

Riding Bareback

Do you remember riding bareback at a gallop through the woods near your farm? I was your student, and I looked at you with the eyes of a twelve year old boy who has seen sixteen-year-old-girl perfection and doesn't need to take another breath. Do you remember your feigned indifference as I backed a horse into a briar patch the first time we saddled up, how you made me clean out the stalls, but always let me know through the sideways look of your eyes that something about my six-foot awkwardness stirred your wild streak? Do you remember the day you told me you had to leave, that you were pregnant and planned marry the father—that mean looking guy with a beard—and move to Maine? Do you remember your fake smile and the shattered look in my eyes?

I do.

Twenty-five years later I found myself in Italy with four friends. The real Italian-American among us had spent months in Tuscany learning the language, studying art, and cooking in the kitchens of famous chefs. He had

the idea of starting a sabbatical program for burned out executives. Not even forty, I fell squarely into that category. My friends and I had each suffered losses that drove us to search for a personal renaissance.

We took cooking lessons and tried our hand at drawing. I learned the history of Santa Maria Del Fiore Duomo, designed by Brunelleschi and built over generations with pure faith that its unprecedented scale would remain structurally sound, at a time when Black Plague had wiped out the city's population and the Florentine republic was under siege by the ruler of Milan. I stood on the floor of the church and looked up in awe because I couldn't imagine that much faith.

We stayed in the countryside amongst olive trees and row after row of ripening grapes. From my bedroom window, I often watched an elderly man patiently set out cheese cloth to harvest the olives, a single tree at a time.

One afternoon, I sat at a picnic table with my friends on the grounds of our little Inn outside Florence. I heard a horse snort and stomp his feet on the hillside across the valley. I turned to look at the animal intently, examining the color of his coat and the grace of his movements in the afternoon sun. For the first time in years I thought of you. I remembered when you told me that horses are the most intuitive beings on the planet. They always mirror the mood of their human handlers perfectly.

I drifted back to our circle and listened carefully. At this lunch, the idea was to share the defining moments of our lives. One of my friends wept gently as he whispered the story of his wife succumbing to cancer. He held her hand as she slipped away, their five children surrounding her bed.

In the awkward silence that followed, I looked back at the horse. He had moved to the other side of his coral and was now munching on grass.

Another friend told the story of seeing his son on the evening news after he carjacked a car by bodily removing the woman driver. In a black out, the boy had left the car in the middle of the road and walked home. He only escaped serious jail time because a friendly judge allowed him to go to treatment instead.

I noticed that the old man in the grove below us was now up in the tree picking his olives.

The friend next to me described discovering his teenaged daughter having an affair with his best friend, how he had been at a cook-out when he finally put the pieces together and for months afterwards this man had stalked his daughter, unwilling to see the sickness of his behavior.

I was startled by the distant “POP!” of gunfire in the woods nearby, as locals hunted for birds or perhaps wild boar.

I told the story of taking The Providence Journal Company public after nearly two centuries as a fiercely private corporation when I was barely thirty. As Chief Financial Officer, I had single-handedly negotiated a \$2 billion price tag for the business in an Atlanta hotel room sixty days after the IPO. I pictured the angry faces of our employees, many of whom had worked at the Journal their entire career, when we announced the sale in the company auditorium. I relived the outrage of the community, which reacted as if JFK had been shot all over again. I told these men, most twenty years my senior, how I had weathered all those professional storms only to go home to my then wife and two baby children. How on a Saturday morning just a few days after announcing the deal, my wife discovered that I was having an affair with a junior banker and thrown me out. I went from golden boy, quoted on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, to being homeless in an instant.

I looked up the hill through misty vision. The horse lifted his head, mid-bite, to look my way. It was the first time there was no gravitational pull to darkness, only Tuscan sunshine and thoughts of riding bareback through the woods at a gallop with you.

An hour after getting thrown out of the house, I called my mother from a church parking lot. I still remember the shocked tone of her voice.

The completeness of my admission made me want to die. My brother took me in that first night. I watched his wife lock up the kitchen knives before going to bed.

After my first Christmas without my kids, I had my last bender in New York City. The pain of what I had done to my kids finally drove me to get help. I have stayed sober for the eleven years since.

I dedicated myself to becoming a good father. I spent afternoons at the playground and learned how to care for two children on my own. I changed diapers and went to mommy-child exercise classes. I brought the same intensity to my parenting that I had to my work. I made sure my kids knew how much I loved them through my words and actions. Over months and years, my babies grew into fine adolescents: my son a fierce athlete with a soft heart and my daughter a gifted writer with a flair for the dramatic.

It took me six years to get remarried, but I found the right woman. She's warm with a wild Italian streak. Her eyes are the most exquisite, mysterious shade of blue. When I look at her I feel like that twelve year old boy again, only this time I know she isn't going to leave.

We have a son named Cole. If horses are the most intuitive animals, toddlers are not far behind. Cole wanders in each morning to ask: "Is it

happy time?” When he climbs into bed with us to make a three-way sandwich, I know I have finally made my way home.

I often think my life has had two parts: everything that happened before that afternoon in Italy and everything that came after. My friends and I played Bocce that evening in the olive grove. We swore at each other like brothers. It was as if the chunk of my heart got put back that day. The horse on the hill reminded me that despite my many mistakes, I am still that boy riding bareback.