

The great discovery (melancholy of meeting)

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The great discovery (melancholy of meeting)

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Summary

Freedom in stillness, under a deep green sky.

They carried the country's secret with them.

The clerk held in his briefcase the meaning of the hours set on the cities' clocks, still and silent, decoupled from the coming and going of an uncaring sun. He carried the answer to whether there was a reason to the order of the items left adrift in the city squares, and if those meanings were one and the same, or nothing at all, or a sequence of numbers with no other explanation than its own inscrutable self.

The spy hauled a collection of shadows. Shadows of towers, shadows of white statues under long afternoons, fixed shadows of immovable fountains, shadows of colonnades, the endless *portici* that lined the streets and trapped the sunlight in a sideways prison. Shadows of the sail that waited on the horizon. Any horizon, from Genova's harbor to dry Brindisi and the hills of Rome, which were too far into the mainland to see the sea and yet the sail was there, immaculate, swelled by the wind, half-hidden by a stone wall, a station, a line of cypress trees.

They met in faraway Trieste, by the border, in proud ashen Piazza Unità with its arms open to the sea. On the horizon, a single white sail.

The two men shook hands. Awkwardly, one twirled his mustache.

"I was meant to deliver this binder in Torino, Bureau of Conversions, branch L, desk 22. Nobody was there. I walked through empty halls, stamping forms, getting tickets, but no-one collected them. By nightfall, I had wandered back to the station."

"I know you were. I saw you there as I crossed a balcony. Its marble was white and black, fashioned after a chessboard, and I fancied myself a bishop. You stared through a tall window, looking lost."

"And what were you doing on a balcony in Torino, *signore*?"

"Naturally, I had stolen my binder. My rendezvous was in Bologna, on the last floor of the tallest tower. Nobody was there. I climbed four hundred and ninety-eight steps and no-one was there to meet me."

"I believe I saw you there, looking up from the ground as if following a fancy. You looked out to the other towers that dotted the town, but none was taller than the one you'd climbed. The mistake wasn't yours. But as I have never been to Bologna, I presume this to have been a dream."

"Your dream was in Bologna as I looked down to the towers."

"Now we are here."

"I appreciate your acuity, *signore*, in refraining from pointing out that it may in fact be our dreams who are here in our steads. The observation would have been redundant and below

you.”

“We are here.”

“Indeed.”

“At the very end. The promontory marks the border.”

“Nobody else left to report to.”

So they opened their luggages, which were full of ruined columns, wooden building blocks, moss, a blackboard, tape, Greek façades. They left that clutter on the ground as they eventually found their binders and presented them to each other. The country's secret, at their perusal.

The documents were blank.

A wind rose and scattered the blank pages across the Piazza, but the sail remained fixed, hung on the horizon. The spy and the clerk were tired. They wondered what had happened behind their backs as they were busy duly following code and protocol, looking only at the next form, the next assignment until their hair had turned gray. And the country changed. It went away. A change like that should have been under their eyes. It should have been broadcast on national television, but if they tried to think of the news, all they remembered, over and over, was the persistent, distant image of a white sail. If the anchorman had said something about it, their memories spat it out as static.

They were alike, the clerk and the spy, dressed in proper black and branded by the sun of the Piazza. They looked at each other as if in a mirror and saw, in the sharp shadows on the other's face, a sideways kind of freedom that could exist beyond the border, beyond a border, outside the bureaucracy they'd built their fences with. Their secrets, after all, were blank.

The sail fluttered. A gust blew in.

And the clerk should head back for Rome, in the dusty ministry's building, where empty desks in empty offices would be waiting for his report. Outside the window, there would be an old ruin, and in that ruin a crack, and through the crack he would see the mast of a distant ship.

And the spy should fall back to Milan and wait in empty bars for news on an assignment. The city might fall to dust and nothing would come. Only, under the white noise that filled the bar's small TV which had never seen anything other than Sunday's football match: sails, remote, unreachable.

They put a hand on each other's shoulder instead. Down by the docks, the train would leave without them. There was a sideways kind of freedom in that square that seemed to stretch on forever, three sides lined by ancient buildings and one by the sea. Together, they could cross the infinite space that separated them from the square's borders and make it to the café there, a quiet old place under the colonnades. It was empty, except for the mirrors it was named after, which were company enough to the two men. As they sat in silence, still, empty, sitting across each other, they knew.

They knew the meaning of the hours set on the cities' clocks, still and silent. They knew the answer to whether there was a reason to the order of the items left adrift in the city squares, and those meanings were one and the same, as was the meaning of a lingering afternoon, and that of the statues' shared knowing smile. They knew shadows. Shadows of towers, shadows of white statues under long afternoons, fixed shadows of immovable fountains, shadows of colonnades, they would remember the endless rows.

Behind them, past the pier, the sail grew close.

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