

THE HONEYMOON
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Be wary of any ritual with a sweet-sounding name.

"Honeymoon," for example.

I speak from the aftermath: here at my desk, up to my neck in credit card bills. (Such was the recent "activity" experienced by my Visa card that the company feared it had been stolen. "No such luck," I replied, when they tracked me down in rural Umbria, where my wife and I spent the first part of our six-week trip.)

And it's not just in English that the word is seductive -- it's that way all over the world. In Italian: *luna di miele* (literally "moon of honey"). And in French the same idea: *lune de miel*. It would take the Grim Reaper not to be taken in by such an aural caress; not to envision, in the roundness of the moon and the nectarlike sweetness of honey, an extended bath of godly pleasure. (And gods don't carry plastic.)

Perhaps, though, the real issue was one of expectation. My wife, Aleksandra, and I had put off our celebratory trip for a year, as we struggled to finish, respectively, a film and a novel. We had also taken another kind of leap, and bought our first apartment. 1997 had been one of those insane Big Years that come along every so often, regularly yet without warning, like the outbreaks of red tide on the Jersey shore. We were exhausted but happy, imagining the trip ahead -- a long, soulful tour by car of Umbria, Rome,

Tuscany, Nice, the Quercy in France, and, finally, Paris -- and ourselves in it. We would be like the great poets of old, stopping by the ancient Roman road to sniff the wildflowers, reading Ovid aloud to each other as the sun descended beyond the green hills. We might even learn to make our own wine and olive oil. We would leave behind in New York our (no doubt genetically inherited) tendencies toward stress and rampant consumerism. And we would spend a great deal of time alone, in peace. In short, we would spend six weeks living like people who bore no resemblance to ourselves.

But, the truth is, one's acquisitive obsessions die hard -- it's like cohabitating with the Terminator. If only Visa had known this and frozen my account. In time, we might all have been saved.

Several years ago, my wife's parents bought and restored an old Umbrian farmhouse. My wife and I had been there twice before, though always with family. This time we were going alone. That was, pretty much, the whole point.

Waiting for us at the house when we arrived from Milan were the caretakers, who live in a neighboring town. I'll call them Franco and Maria. They are very nice people. Franco is somewhere in his sixties, a retired factory worker, short and white-haired, with cherubic red cheeks and a regional accent so arcane it left me stunned. He looks after "the grounds" (we might call it a garden). This was a job he more or less eased himself into. My in-laws had hired Maria to look after the house, and since Maria did not drive, it was Franco who brought her over. Then he just seemed to stay. He never entered the

house, nor went away, but spent hours outside, improving things on his own. Look out a window at any hour of the day and you'd probably see Franco with a rake in his hands, or bent over a shrub. Pretty soon my in-laws were paying him along with Maria.

We arranged for Franco and Maria to take a few days off, and then, with smiles and waves all around, they departed. It was the start of our honeymoon and we were in Umbria and finally alone and, I have to say, I was feeling pretty damned good about the whole thing.

I was still feeling good the next morning, making coffee in the kitchen in my underwear, when Franco and Maria showed up. This was a surprise. I tried to look like the lord of the house, but under the circumstances this was not easy to do. Maria began taking the dirty dishes out of the dishwasher and washing them by hand (she is afraid of machines). And Franco, I noticed, started every sentence with *dunque*, a word which essentially has no meaning at all. The coffee began to boil over. I fled upstairs.

They showed up every day except Easter. They became as much a part of the Umbrian landscape as the famed green hills. Franco particularly had a Zelig-like quality that was remarkable. I went out for more firewood one morning and there he was by the woodpile, offering (*dunque*) friendly advice about which wood burned best. (Hard to know whether he was wrong or whether I just misunderstood him.) Out for a little fresh air one afternoon, I ducked behind a row of cypresses to have a pee -- and there he was, standing in the vegetable garden with a rake in his hands. *Dunque...* I know I sound

mean, but you have to understand. This was our honeymoon. I began to set my alarm clock, a little earlier each morning, just trying to get the coffee made before the invasion. (I succeeded once; the sunrise was beautiful.)

All this to say that when Aleksandra and I finally went to Rome for several days to visit my beloved Italian cousins, we were desperate to embrace city life again, with its anonymous, ambulatory pleasures -- shopping, wandering narrow streets, shopping, eating, and shopping some more. The thrill of capitalist liberation. Perhaps this can explain what happened when, in a fateful move that would change the very nature of our honeymoon, my wife first dragged me into an Italian pharmacy.

Actually, "pharmacy" isn't correct. In Italy, it was called a *profumeria*. As my wife later explained to me (with all the condescension of a Nobel Prize-winning physicist talking to a man in the street), what Italy does best is the *profumeria* (perfume and, especially, makeup), whereas France's great gift to the world -- the thing that makes France France -- is the *profumerie* (perfume and, especially, makeup). At the time this knowledge did not carry the force of revelation.

Our first stop in a *profumeria* -- a fancy, rose-scented place at the northern end of Piazza Navona -- lasted a mere twenty minutes. I hung around, twiddled my thumbs, and finally went outside into the piazza and stared at the Bernini fountain. My wife emerged into sunlight carrying a white plastic bag inside of which I could just discern the outlines of three tiny, rectangular shapes. She was smiling and looked very beautiful. It all seemed

normal enough for a honeymoon, I remember thinking. But then so do most horror movies -- at the beginning.

"Can we go now?" I said in what I thought was a pleasant tone. "I'm hungry."

"They're better here," my wife said, as though she hadn't heard me.

"Who is?"

"Chanel." She was literally glowing. "Their colors," she said.

I stared at her. Was this the same woman who had written a brilliant college thesis on Virginia Woolf?

"But we're on our honeymoon," I pleaded.

"Just look at this." She pulled a small box from the bag, opened it, and produced a lipstick. She took the cap off the lipstick and with two quick turns of her wrist had extended the stick (the color of a grievous flesh wound) an inch into the air. It looked like the sexual calling card of a randy poodle. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

"Actually, it looks like--"

"And it's half the price of Bergdorf's."

"Yeah, but Bergdorf's--"

"Here," my wife said, sticking the lipstick under my nose, "just smell this."

I should have known then. What else can I say? I should have read the signs and seen what was happening. Should have figured it out after the sixth

lipstick or the tenth, in Rome, in Perugia, in Montepulciano. Should have called a doctor or called the police. Should have done the humane thing and had my dear wife institutionalized before the disease got any worse -- done it in Italy, where the food is so good and the people so nice.

But I was blind. I had my own preoccupations, you see: I was searching for the perfect fountain pen. Look, we all have our weaknesses. A brass barrel preferably, a lacquer of unimaginable shine, a nib of nothing less than eighteen karat gold, a flow of ink so smooth it would make you long to be a scribe in some medieval monastery, hairshirt and all.

We drove into France. We were in Nice all of twenty minutes when, strolling along one of the narrow streets of the old quarter, she spotted a pharmacy.

"Wait! I need a few things."

"But we just--"

We were inside. (I am convinced, for what it's worth, that every pharmacy in Europe has a kind of vacuuming system in operation around its doors, sucking in the innocent and experienced alike.) What I felt now was not the sensory overload of the *profumerias* in Italy, but a cold, scientific calm: the women all wore white lab coats. Feeling as though I were being scrutinized by a higher power, I sat down meekly on a chair in the corner. Aleksandra, meanwhile, briskly stepped up to the counter and addressed one of the white-coated women. Even from the back my wife's body language was impressive: she might have been the captain of some powerful ship, bringing her into port.

They began to discuss hair volumizers, skin toners. The names *Biotherm*, *Phyto*, and *Vichy* were bandied about with impunity. Half an hour later, in what had become an all-too-familiar rite of communion, the great god Visa was called upon ("It's half the price of Bergdorf's"), and we went on our mortal way.

On next to the Lot, in the Quercy, to pass a couple of quiet, rural weeks in a little stone farmhouse. The Lot is an ancient region of rugged limestone uplands and stone walls, inhabited by decent people who have resolutely remained behind the times. Who would have thought that here, too, among the farmers and shepherds and eau-de-vie makers and Resistance heroes, one could find the lipsticks of Chanel and Yves St. Laurent? I am here to assure you that they can be found. A kind of miracle, no doubt. This time it was my mother, during our three-day visit together, who did the honors (her god Visa made mine seem like a 99-pound weakling). She bought a St. Laurent lipstick for Aleksandra and one for herself -- and then, deciding that the color she'd bought for herself really didn't suit her, she gave it to Aleksandra as well.

Meanwhile, I was having complicated yearnings of my own. I had gone three weeks by this time without a fountain pen of any kind, let alone the perfect instrument on which I'd set my dreams (Italy, it turns out, is better at lipstick than fountain pens). I hadn't thought to bring a decent pen from home, or even the Levenger catalog for consolatory browsing. This was serious. My gaze was turning increasingly wild, my fingers beginning to twitch. Finally, in a panic, I bought a couple of disposable Varsity fountain pens at the *Maison de la*

Presse in Bretenoux. I felt a little better. "They were a good deal," I assured my wife when she looked at me strangely.

Then, before we knew it, we were in Paris, a city we both know well. We had just a week left of our honeymoon. Where had the time gone? How had we gotten here? I imagined Franco back in Umbria, still standing by the woodpile. I saw the sheep grazing on the *cause* of the Lot and the farmers in their blue smocks. Had we both gone mad? At Gilbert Joseph on the Boulevard St. Michel -- one of a chain of Parisian stationery stores -- my wife spotted me literally elbowing aside small children to get to the pen section. Pretty Parisian mothers were glaring at me and threatening to have me ejected from the store. I paid them no heed. I bought an aluminum Lamy fountain pen and numerous cartridges of a nice gray ink. I was ecstatic, though not as gleeful as my wife. The next day she emerged from a pharmacy on the rue du Four carrying what looked like a small aluminum flying saucer (it was a compact) inside of which, I was told, was the famed *poudre de T.LeClerc*. On another day, while I was throwing back a *demi* at the corner bar, Aleksandra was at Lazartigue having a strand of her hair studied under a microscope by a woman dressed like Madame Curie. Such, such were the joys.

It was time. On our last morning we piled the fruits of our respective obsessions into plastic bags, into suitcases, into trunks. It had been, strangely, a wonderful, happy time.

We were in the taxi, Montmartre passing by our windows.

"There's so much more I could've gotten," Aleksandra said wistfully.

"*Dunque*," I said.

We were finally alone. She looked beautiful, her skin seemed to have a new glow....We kissed and were sorry to be going home.

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