearing cheap shorts and a laced halter top, bare feet and dark black hair that fell over her shoulder; I saw her push it back. She breathed out heavily in doing so.

Her face suddenly brightened as she took notice of the American boy in front of her.

She ran out to the hot sun, chattering quietly in an Italian tongue. She walked around the bike, commenting on equipment.

I was tired, but this babbling adolescent circling about my bike woke me from the heat.

*"Questo qua? Escusi mi... Freni scorzo!"*

I looked down at the odometer, and I thought *one-hundred-fifty kilometers. My legs are swollen.* I swapped legs as one would hang over the top tube of the bicycle while balancing with the other.

Circling me, she continued, studying my bare torso. Still talking, she reached out and touched my thigh as it hung on the top tube of the bicycle. She came very close, and I could smell the scent of her hair.

She continued her interrogation. She stopped. Pushing at my chest, she motioned for me to get off the bike.

I did so. She gripped my bike and flung her leg over the top bar.

She looked down at my shorts. She pointed and said something that made the cowboy laugh. She motioned me over and had me hold the seat. She squeezed the handlebars. She wrapped her arm around my shoulder as she leaned back on the bicycle. I could see the fairness of her skin under her arms, and I could imagine what rest of her looked like.

"What is she saying?" I asked the cowboy.

"Oh, nothing, Guy."

The cowboy said something to Suzy. She looked up at me and brushed my face with her fingers as she took her arm off my shoulder and dismounted the bike. She held her hands behind her back. She smiled in sudden silence.

"You want a campsite?" The cowboy asked.

"Well, I'm looking for a bed." I replied.

He looked over at the tent briefly and combed his moustache. "Well, Guy," he said, "This isn't really a hotel. Do you have your own tent?"

I looked down at the bike in my hands. I looked back up.

"I guess you could borrow one." He said.

"How much?" I asked.

"Thirty Thousand Lira."

"What?"

That was worse than anything I had paid in weeks before in Yugoslavia or Greece.

"That's right. I can give you your own tent and you can have all the food and drink you want. We have our own fresh water and wonderful red wine from the region."

Suzy stood smiling.

"How soon can you get something together?" I asked.

"As soon as you wish, Guy."

I opened my front pannier bag and motioned the passport to him. Suzy snatched it out of my gloved hand and stared at it in wonderment, jabbering.

We walked up the road, and the cowboy unlatched the front gate. The guard glared at me as Suzy walked her bike along the pathway.

"Who's he?" I asked.

"Him my friend," He said, "He is the *watchdog*."

We entered a courtyard area that was surrounded by a swimming pool; benches and lounge chairs were scattered along the pool's deck. Above the water stood a terrace and gazebo. To the left of that, Italian music played over a concrete patio.

"I'm sorry, Guy," the cowboy said as he stopped in front of the pool. "My name is Antonio." He shook my hand.

"Cliff. Nice to meet you."

"Cleeford." Suzy said, looking at the passport. She smiled, looking at my shorts again. I smiled back, trying to figure how old she was.

Antonio led us along the pathway to an area covered with tents and huts among a grove of pines. Opening the door to one of the huts, I saw a bed and nightstand. The bed looked slept-in.

"I know this is not being used tonight. It is yours if you wish. They are usually fifty thousand lira, but I think you could use a bed." He glanced over to Suzy who seemed to watch the door nervously.

Antonio said something to Suzy in Italian, and she clumsily pushed the bike over the threshold, the front packs jammed on the doorway.

She said something to Antonio. I looked to him for translation.

*"Maybe you would like to go swimming."* He said.

"Sure," I replied.

"Okay, we will leave you alone for a while."

Suzy said something else. Antonio walked away. Suzy looked at me.

I walked around her and picked up the bicycle, rolling it over the threshold into the room. Suzy helped move it against the wall opposite the bed. She stood, staring at me as I let the air out of the tires and untied the straps that compressed the pannier bags onto their frames. Lifting the front bags off, I laid them beside the bed. I looked over to her. She was smiling.

There was a momentary pause, and we both looked at each other.

"We go swimming?" I said, mimicking the breaststroke.

"Si, si." She said. She turned quickly. I went to the door and saw her disappear into the trees.

I untied the rear bags and dropped them on the floor then fell into bed.

Days... one-hundred-kilometer days since Athens, where my Spanish friend, Pancho, had given up and taken the plane back to Madrid. Since we rode the train out of Pec, Yugoslavia, he vomited regularly, and his knee was weak from the fall he had taken in Dubrovnik. Now, in Italy, I had covered one-hundred-fifty kilometers to land three days short of reaching Rome.

My legs were sore from the ride. My whole body was sore. I leaned up on the bed and untied my cleats, which were powdered white from the salt of dried sweat. Peeling off socks, my feet were pallid against my sunbaked calves. I stood up and tore my racing shorts down my swollen legs and hung them on the chair beside the front wheel. They too were white with salt. Opening the pannier bags, I found my running

shorts and slipped them on. From another bag, I took out my towel. I threw it over my shoulder and headed out to the pool. The pine needles stuck to my feet as I walked.

I looked for Suzy, expecting to see her as I neared the courtyard. The sun was waning, and within the tree shadows, I saw the gate guard pace around the pool, his shirt open.

He stopped and picked up a plastic jug from the pool deck. Continuing his pacing, he poured the contents into the pool until it was entirely emptied. He paced and poured. I stopped in my tracks.

I looked around again for Suzy. She was nowhere in sight. I turned around and walked back to my hut. I passed through the trees into the shadows.

The public shower was cold.

I toweled myself dry and went back to the hut. I only had two pairs of shorts. I picked the cleaner one, along with a freshly washed white polo shirt. Taking out the map from a zippered section of the front pannier bag and folding it out, I saw its worn edges and stiffness from sweaty handling. I studied the snakelike pattern of pen-marked routes. Pino di Lenne was a far cry from Rome--about six hundred kilometers of unknown roads through the Italian campo. I was running out of leg, money, and desire.

*Another five days?*

It could have been twenty years.

Six hundred kilometers. That meant at least one hundred kilometers for five-days-straight. Ahead laid Policoro, where I would turn north and head up into the mountains through Tursi, Marsico Nuovo, and Serre, before reaching Salerno on the Mediterranean Coast..... If I made it through the mountain passes with good time, the coast would be flat enough and I could make up time there.

Again the trip had turned into a race, just like the Galicias of Spain. Four days to get from Zamora to Vigo. Four days of mountain when I had to....

I opened my felt marker and drew in my day's route: Pino di Lenne, I wrote "8/19".

August nineteenth, I thought, it seemed like the pinnacle of summer.

*Riding North, the air will get cooler, the sun will sink sooner, and time will eventually run out. Before long it will be autumn. The leaves will dry and the rains will come. Afterwards, it will be winter, and by that time I will have forgotten this place, this wooden floor beneath me, Antonio's leather hat and Suzy with her red cheeks and bare feet.*

A bell rang.

I tucked my shirt in and headed up the path fixing on the smell food in the distance, to the terrace. The light had faded, and I could feel the air. I heard Italian voices mixing, the unknown words, the sounds of little kids calling out to each other in laughter. The radio was playing mandolin music, and I could hear an occasional clap from the children who danced beside the fountain. As I approached the courtyard, I saw the myriad of candles placed around the pool and gazebo. The cement was warm from the hot afternoon and I could feel it through my shoes.

I approached the gathering of people near the open terrace. Antonio was there, and he caught my eye.

"Hey, Guy, you look very washed. Come here." He motioned me over to the doorway that led into a small room. It was a bar, and along the walls stood wooden barrels. Stepping behind the counter, he filled a cup with red wine. He handed it to me and I took a sip. It was very strong.

"So, where are you going from here?" He asked, filling another glass for himself.

"To Rome." I said, taking another sip.

"Madonna!" He came back around the counter. "And how do you get there from here?"

"Well, through the mountains." I said. The map and notebook were getting moist in my hand. "Through Salerno."

"Very tough, Guy."

He studied me for a moment as he stood by the side of the bar. "But I think you will make it. You know," he paused for a moment, "We don't see Americans in this place. And I think you are the only one on bicicleta. Why do you do this?"

"I don't know." I said, taking another swallow. Antonio took the glass from my hand and went behind the bar to fill it again. He handed it to me.

"C'mon."

I looked out to the doorway where the candlelight was beginning to light the gazebo in the fading twilight. I could hear the grasshoppers chirping in the radiant Italian air. The smell of pine and sage mixed with the flavor of oak and strong wine...I saw the western facade fall from Antonio's face and recognized the Italian that lived behind it.

"I don't know," I replied, "I used to race in the states. I did that for a while. I did well."

I looked down at the glass of dark red wine, raised it to my lips, and sipped the iron-flavored bitterness. "The thing was that when I really began to think about it, I found I was just riding around in circles all the time, trying to ride faster than the other guy."

"Yes," Antonio said, "But winning is everything."

"Oh, sure," I said, "But no matter who is on your side, pulling or helping you work in the front, it's still a race, and a race to win. There is no... pleasure"

I saw Antonio brighten his eyes. "No, Guy. I do not believe this. On the bici, things are much different. Yes, the race is very much fast, but that is life. You understand, if you have raced, that there is very much speed. If you love the bici, you want to go very fast."

"Sure, Antonio." I replied.

*Maybe I did, maybe I really did. But I hated the evil eyes from the other team riders, the others who jockeyed up close on your front wheel and who expected you to explode from the suicidal attacks. I hated the finish, hearing the others explain the finish, as if they themselves were the only ones to experience the moment of truth, too cowardly to admit to the others that they couldn't handle the pain....*

And yet, I didn't know why I was in the South of Italy. What I really enjoyed, what I really loved...what was it?

I loved making the art of cycling. It was like music and dance. I had spent three weeks not speaking a single word, just listening to the bike and wind. I wrote about it in my notebook, described each ride in detail. I lived the lives of European people captured on film, but for Antonio, it was something he would have to live for himself--to really *not* understand.

Through the doorway, I saw Suzy enter the bar. I saw her before me, and never since had I truly seen her. In a cotton gown of white and red, flowers of green and blue which bordered the long seems of flowing form, the curve of gown sloped downwards, hair up in a spiral, where a row of small interlinked flower strands held it in place. Her face was clean and fresh, without cosmetic, just warm and blushed from the sunshine. The bust of her gown flowed to reveal the curvature of her bosom. The border crossed her tummy and hung over outflowing hips, tied with a bow just above the top of concealed legs.

I saw her not as pieces, but as an entire thing, as though I had known her from before. Detached from a world of machines and airplanes, she was, herself, complete, without exaggeration, a human of formal design.

She was the daughter of the landowner. She stood next to him, and he looked at her very much like a father would, especially now, as if things were not normal.

He was a big man and his size, with large cigar, frightened me. I tried to superimpose any likeness of Suzy. He wore a red vested sweater with dark slacks and a bleach-white shirt. He looked at Suzy and then over to me.

He said something to which we all gathered in a circle to pray.

The group dispersed, and Suzy sat at her father's right. I could still see her.

I sat next to Antonio, who interpreted for me. The courtyard table was at least ten people-long, and several minutes passed for the food to go around. Meanwhile, guests resumed the casual discussions from prayer.

I tried to make sense of the conversation. As it seemed, the table formed a hierarchy of characters, from the patriarch at the other end to his wife and family, to the unknown guests, to the array of workers, and then to myself at the far end.

Suzy looked down the table to me and smiled. I smiled back.

Tony passed some food, which I heaped onto my plate.

"My God, guy, do you figure to eat all of that?" He said.

I looked at him and smiled while I passed the plate to the person in front of me, grabbing the next.

"*You* ride one hundred fifty kilometers sometime and let me watch you eat." I commented

"The only riding I do is on the wine keg, so help yourself to some of this." He filled my glass with more of the local red wine.

The couple next to Tony had worked their way into an argument. I looked at Tony, who was eating his dinner, then back at the couple. Though the language was incomprehensible, I could sense what they were saying.

"Oh, you're just a...." She said.

"With all your....., it just makes me.... Why don't you just...."

"Oh really, well if you hadn't done....., you and your....wouldn't ....

"Hey Guy, would you believe that these two are about to be married?"

"Impossible," I said, my mouth full of pasta, sweet tomato, and gritty red wine.

"Yes, next Sunday. I would say that they are having their problems. "

I looked at the husband, then the wife, both looking away at the evening's twilight. Heady with the wine, I tried to focus on a convergence in the northern horizon where they both stared, unhappy.

Dinner ended, and the father stood from the table, saying something that sounded very sincere. I saw Suzy there as he spoke, and watching her, I thought what a jewel she was. I could see the outline of her face, the carved low jaw that glowed through the light, the grey-blue eyes like water, the slender brow and jet-black hair, the reveal of her features. She looked off to the northern distance.

*The greatest still life comes at the moment when the thing that is appreciated knows that it is so. Such innocence, such beauty, and it was close to me. Close enough to touch.*

Antonio blurted out, "That's what I keep telling her."

The wife-to-be shouted something like "*Screw you!*"

Tony rubbed his forehead and went back to work on his meal. As he ate, the conversation continued. Accusations passed back and forth.

"Hey Guy, would you believe that these two are about to be married?"

"No." I said.

"Well, my friend," He said, "This is what you look forward to on the eve of your wedding day."

"Not in my house." I declared.

Suzy looked over to me. Heat waves lit up in her eyes. Her father glanced over at me and said something to Suzy. She spoke very properly to her father. At the other side of the table, her mother approved; her sister, who must have been twelve, dissented.

I continued eating my plate of spaghetti. The bread was doughy and completely drenched with butter and Parmesan.

I took a big gulp of hearty red wine. The table's conversation dulled to a rumble of voices. I could feel the food flowing into my body's sponge. I looked up to Suzy from my feeding frenzy.

She was looking over to the darkness at the other side of the table.

The salad was only cucumber and tomato. Olive oil and garlic were placed on the table. I added them with a bit of balsamic vinegar and slices of mozzarella from a watery plate. I looked up.

In front of me stood the gate guard. He was smiling, looking at me. He stood behind the arguing husband. The guard's face showed a smirking grin. He looked over to Suzy for a moment. She glanced up. I turned to the guard. He was gone.

I glanced back at Suzy. She spoke to her father.

I sat back on the picnic bench and wiped my mouth. I looked up at the sky for a moment. The evening was beautiful. The wind rustled the beach-like palms along the terrace. The air was warm like summer; my body filled with the fruits of the camposino, my head filled with wine and conversation.

I looked around, at this place, this point in time. I thought that this, again, would never be repeated. Never. I may run into three hundred miles of hell after this night, but if I had to, I would let it all go, give up the journey. Pedals and legs turning million-mile cranks with no person attached to them, like a surreal Gaudi painting, or let it go and find the stuff on the inside. The ride was worth it. The ride was worth it. I looked over to Suzy.

She was gone.

I looked out to the black darkness beyond the terrace and she was nowhere to be seen. I took my last bite of bread-and-cheese.

Thanking Antonio, I left the table, giving greetings to the father and the mother. I walked down the path, watching the lights. I saw the tent, and I could not tell whether it was inhabited. I thought of Suzy being there. What I would do....

"Shut up." I said.

The sound fell into nothingness. The night was as silent as it was dark.

I pulled the tapered wings aside and entered.

*In the fields between the seashore and the wide grassy fields, Suzy stands with her long flowing hair and bright sundress. I am moving closer to her, gliding like a lark over the fields. She smiles. The sun lights behind her, outlining the silhouette of her body captive within her gentle gown. There, inside that place nestled somewhere between the bosom and the womb I travel....*

*Her arms are outstretched. I think, that this is the only place in the world, a place quiet, so far away from what that I have known, that this must be what I yearn for. I come closer to the rays of warmth that pull me towards the center of goodness. Halfway across the globe on a sweeping expanse, I touch her hand and draw close to her warm face. The sky is perfectly blue.*

*The feel of soft soil, the wind, the grass, my heart, the only reminders of real life, we hold each other close on the warm range, two unknowns, speaking different*

*languages, each alone on a wide-open expanse uninhabited by any other mortal being....*

I woke in the morning with the subconsciously expected fright of not knowing my whereabouts. It had gotten so common, that my mind was already trained for the response: you are in a nowhere-town somewhere in the country, and there is something redeemably good in what you are doing. In a moment, I recall the past day, the differently pointing array of highway signs, the slow grind through industrial parks, the progressive filtering of city life into scattered fields, to orchards and farms, and into the heart of the camposino.

I laid in bed for a while thinking of Suzy, the dress she wore, the candles at night... and it seemed as though it were moving before me in slow-motion, a ballet of images in movement to beautiful song. The smell of pine sifted through the open window off the cabin, and the smell penetrated into my memory, like the smell of perfume.

I showered, dressed, and headed to the dining area for my daily fueling.

"Questo!" I heard from inside the main building. There was a terrible thrashing racket, something like a chair being thrown.

"Mi belli bambini! Il grosso maca vaca!" I could not quite understand what he was yelling, but it was quite loud and quite intense.

"My friend." I saw Antonio appear from the doorway.

"Yes," I replied. "How are things going?"

He waved his hand. "Everything is fine, my friend." There was another crash in the background. "Would you like some cafe?"

"Yes," I replied. "Thank you. And do you have anything to eat."

"We do have the meal from last night. Would that satisfy you?"

"Yes, very much, and coffee."

"Certainly." He turned and went to the doorway for a moment. He returned to the table.

"You know, my friend, I like you."

"I like you too." I replied.

"Your meal will be here in one minute. I will be right back." He was then gone.

I looked over and saw the gate guard walking down the pathway behind me, the very same pathway that led into the campsite the day before. We locked eyes, and he smirked, continuing his way.

The maiden involved with the last evening's argument with her fiancé brought my meal. I dove into the meal with carelessness.

I saw an arm reach around my right side, and I looked up startled. The woman had placed a large cup of coffee on the table. I looked up at her, and she seemed to beam. She touched my face with her hand. She turned and disappeared inside.

My heart was racing. I had expected Suzy. This woman was just like her, and for a brief moment when I saw her, I had thought it was indeed she, but older, and wiser, and shrewd.

I ate my breakfast in haste. It was the perfect meal for the first day of my ride into Rome. Four days now. Today is a good day because this meal is good. The sun is shining, and all signs show that goodness is in the air and I lean forward into the day's challenges with these clean thoughts. I took a gulp of coffee and finished the plate.

The door flung open, and out stumbled Antonio. In the background, I could hear the same bellowing as before. Antonio replied to the inside. He straightened up and twisted his belt into shape.

"My friend," he said, "you have to leave immediately."

"What's wrong?" I exclaimed.

"Please, my friend, do not cause me any problems. I will help you get on your way."

He motioned forward.

"What the hell is going on."

"Don't make anything worse than it is."

"Worse than what?" I questioned.

Antonio lurched down and grabbed my arm, his half-shaven beard in my face. "He will kill you, do you understand."

"What?" I replied.

"The sins of unholy acts with this man's daughter is written all over you. Do not talk to me of anything but leaving this place." He took the napkin from my lap and threw it aside.

I reached over to my left hip and felt the fanny pack with all my money and passport still there. Ten thousand Lira to get me to Rome. My bike is out-of-reach. My wristwatch read ten o'clock.

"Okay, time to leave."

"Good decision, my friend."

I walked back to the tent where I had spent the night. In silence, I packed my bags, making sure to roll each individual piece of clothing and stuff them into their respective positions. I cleaned my camera and lenses, and checked the film for the next day's venture. Tugging at each compression strap, I cinched the packs together to the bike; I checked through the systems, the brakes, the shifter cables, the tire wear the, chain....

I stopped.

The wind rustled through the trees outside the doorway, and looked out. The pathway led up to the gate entranceway through the grove of trees. It was silent like a Sunday morning. There were no voices. The wind blew again, silent and cool.

I lowered the bike down through the doorway, and proceeded up the path. The pool passing by on the trail as I headed to the front gate.

The entire campsite was deserted. Not a single person met my arrival. I set the bike along a large wooden post and manually lifted the gate. I pushed the bike through. I turned and lowered the latch.

Standing there in the gravel-laden parking lot, I took in the landscape. Birds flying about and the buzz of insects permeated the air. I looked at my watch.

Ten-Thirty.

From here to Salerno is a fine day of hills and battles. Let's take them each as they come.

I clipped into the pedals and headed down the road, the campsite disappearing into the distance behind me into oblivion.

Salerno: 150 KM, The sign read.